



NOVEL

4.5

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

STORY: SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART: TOMOSESHUNSAKU



CLASSROOM 
OF THE ELITE YEAR **2**

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

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

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

"H-hey, hey..."

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



KARUIZAWA KEI



YAMAMURA MIKI

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

TOKITOU HIROYA

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

HIMENO YUKI

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

4.5



WELCOME TO CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



CLASSROOM  **2**
OF THE ELITE YEAR

NOVEL 4.5

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



**CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2 VOLUME 4.5**

SYOUGO KINUGASA

ROYALMTLS

C O N T E N T S

THE CURTAIN RISES ON A FUN SUMMER VACATION

1. IKE AND KOMIYA AND...

2. THE BEGINNING OF A SHORT-LIVED VACATION

3. EVERYONE'S HOLIDAY

4. EVERYONE'S GROWTH

5. A TREASURE HUNT OF GIRL TROUBLES

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POSTSCRIPT



Prologue: The Curtain Rises on a Fun Summer Vacation

I'M SURE MANY of the 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, and the penetration rate of smartphones among teens and people aged under 20 is expected to exceed 99% by 2020. There is no doubt about this fact when looking back on the world.

For me, who started using a cell phone in high school, it's still not a high priority as a necessity in my life, but it is only a matter of time before it becomes so.

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 can't say that I had any friends or loved ones.

The number of students who I can call by name, even if they are only acquaintances, is incomparable to that of last year. The time spent on the cruise ship will be an unforgettable memory for me and my fellow students.

You can fill up the swimming pool, enjoy 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, students are required to go to the doctor's office, which is open 24 hours a day. It is unlikely that any student will break the rules, but there are strict penalties in place, so it shouldn't be a problem.

In addition to that, there is a predetermined hierarchy of levels that students are 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: Ike and Komiya and...

IT WAS THE morning of August 4th, the day after the completion of the special uninhabited island exam. For seven days, from today until the end of August 10, the students will spend their holidays on a luxury cruise ship. They have been promised that there will be no special exams like the zodiac exam held last year.

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

In other words, from today on, 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 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 top brand bed gently wrapped around my body. And after living in a tent on an uninhabited island, the feeling is even better.

That's about all I have to say about the situation on the first day.

Based on the results of the uninhabited 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 uninhabited island exam, so the announcement was made irregularly late after the results of the special examinations were calculated.

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 are directly related to their monthly allowance.

If you don't have money to spend freely, your holiday on the luxury cruise ship won't be as enjoyable.

Year-Two August Class Points

Class A led by Sakayanagi Arisu 1206 points

Class B led by Ichinose Honami 578 points

Class C led by Horikita Suzune 571 points

Class D led by Ryūen Kakeru 551 points

As a result, our class ended up in Class C by a small margin. There was a chance that we could have risen to Class B at one point, but it seems that we fell just one step short. However, there was no cause for pessimism, and the result was rather good.

Kōenji earned 300 class points for his first-place finish. I was reminded of the destructive power of this overwhelming score. Until now, many in the class had perceived Kōenji as a hindrance, but the people around him had no choice but to change their view of him.

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 card that exempts him from any further cooperation until graduation. If this fact were to be made public, there would be fewer people who could be honestly happy.

However, I think this was a good thing. If it weren't for Kōenji's 300 points, we would have had to fight for a while against the uncertainty of whether we could really 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 Class B by ourselves, and then close the gap by winning in a direct competition with Sakayanagi's class.

This upward trend also applies to Ryūen's class, which has dropped to Class D. He was not able to finish in the top three on the podium during the uninhabited island exam, so it is inevitable that his class points are a bit of a letdown, but his capability is impeccable. The addition of Katsuragi will raise the overall academic performance of the class and give the class a sense of stability. And Ryūen had made some kind of deal with Sakayanagi. Whether it was related to private points, class points, or something else that I hadn't thought of, it was difficult to say at this point, but it might be something that can change the course of the battle.

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

On the other hand, Ichinose's class, which has remerged to Class B is not in a bad shape if you only looked at the results. With Sakayanagi leading the way, Ichinose was able to gain class points with their cooperation.

With only 27 points separating Class B from Class D, it was not surprising if the rankings changed on September 1 due to minor behavioral issues during the

period when the special exams were not held. Depending on the results of the uninhabited island exam, she could have fallen into Class D, so Ichinose's anxiety must be quite strong. No, she had to be worried.

This is where the real moment of truth will come, Ichinose.

In my mind, I pray for her success.

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

If so, the next special exam would be a battle of grades. If they easily fall behind the C and D classes, the future of the Ichinose class will be bleak. In other words, the next round may decide the future of...

In any case, the situation of the three classes in a side-by-side comparison is simple and that's about it. The last one is the Class A, led by Sakayanagi, who is still not letting us close the gap easily. Their sense of stability is outstanding, and they were able to slip into third place in the uninhabited island exam this time, accumulating class points. Many of the students are excellent individually, and Sakayanagi's ability to control them is perfect.

In addition, Sakayanagi's strategy is not limited to royal or evil ways. and she is able to use both of them with great dexterity. She is the leader of the unmoving Class A, and her performance is worthy of her position.

At first glance, there are no gaps, but if Horikita's class gains momentum from here, it's not impossible to catch up. There should be plenty chances to secure the top slot. Of course, in order to do so, it is necessary to somehow destroy Class A, which continues to run in a league of its own. The shortest route is to get rid of Sakayanagi, but it is extremely difficult to get rid of her, and even if she didn't have protection points, she would not be an easy opponent. 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 Kitō are absent or dysfunctional, there is only so much Sakayanagi can do. As for Kitō, there are many unknowns on his abilities, but the first two seem to be people that you can handle without many 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 grades have temporarily stopped fighting and are in a state of truce. From now on, it's my turn to be a student for a while and enjoy myself as much as I can. Until the other day, our pockets were empty, but when the class points were announced and the private points for August were given out, our wallets were suddenly flushed with cash.

Our class received 571 class points, or the equivalent of 57,100 yen in private points for each of us. We didn't get an extra bonus because we couldn't get into the top rankings for the special exam, 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, if you're going to spend a week locked up in your cabin penniless, it won't cost you anything, but it's no different than being holed up in a dormitory on holiday.

A text message came through on my cell phone, informing me that the detailed results of the special uninhabited island examinations would be released in a rest 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 my cell phone, but since the school didn't do that, I wonder if they don't want the students to take the exam results home and analyze them for a long time.

This time, Acting Director Tsukishiro operated in the dark behind the scenes, so it could be assumed that he was trying to avoid leaving any unnecessary evidence. I'd like to go see the results right away, but I think it's safer to leave some time for the students to arrive in droves.

Forgetting about the test results for the moment, I decided to take care of something else. On my cell phone, I sent a message to Ichinose, simply asking if I could meet her in the evening in three days' time. Of course, it's easy for her to imagine that this is in response to a spur-of-the-moment confession that took place on the uninhabited island.

I can assume she would have liked to see me right away hear my answer to her feelings, but she had just finished the grueling uninhabited island exam. First of all, she needed to regain her strength, and then she should spend some time with her good friends.

I turned off the screen of my cell phone for the time being, as I hadn't received any messages yet.

"Why don't you go check out the results?" I turn to my roommate, Hondō.

"Hmm, I'll pass... I can't walk, my body is a wreck. Now I just want to lay in bed all day."

It's no wonder since this bed is not only tiring, but also robbing you of the energy to move due to how comfortable it is.

In particular, Hondō, who was suffering from exhaustion, weakly turned to his left and looked away.

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

“I worked myself to death on the last day, and I really wanted to eat, but I couldn’t.”

He turned his back and rolled himself up, covering his head with the covers. For now, he just wanted to lie down and sleep.

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

“What about you guys, Akito and Ayanokōji? Aren’t you a little concerned about the rankings?” asked Miyamoto.

Akito fiddled with his cell phone and turned his gaze to Miyamoto.

“I don’t care. I know what rank we are. To be honest, I think it’s enough that we avoided expulsion for now. Just like Hondō, I’d like to just relax for the day.”

It’s not 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 male in the group. I’m sure it was more of a mental challenge than a physical one.

“You were in the same group as Sakura and Hasebe right?” Miyamoto asked Akito as he sat down on his bed.

“What about it?” replied Akito turning his head towards Miyamoto.

“I was in a group of three bastards, so it was a hell of a sweaty time, but you must have been in heaven surrounded by girls.”

“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 types of the groups, so each claimed their own heaven and hell.

Listening to the conversation, I was honestly glad that I didn’t join either group. It’s better for me to be alone for that kind of test, unless you’re a good friend of mine.

Anyway, now that the Akito and Hondō had both refused, Miyamoto’s gaze turned to me.

Unlike Hondō and Akito, I had regained a lot of the energy I had lost on the uninhabited island by sleeping. My strength isn’t perfect, but it’s enough to get around the ship.

However, there was no need to rush, we could check the test results later. And even if Akito didn’t go to see the results, the other members of Ayanokōji Group could go to see the results instead.

“I’ll take it easy today, too. I’m sure everyone is concerned about the ranking, and I don’t like crowds...”

Boom, boom, boom!

Just as I was about to say no, the door of the cabin was slammed multiple

times. The force of the knocks was so strong that it seemed as if something horrible had happened.

Akito jumped to his feet and hurriedly opened the door, only to find that it was Ishizaki.

The air was almost tense as if something was wrong, but...

“Yo, Ayanokōji! Let’s go see the test results together!”

The smile on his face and the words he said made everyone gasp in disbelief.

Akito turned around and looked at me speechless.

“No, I’m...”

“What the hell, you’re bored anyway, right? Let’s go, shall we?” He strode into the room and grabbed me by the arm, forcing me to get out of the extremely comfortable 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 sudden appearance.

“Well, it just happened.”

There was nothing more to answer than that, but it would not be satisfactory for Akito.

Anyways, the pressure of Ishizaki’s smile is so strong it’s hard for me to decline.

“I’m a little tired today.”

“What do you mean you’re tired? I’m sure you’ll be fine. Let’s go!”

He doesn’t seem to be giving up, as if he’s trying to force me to go with him without letting me think things over.

“Okay fine. Let me change my clothes first.”

“Oh, I’ll wait for you in the hallway then!” Perhaps convinced by my answer to go, Ishizaki walked out of the cabin.”

“You’ve caught the attention of a troublesome person too, haven’t you? Let me know if you need any help, okay?”

“Thanks, but... well, Ishizaki’s not a bad guy, so it’s okay.”

“Not a bad guy, huh? I don’t have a good impression of him, so it’s possible that Ryūen is behind this. You’d better be careful.”

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

Ishizaki is not a person who is capable of hiding things or playing games. However, if he is not informed of this and is being manipulated behind the scenes, he can be a nuisance. However, now that we aren't 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 I couldn't see any of the other students.

“Come on, let's go!”

“There's no need to be so hasty, 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. It's hard for me to imagine Ishizaki going to the cinema on the day of the release.

“I went to see World Domination 16 on its opening day you know.”

I've never heard of this title before, but it sounds like something that would have guns and fists flying all over the place. It's also a very long work, 16 in the series. But the title doesn't attract me at all.

“I'm wondering, what was the rank of Ryūen-san's group?”

I'm sure Ishizaki doesn't have much friends in his class. Otherwise, he probably wouldn't have bothered to invite me since I'm from another class.

“Are you sure you didn't invite Ryūen and the others? They should be concerned about the ranking as well.” I ask, trying to find out the truth behind it.

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

“That's easy to understand.”

“Right? Other than that, most of them are just tired of being on an uninhabited island and want to pass the day resting.”

It means that there are many students who want to rest for now, just like Hondō, Akito and the others.

“You're doing well, Ishizaki. Aren't you tired?”

“Me? I recovered after I slept.”

“I see.”

It was a surprisingly simple answer, but easy to understand. It's not that he's particularly athletic, but maybe his resilience is better than others.

“So how come you called me to come with you? I’m not particularly good at socializing...”

“That’s not true. You’re easier to talk to than Kaneda anyways.”

I didn’t know much about this Kaneda person, so I wasn’t sure what to think of this comparison.

On the way, I passed by a store.

“Wow, they’re selling national flags!”

Ishizaki’s eyes lit up with excitement as he picked up the flags of the world from the store. As I looked at him curiously, wondering what he meant, Ishizaki rubbed the bridge of his nose with his index finger and replied.

“Well, you know, when we went to Albert’s room before, he had a collection of national flags. Maybe because I was inspired by that, I started to collect them too.”

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

“I don’t know Albert that well, but he seems like a nice guy.”

“Yeah. That’s true. We had a lot of conflicts when we first entered the 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 this 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 person in the class.”

“Is it because you’re under Ryūen’s thumb?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good reason, it happened right after I entered the school. But after the fight with you on the rooftop, I was supposed to be the one who defeated Ryūen-san and took back the class. I’ve been able to hang out with a lot more people that I hadn’t been in touch with before.” He choked on his words after saying that much.

Indeed, Ishizaki’s position might be complicated.

There were more than a few students who had hoped that he would defeat Ryūen, and they thanked Ishizaki for his help.

However, if he were to fall back into the arms of Ryūen, it would be inevitable that there would be a backlash.

“I guess that means I’m part of the cause.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, that was a weird thing to say. Ayanokōji isn’t responsible for anything. It was a fight that we started in the first place.

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 dangerous.

“Don’t think that you can solve the problems of the class by yourself.”

“I know. Class problems will be solved with the class guys. Even Ryūen-san is prepared to come back.”

Ishizaki believed this and did his best to follow him.

1

“Whoa, that’s a lot of people.”

Sure enough, the rest area near the fitness gym where the exam results were being disclosed was packed with many students. Near the monitor, there was a large sign that read, “Photography is strictly prohibited,” and two adults who seemed to be in relation with Tsukishiro were keeping a close eye on the students.

The rankings and scores were displayed on a list of monitors, which seemed to be scrolling automatically. Right now, it’s showing the 50th to 60th place group members and their scores.

“Nn.....?”

There was an inexplicable feeling of discomfort that I suddenly felt all over my body. What is it? The cause of this feeling didn’t become immediately apparent, and I feel a kind of unspeakable weirdness.

“I was going to take my time to look at the results, but I don’t think I can concentrate at all with this.” Ishizaki doesn’t notice that uncomfortable feeling, but he looks at the monitor and mutters in disgust.

“It can’t be helped. It’s natural a lot of people would like 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 has a bold personality, it seems that won’t push his seniors out of the way.

One of the third-year students reached out and began to operate the monitor, which was an auto-scrolling monitor, but could be interacted with by touching and viewing the rankings at will. 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 he waited, it would be a while before his turn came around.

“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, who was about to turn back, didn’t seem to notice anything.

This strange atmosphere.

The large number of gazes directed at me.

It’s not something that can be put away as mere imagination. It’s not that

Ishizaki next to me is dull and unaware of it, they simply aren't watching Ishizaki. They're only watching me.

They are watching my every move with an obvious intent that they aren't even trying to hide. 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 that Nagumo is involved in this.

Has the case I put off on the uninhabited island exam returned today?

"What's wrong?"

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

"No, it's nothing. It seems that other students are coming to see the results one after another, so let's turn back."

"Alright, no problem."

I had imagined that Nagumo would set something up sooner or later, but this is a bit tricky. It would have been much easier if Nagumo had come directly to us and set something in motion.

He made the first move that I didn't want to be made.

"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. Either way, it's extremely disturbing to be persistently gazed at.

"What's wrong with you? You don't want to have dinner with me? That's kind of rude."

"No, that's not it. I was just thinking about something unrelated."

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

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

That was certainly true. Let's just forget about the third-years for now.

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

"It's fine, we're just going to have dinner together."

I can't deny that I feel pressure, but it doesn't mean 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 uttered a line that made me stand on end. But then, as if he realized something, he hurriedly turned around.

"Are you... being bothering by me 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 it off. Well, I knew that he had this kind of personality. It's not that I feel bad about it, so I guess I'll follow Ishizaki.

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

“Ayanokōji-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 exam results too?”

“Yeah. But I'm not likely to be able to look at them slowly, so I gave up.”

“I see. The third-years are all working on the monitors now, and it's going to be a little while before we juniors can freely view them.”

It seems that Nanase also wanted to know the details of the results, but she gave up.

Ishizaki was looking at our exchange curiously. Come to think of it, Ishizaki didn't know Nanase directly, did he?

“Oh, hey Ayanokōji-kun. When did you get to know such a cute and adorable girl?”

“A lot of things happened.”

It's very troublesome to explain everything from scratch, so I told 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 unusual for me to be confronted with this kind of thing. I didn't think Ishizaki was deeply interested in heterosexual issues, but apparently, I was mistaken.

“Do you want something from me?” I said turning towards Nanase.

“No, I just felt like talking to you when I saw you.” Her straightforward eyes shine, and she says without hesitation something that might make me feel somewhat embarrassed.

“I'm sorry to bother you. Excuse me!”

I thought when she was running, it was to catch up with me, but she broke into a run again after she left. The inside of the ship is the same as the school halls, and I don't think it's a good place to run, but I guess it's alright if she was careful.

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

I don't know what he meant by “thing” but I'll ignore it.

“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. So once again, I firmly denied it to Ishizaki in the form of a reminder.

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, Ayanokōji! Thank God, I’ve been waiting for you!”

Ike was waiting for me? Yet another unexpected turn of events.

“Actually, I was thinking of going to visit Komiya now, and I was wondering if you wanted to join me.” Ike said as he approached me and leaned in to whisper into my ear.

“Me...?”

“Well you see... I’m just a little uncomfortable going alone.”

“Why?”

“Why? I mean, you know. I’m... going out with Shinohara. After the exam, on the way back to the ship, there was a time when we were alone, and...”

It seems that he confessed his feelings to her, and Shinohara gave him the okay. I had thought that it might progress, but it exceeded my expectations.

“Well, congratulations.” I congratulated him honestly, and he looked away from me like he was telegraphing.

“Oh, thank you. But from... from Komiya’s point of view, I think I might have cheated.”

“I don’t think so, though.”

“No, I don’t think it’s fair. It’s like... playing dirty.”

It is true that Komiya had to retire from the uninhabited island test early because of some suspicious behavior. It’s not that you can’t use the term “sneaky” to describe it, but anyone can say that. It seems that Komiya was planning to confess to Shinohara during this exam.

“I was really thinking of waiting until after Komiya’s injury was healed, you know? But I was relieved that the exam was over, and with Shinohara beside me..., I felt like I didn’t want to give her to Komiya...”

It seems that he confessed to her without thinking.

Of course, there was also the risk of being rejected. If that had happened, it would have made things even more awkward after Komiya and Shinohara got together.

“That’s why I felt I had to properly report it to Komiya. Man, to man. If he was also planning to confess to Shinohara, it would be complicated, right?”

“If you didn’t make the first move, you would have been in trouble if Shinohara decided to go for Komiya after all.”

“Ehhh?! Why are you saying that...?” Ike was upset as he exaggeratedly flinched.

Half of him wanted to give a report, and the other half wanted to stop himself from telling Komiya

“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?”

Ike looked frightened, as if he got scared from imagining it.

Komiya isn’t a big guy, but he’s a basketball player. Ike, on the other hand, is small for a boy, so I’d say there’s enough of a size difference.

“Well, he has a dubious leg injury right now, and can’t really walk. He can’t hurt you 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 would be having a hard time if he was in the cabins.”

No wonder he spends most of his holidays in the doctor’s office. Ike and I arrive in front of the infirmary. Ike took a deep breath to calm himself down. There was no point in rushing inside, so he 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. We saw Komiya, who was sitting up, and several of his classmates, including Ryūen, Albert, Kaneda, Kondō, and Yamawaki were surrounding him.

Even though someone outside of the class showed up, Ryūen didn’t give us a second glance as he stood up.

“Sorry for the interruption, Komiya.”

As if the conversation was over, Ryūen left the infirmary with his friends. I looked at Ryūen lightly, but he didn’t even give me a glance.

“He’s still as scary as ever, Ryūen... I mean, what did he want?” Ike, on the other hand, mumbled to himself as if he couldn’t look directly at Ryūen.

It was the first time I’ve ever seen such a thing.

“Well, he is powerful, isn’t he? He was just visiting me.” Replied Komiya from the bed.

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 was visiting you... He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who would do something like that.”

Ike said what he honestly felt, and Komiya agreed with him.

“If it was this time last year, well, it would be unthinkable.” Komiya smiled in nostalgia as he recalled a year ago.

“But something’s changed a bit within Ryūen-san. It’s not as if he’s become well rounded though...” Komiya said, somewhat confused but happy.

“I think I can get along with that guy now and follow his orders.”

“Follow Ryūen...? I don’t get it.”

Ike’s body trembled exaggeratedly as he didn’t seem to understand at all what Komiya meant.

“Ike and Ayanokōji, don’t just stand there, please sit down.” Komiya gently welcomed us, even though we were students from the other classes and encouraged us to sit down without hesitation.

We took him up on his words and sat down together in the chairs.

“You look better.” Looking at the leg, I observe 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 around while I’m stuck behind the door, so I hope I get better soon.”

“When will you be able to go out?” asked Ike.

“I’m going to ask for permission to go out with my crutches and cane.”

They are rivals in love, but surprisingly, the two of them are able to talk on their own.

I guess my presence was a bit superfluous.

“I’m just a little worried about...”

“Worried? With what?”

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

“Well... it seems like Ryūen is planning to find out who pushed me off. He asked me a lot of questions to see if I remembered anything. Like I told Ayanokōji, I don’t remember being attacked or anything at all.”

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

Right now, Ryūen’s class is gaining momentum day by day, and it’s time to focus on the sophomore battle to get to Class A. Of course, the same could be said for our class, but we shouldn’t go too deep into this one.

If Amasawa, another White Room student, or someone related to Tsukishiro was involved, there was no guarantee that even Ryūen would be safe.

“I hope I didn’t overdo it....”

“It looks like Ryūen’s going to kill the culprit half to death, right?”

For the two of them, there was no way they could envision Ryūen getting beat.

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

“So? It’s not like you’re just here to visit me, is it?” As if he had sensed something, Komiya asked Ike that. At that moment, Ike stiffened as if surprised.

“Oh no... Well I...” Perhaps he wasn’t ready yet, but he choked on his words.

Seeing this, Komiya waited for his words with a serious face, without prompting. The atmosphere of a place can change visibly in an instant.

“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 suggestion, but he must have felt it as men do.

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

“I confessed to Shinohara!” A determined Ike tells him in a simple but loud voice.

Silence came immediately afterwards and I found Ike swallowing heavily next to me.

“So? What was 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 was scared that Komiya would retaliate out of anger. 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 might hit me.”

“No, it doesn’t... well, yeah 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 to come over did not reveal his true intentions.

But from the power of his words, Ike seemed to have made up his mind. He stood right beside Komiya, frightened.

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 ever make Satsuki cry, I won't forgive you." He said, lightly pressing his left fist against Ike's chest.

"That's all Komiya...?"

Komiya's devilish expression changed to a smile.

"Nah, don't give me that pushy look. Satsuki chose you, that's all, isn't it?"

"But... if you hadn't been removed from the exam, it might have been the other way around..."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think so. I don't think it was a quick win for me. Just..."

"Just?"

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

Komiya was 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 him a big boost, and because of that, he was able to face Shinohara.

Without a doubt, this was the most important factor in their relationship. If Komiya hadn't been injured, if Ike hadn't been by his side at that time, if either of them had followed a different fate, it might have been Komiya who would have been next to Shinohara.

"In that sense, this injury was just unlucky."

It wasn't a fulfillment of love, but Komiya seemed to be in the clear.

"Thanks, Komiya."

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

"Yeah, I know. I can't afford to be expelled from school now."

This love affair could have been a pivotal turning point for Ike. It gave him the opportunity to struggle for himself and for the people he loves, just like Sudō.

At last, the report from Ike and the exchange with Komiya settled down.

"I'm sorry, Ike, but can I have a word with Ayanokōji alone for a moment? There's something I need to go over with you about my injury."

"Alright, see you later Komiya. Ayanokōji too."

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

Once the two of us were alone, Komiya spoke up.

"Sorry about that. Didn't Ike ask you to come only to help him?"

"No, I came because I was wondering about your condition too. It was more like I interfered."

"That's not true. I don't know what... is this right?"

“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 beating and trying to kick the other 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.”

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

“I mentioned a little bit earlier about the situation with Ryūen-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 that this was an accident caused by my own mistake.”

“But Shinohara has actually seen the existence of the person who attacked you guys.”

“I know. But I have a bad feeling about this, and I have a feeling it won’t end well.”

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

“Can Ayanokōji keep an eye out for that too, even if it’s just for a little while?”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can do about it.”

“I’m not expecting you to do anything about it directly. If you feel uncomfortable, let me know.” He asked me with a strong gaze.

We’ll exchange contact information formally so that we can always be in touch.

“Okay, for now, you should focus on healing your injuries as soon as possible.”

Resting is the only shortcut to a full recovery.

“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 to do that. I think 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 her name, even if it was simply a tease.

Anyway, it's not a good thing that he's injured, but I feel like I'm a little closer to Komiya now.

“See you later, Ayanokōji.”

“Yeah.”

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

My classmates Sudō 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've been trying to make friends, but it's happening.

“How to make friends is not something you can put in a textbook.” I thought to myself.

Chapter 2: The Beginning of a Short-Lived Vacation

FOR MANY students, each day on an uninhabited island must have seemed like a long time. In contrast, a day spent on a luxury cruise ship is like a flash of light, passing in an instant. Why does time flow so differently in the same 24-hour period? I guess the most important factor is that we don't think about time for most of the day. During normal school life and special exams, we often think about time. On the other hand, on vacations, we don't think about time as much, and the difference is apparent.

The second day of the holiday was such a festival.

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 fully enjoy their vacation. And while I had been spending most of my time quietly by myself, I received an email from someone unexpectedly inviting me to hang out.

It was from the vice president of the student council from third-year Class B, Kiriyaama. 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 out of my mind all the unpredictable ideas.

Although the location of this call is a swimming pool, it is far from a game. Of course, I can refuse. Or I can 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 insistent stares I had felt from the third-year students yesterday.

I'm currently in the rest area by the fitness gym. I was in front of a monitor where the results of the special exam were posted. I'm not sure if many students have already finished checking their exam results, but I'm alone right now. The number of teachers monitoring the exam results had also been reduced to one.

The results of the exams had been drilled into my head, but when I slid the results of the top students onto the screen again, I focused on the results of the Kiriyaama group.

The overall rankings were announced in front of the entire group, with the Koūenji group in first place, the Nagumo group in second place, and the

Sakayanagi group in third place, but in fourth place was the Kiriya group, with a score of 255 points, only six points behind.

“The third-year students must be pretty disappointed” I muttered to myself.

Nagumo missed out on first place, and Kiriya missed out on the podium. On top of that, all of the expelled students were third-year students, which was an unusual situation. 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 staying in every nook and cranny.

Students who were engrossed in conversation, as well as third-year students who were swimming, noticed my presence and began to observe me intently. It was no mere coincidence that I felt their eyes on me yesterday.

“It’s too early to prove anything, isn’t it?” I thought to myself.

It’s such a strong feeling of discomfort that I want to complain about it. I was supposed to be here as one of the shadowy students, but I stood out more than any of them. Even if I try not to think about it, I naturally want to try and 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 give 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 that Nagumo assumes that I am aware of the strange stares. It’s not surprising that he’s most likely enjoying seeing me as the center of attention.

Anyway, for now, the best thing to do is to ignore the stares and spend the day trying to relax.

When I looked around the pool to see who else was there, I saw Ichinose and some of her classmates. Ichinose happened to be the first to notice my presence and our eyes met.

Ichinose’s shoulders jerked as she saw me and she hid behind her other classmates. Her classmates called out to her, wondering what was wrong with her sudden change in behavior.

After Ichinose’s confession to me during the uninhabited island exam, it was understandable that she would feel awkward just looking at me from a distance like this. If it’s just Ichinose I might have approached, but her classmates are also there, so it would be best to keep our distance for now.

Even if I leave her alone, we have an appointment to meet the day after tomorrow in the evening.

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 in quite some trouble this time around Ayanokōji.”

I turned my gaze to see Kiryūin 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 what you mean.”

I tried to play it off, but Kiryūin 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.”

“Maybe you mean the way they’re looking 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?” replied Kiryūin sarcastically.

I put it forward that I didn’t care, but that’s not the case, implied Kiryūin.

“It just seems like one of those terminally horrible strategies to me, doesn’t it? It would be nothing short of troublesome, especially for a type of person like you.” While relaxing, Kiryūin calmly pointed that out. She wasn’t wrong. “As expected of the student council president. He’s played a bizarre but effective card against the perfect you.”

“I’m not perfect.”

“Don’t be modest. I’ve been through the line of fire with you once, and I know 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 Kiryūin has taken into consideration the surrounding environment.

“I understand, I’ll admit it for now.”

“Hmm, that’s fine. Now, back to the topic at hand, did something happen with Nagumo at the end of the exam? Because there were no orders for the third years until the end of the uninhabited island exam.”

“It’s frustrating that I can’t say that I don’t remember being resented at all.”

Kiryūin, who had been easing into a posture so far, sat up slightly.

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

“I know. When it comes to OAA, he’s by far the number one in the entire school.”

There are only a few students who hold an A+ in one ability, like Sudō and Kiryūin.

However, Nagumo is the only student with an all-A or higher, and the number of students who have obtained two or more A+ is extremely limited.

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

Kiryūin takes a breath and picks up the glass on the table.

“To Nagumo, you must have been just one of his toys. However, something that happened during the uninhabited island exam seems to have triggered him to take you seriously.”

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

“If that’s the case, then you’ve made a wrong choice somewhere.”

Kiryūin’s words were painful to hear, but she was relentless.

“There are probably only a few people who can defeat you one-on-one. I’m a skilled fighter myself, but if there’s one type I’m not good at, it’s probably you, Ayanokōji. But in Nagumo’s case, his nature is completely different. I suspect that the type you’re not good at will be him. What do you think?”

“I can’t deny that possibility anymore. I’ve been misjudging the nature of this whole situation.”

Kiryūin shoots me a look. I hadn’t realized how stressful and disgusting this 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 is to stay indoors, and that’s not a practical solution either.

“I suppose so. Nagumo tends to prefer flashy moves, crushing blows, and one-on-ones. But when it comes to winning for sure, he will use any strategy. Even if it means mobilizing the entire third grade. He doesn’t care if it’s a mother-in-law move or not, He’s going to prioritize winning in the end.”

So, the act of making a large number of people look at me was just the beginning.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not going to be able to help you with this one.” She said and put on her sunglasses.

“I never said I wanted to rely on you.”

Kiryūin rejected me even though I didn’t even ask her for anything.

“I’ve been free to do whatever I want for three years, but I’ve got a few regrets about my school life. If this school had an original class detention system, I might have been willing to consider it.”

This is the first time I’ve ever heard someone say this. In layman’s terms, it’s staying in school.

“You’re here, Ayanokōji.”

As I and Kiryūin continued to talk, the vice president, Kiriyama, showed up. Kiriyama, with his serious impression, seemed to have arrived much earlier than promised. He took one look at Kiryūin, who was relaxing by his side, and then turned his gaze to me again.

“We have a little while before our scheduled time, but you don’t mind if we start? This is a bad place, let’s move.”

“You don’t want me to hear this, do you Kiriyama?” Kiryūin said she couldn’t help me, but she was interested in what he had to say. She took her sunglasses off and put them on her head 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, so a lot of students were staying there. Well, for some reason, only the seat next to Kiryūin is empty, but there’s no need to pursue that point too deeply.

“It’s a strange thing to say that this attracts 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 a lot of 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 you’re depressing?” Kiriyama spat out at Kiryūin. The expression on his face was completely dead, devoid of any color of emotion.

It showed that he had been burned by Kiryūin’s words many times before.

“I see, so it means that I’ve made you feel uncomfortable.”

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

“Anyway, why don’t you tell me what you’re going to talk about?”

“No. I refuse. It’s none of your business.”

“Are you calling me irrelevant? How dare you assume it’s none of my business?”

“What?”

“Ayanokōji and I are in a relationship. If that’s the case, how can you say it’s irrelevant?”

Huh?

Kiriyama looks at me and Kiryūin alternately with a surprised look on his face before letting out a reaction of “What?”

“I’m just kidding, Kiriyama. You’re a boring guy, but your reactions are sometimes funny.”

Seeing Kiryūin laughing with amusement, Kiriyama looked strongly indignant.

He walked away without uttering a word. He would have to leave such a woman alone and get on with it.

“I can’t exactly ignore him, so I’ll leave you now, Kiryūin-senpai.”

“Please give my regards to Kiriyama.”

No, I don’t think I will. I doubt Kiriyama would want to hear Kiryūin’s name even if she wasn’t present. I followed Kiriyama, who was walking ahead of me, to a deck one floor up that overlooked the pool.

It was a relatively quiet place, with many students sunbathing or taking a nap break. 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 cleared the area of people.

In that sense, the freshmen and sophomores probably wouldn’t mind me talking with Kiriyama. 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, what is it you wanted to call me up for?”

“I’m not going to beat the bush. On the last day of the uninhabited island exam, what did you do to Nagumo, Ayanokōji?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s obvious that you had something to do with the results of the exam.”

On the last day of the exam, when I and Nagumo met, I heard over the walkie-talkie that they were developing a strategy to suppress Kōenji. It’s no wonder that Kiriyama was pushing the topic.

“I don’t mind answering, but can you also answer my question first?”

“A question?”

Yes. When I got this call, there was something I wanted to make sure of. I continued to Kiriyama, who looked at me suspiciously.

“It’s something I’ve been wondering since I first met Vice President Kiriyama. In the beginning, you seemed to be working to defeat Nagumo, but at what point did you abandon... giving up on fighting?”

If Kiriyama was expecting Nagumo to lose and crash and be defeated, then this incident should be a welcome one.

“Given up? I don’t understand what you mean. My personal battle is still going on.”

“Is that so? It doesn’t look like that 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 plan are starting 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 ordinary words of denial uttered by Kiriyama. However, human beings are prone to make the slightest gaffe.

“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 in the student council president’s camp.”

“Isn’t it the same thing?”

“Admitting defeat and turning on to the other side are different things. They are completely dissimilar. I 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.

“What’s the point?”

Without admitting or denying it, Kiriyama tried to continue the conversation. Because right now, the easiest option this man could take was to go through with it.

“I simply wanted to ask what position you are in. Is there no alternative to being an enemy of Nagumo, even though you’ve given up on fighting him? Or are you under the thumb of Nagumo? If you recall, this was a case entrusted to me by Horikita Manabu.”

Kiriyama’s expression hardened, as if he hadn’t heard Manabu’s name in a while.

“That’s right...”

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

“Looking back on 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 weren’t the right person to get involved in the first place.” 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 Class A. But by the middle of my sophomore year, that spirit was slowly fading.”

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 gap of over 700 points. They allowed Nagumo to run solo early on, and came to a point where they could not catch him.

“We, the third years, moved on to the individual competition early on. Class points and school rules were of secondary importance, and we began to play according to the original rules proposed by Nagumo.”

That was a big part of the reason behind the unusual solo run. Once that happened, it would have been a high hurdle for Kiriyama to confront alone.

“I was struggling to break through somehow, but as soon as I entered the final year, that wave swallowed me up too.”

Regret? Resignation? Kiriyama shows an indescribable profile.

“What happened to you after you were swallowed by the wave?”

“Huh... do you want to hear it straight from my mouth so you can feel better about yourself?”

“No, because it’s important to me.”

“Nagumo handed me a ticket to graduate with Class A, and I decided to follow the rules that that man made up. This is what you wanted to ask, right?”

In other words, the position Kiriyama’s in now means that not only has Nagumo stopped being hostile, but he’s also become one of Nagumo’s friends. That’s how important it must be for an ordinary student to graduate from Class A.

It’s also proof that 20 million points have such value and appeal.

“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 from Class A, 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 will follow.”

It was only natural that Kiriyama was upset and wanted to let someone know the details, even if it meant calling me.

“It was my mission to take down Nagumo. However, your involvement caused a disruption in the chain of command, and we lost the first place to Kōenji, and ended up in second place. As a result, I lost class and private points. That’s a big loss for both Nagumo and I. Do you have any idea how much this means to me?”

It had been confirmed on OAA that Nagumo had his own large group of trial cards and seven additional cards; the amount of money lost by not taking first place amounted to seven million alone. In addition, if all 28 of the third-year students’ flight cards had been designated to Nagumo’s group, he would have received an additional reward of nearly 15 million private points. However, the result of sinking to second place was almost halved. 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, we need to collect private points without wasting even a single point.”

Considering that Kiriyama's group had also concentrated their 'additional' cards on their own group with the intention of aiming for second place, that meant that more private points than I had just calculated were lost.

"It seems that it's not unrelated to the fact that Kiriyama-senpai's group missed the prize of the podium."

When I pointed that out, he reacted with a slight twitch of his shoulder.

"Ah. I was hurriedly sent out as a backup factor for the Nagumo Group. It's not just that we lost to Kōenji, it's that the second-year group took third place from us."

The large amount 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 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 his trust has been damaged. Still, if you had switched it up, the problem would have been minimal, but after the special exam... Nagumo took unbelievable action."

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

"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 with other year groups at the end of the exam."

But when that didn't happen, the third-year students in the lower group were expelled en-masse.

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

"It's terrifying, 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 the unreasonable actions of Nagumo, 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 abnormal that even after all these events, the third-year students still showed no signs of defying Nagumo.

“You know what’s strange? The fact that Nagumo can’t be blamed for it. Even though it’s a big blunder, a lot of people below Class B who don’t have tickets are keeping quiet. Even if I wanted to defy him, I can’t. Nagumo and the students enrolled in the third year Class A are protected by an inviolable fortress.”

An impenetrable fortress. I guess that means that a system has been created that no other class can ever go against.

If that’s the case, then it seems that I will be able to unravel the mystery by posing one question.

“Vice-President Kiriya has the ticket in his hands directly, right?”

A question that would normally end with a ‘yes’ reply.

However, Kiriya 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 had hit on a shrewd strategy. If all the private points were controlled by Nagumo, then no one would be able to resist him. To put it simply, he’s making a verbal promise to rescue them with 20 million points.

No, even the word “promise” may be a bit naive. I think Nagumo is using vague expressions like “If you continue to be loyal to me, I will prepare a ticket for you” to avoid making a clear statement. In this situation, if you go against them, the promise may be unceremoniously turned against you.

“It is also forbidden to accumulate private points by sneaking around. The maximum amount of private points an individual can have at their disposal is 500,000 points. Anything above that will be transferred 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. They would also have rules in place to monitor each other.

Even if they could use some means to kick Nagumo out of the school, he would be expelled with tens or even hundreds of millions of private points.

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

“Now you know why the third-years are unusually pushing up and then protecting Nagumo, don’t you?”

“I understand perfectly.”

It could be described as a perfect dictatorship. It's impossible for anyone in the same grade to compete with Nagumo.

"That guy is playing with the entire third year. 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 enrolled in Classes D and C, where they have no chance of winning, the existence of this Nagumo would be nothing but a god. It's only natural that they are told that if they are useful, they can graduate from Class A.

However, you won't know that until you really move classes just before graduation.

"We have very little school life left, and I want to compete and fight to get as many tickets as possible. That's why your presence is nothing but a hindrance, Ayanokōji."

By messing around with me, Nagumo loses valuable private points. With the accompanying 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 us 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."

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

So Kiriyama wants to stop Nagumo's outburst, even if it means risking losing his ticket? No, he fears what will happen to his own ticket if he doesn't stop it.

"If you're not going to talk to me, 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 you to stop the operation that Nagumo 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 the third-years are looking at me, right?"

Kiriyama 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 sense of disbelief among the third years at this bizarre and weird behavior.”

Despite their disbelief, they had no choice but to obey Nagumo, who had complete control over them.

“It’s a solid Nagumo administration, but... even so, if they continue this kind of recklessness, the worst could happen.”

Kiriyama and the others who have been given tickets will continue to obey faithfully, but many of the students who have not been given tickets will not. Kiriyama couldn’t let a riot like that happen. It would not be surprising if he planned to expel Nagumo from the school if he did not get a ticket. For Kiriyama and the others, that would be the worst-case scenario.

“Even if I say I’ll meet with him, I don’t think it will be the end of the story.”

“Then what should I do? You won’t tell me the details, but you also don’t want to see 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.”

The next news would probably come to Kiriyama’s ears from Nagumo, not from me.

“Alright. But you’ll have to make a decision before Nagumo makes his next move.”

Kiriyama had been looking around the entire pool and immediately noticed someone’s appearance.

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

“I’m going now. If they find out that I’m meeting with you, I’ll get in trouble again.”

That would be wise. Kiriyama must have taken a reasonable risk in making contact today.

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

1

The pool was quickly cleared out as Nagumo and his friends began to increase in number. If they wanted to talk to me directly, they would send a messenger to me. I interpreted the fact that they didn't do so at the moment as an indication that they had no intention of setting up a place to talk. Anyway, it's not nice to keep drawing attention to yourself.

As if to escape, I went to the locker room to change my clothes.

“Ayanokōji-senpai!”

I run into Nanase, who spots me in the aisle and runs up to me with a happy look on her face. On a ship where the places you go are generally fixed, you will repeatedly pass students you know outside of your cabin, so meeting them two days in a row is not that unusual. However, the way they appeared reminded me of the scene I saw yesterday.

“May I have a moment of your time now?”

She lightly checked my surroundings and seemed to be checking if I was with someone else. Maybe she couldn't start a conversation because I was with Ishizaki yesterday.

I responded by slightly nodding my head.

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

“Something that's bothering you?”

Nanase nodded, her cheerful mood disappeared and she became serious. Then, paying attention to the surroundings, Nanase spoke in a whisper.

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

I might get angry? What on earth could she be talking about?

“Well...”

Nanase tried to talk about what she had been keeping quiet in a more whispered voice, but then...

“Huh? Ayanokōji-kun?”

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

It was Ichinose's classmate, Kobashi Yume.

In my previous school life, she would not have greeted me even if she saw me. However, during the uninhabited island exam, we spent a short time together. It seemed to have brought about a change in our relationship.

“Oh, I’m sorry to bother you for a moment. I guess I’d better wait.” She said apologetically, as if she had overlooked Nanase, who was hiding behind my body.

“No, it’s fine. I was just asking Ayanokōji-senpai about something I didn’t understand.”

“Is it okay if we talk about this later?” I ask Nanase.

Nanase nodded vigorously twice, as if it wasn’t as serious as I thought it would be.

“I’ll call on you again when I have time.” She was sure 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 notice you talking to her. She’s a freshman, right? I hope I didn’t offend her.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. You wanted to see me?”

“Actually, the girls in my class are going to have a party tonight to celebrate our good work. I was wondering if you’d like to join us. I also wanted to thank you for helping Chihiro-chan.”

That was the invitation.

However, the keyword “girls in the class” stuck out strongly.

“What kind of people are going to come?”

I got scared and tried to confirm, but Kobashi tilted her head as he said,

“I guess we’re still in the process of planning. Don’t worry about it so much, there are no weird students, so it’s fine.”

It’s not that I’m afraid of weird people joining, but she doesn’t seem to understand.

“It’s only students from your class, right? Does it float your boat that I, a stranger, will be joining?”

“Really? That’s not true. So, hey, what do you think?”

It was a fluffy, abstract invitation to a party instead of good night’s sleep. To be honest, I wasn’t too keen on the idea, partly because I didn’t have many people in Ichinose’s class that I could talk to intimately. I’m not sure if I’ll even be able to have a conversation with Ichinose. It’s a bit of a pain in the ass, but I’ll take a pass on this one.

“I’m not going to...”

Seeing that I was about to refuse, Kobashi clasped her hands together and said,

“Please! It’s just a chance that we met here, you know?”

It was hard to say no when she said that, but I couldn’t just give in so easily. It was obvious that if I let things flow here, nothing good would come of it later.

“Huh?”

“No, I can’t help it. I’m going to report this to everyone in the class. I asked Ayanokōji-kun out, but he said that I didn’t ask him out well enough and he turned me down.”

“Wait. Why would you do that?”

“So, you’ll come?”

“That’s...”

“So, you still don’t want to? Oh well, if I could have asked you out a little better... I’m sorry everyone, I failed.”

“I don’t want you to be so depressed...”

“Just show up...! Please! Honami-chan is coming too!”

Once again, this time she rubbed her hands together with more worship than before. It was as if there was already no way to retreat after being taken this far.

“All right. Are you sure you want me to just show up?”

“Yeah, thanks! Oh, but don’t tell Honami-chan that you’re going to the party today, okay?” She smiled so brightly that it was hard to believe that she had been depressed and sad just before.

It is well said that women are born actresses.

But don’t tell Ichinose? That part stuck with me a little.

“Why is it a secret? I’d like to ask everyone’s permission if I can participate.”

If there was even one student who refused to participate, I would want them to feel free to tell me. That way, I can say no once again, in the name of a good cause.

“Because, you see, that’s the thing about... Ayanokōji-kun, isn’t it better to have a surprise?”

This seemed like a surprise in a not so good direction.

I don’t want to go into it badly, but it seems that Ichinose’s classmates are starting to have a lot of thoughts about me and Ichinose.

“Well then, I’ll be waiting for you at 8 o’clock in room 5034.”

“Room 5034, is it going to be in... someone’s room?”

I had thought that we would be using some rest area or the deck. And it’s a cabin where the girls are sleeping, not the boys, room number-wise.

“Well... yes.”

“Isn’t that not allowed?”

“No doesn’t mean no, it’s just a little more difficult to get in.”

I’m not sure what to do. My retreat was being taken away more and more.

“Then I’ll be waiting for you! Make sure you come!” Satisfied with her promise, Kobashi walked away a little too fast.

It's not even the right time to talk to Ichinose face to face yet. Well, in a multitude of people, I guess it's okay. If it's a party for good work, I'm sure there will be more than a few boys there.

2

After this, I spent a bewildering amount of time in my room, not feeling like walking freely, and before I knew it, it was just before 8:00 PM.

“Am I going...?”

If I could choose again now whether to go or not to go, I would choose ‘not to go’ without hesitation. It was such a welcome invitation, but if I really didn’t want to go, I should have refused without hesitation. It was because of my half-hearted response that I ended up in this situation, so I guess I’ll just have to live with it.

I stood there in front of room 5034, which I had arrived at... with renewed determination.

A minute had already passed since I arrived at this place.

You can hear the girls talking and laughing from time to time just before I try to knock on the door. There was no sign of any boys... at the moment.

I have a bad feeling about this.

I’m not sure why, but I think I’m starting to feel like I’m sweating.

“Wouldn’t it be wiser to just turn back?” The devil’s whisper escaped through my throat as a voice.

No, but I want to avoid being branded as a person who broke a promise, if possible.

What should I do...?

“Oh, you’re here!”

It was Kobashi who showed up from the end of the corridor. This was the worst timing. In Kobashi’s hand she was holding a large plastic bag, with snacks and bottled juice peeking out from inside.

Once I had been spotted, the option to flee no longer existed naturally.

“I think everyone is already here, so don’t hesitate to come in.”

“Oh, yeah... I was just about to do that.”

I’m not allowed to run away anymore. The door that had felt so heavy and I could not open, Kobashi opened it easily without hesitation.

What’s wrong with me? I need to prepare myself a little more for these situations. While I was thinking that, the only protective barrier separating me from the cabin was being removed.

The first thing that stimulated my senses was not sight, but smell. I could smell the sweet scent of flowers, honey, or something else.

Immediately after that, a girl, a girl, and a number of other girls caught sight of me.

“Ta-da! I brought Ayanokōji with me!”

In a room with four people, which can't be called spacious, there are girls sitting all over the place.

What is this world in front of my eyes? There are ten of us in all, including me and Kobashi. I'm not sure what to make of this. And there's not the slightest hint of a boy in sight, which almost makes me feel like I've been betrayed.

“Wait, that's a bit of a bad way of introducing him Yume-chan~”

“Really? Oh, I bought this thing you asked for~”

She put the plastic bag on a small table near the bed in cabin.

What's with this fluffy, light-hearted gathering?

The girls in the group are girls I've barely spoken to, but I remember their names and faces from OAA.

When I was too overwhelmed by the scene to move, Kobashi tapped me lightly on the back.

“Well then, Ayanokōji-kun~, where should we go? Oh, do you want to be next to Honami-chan?”

It's true that Ichinose would be the one who's closest to me in this group, but she asked me without hesitation. I don't think there was any choice in the first place because the room was so small, but my right to choose didn't seem to exist from the start.

The only strange thing was that even though there were 10 people in the room, there was enough space for a boy to sit next to Ichinose. In other words, it wasn't a coincidence that the space was empty, but it was most likely predetermined. I remembered what Kobashi had said when he asked me out during the day and compared it to what's going on now... but it wouldn't help me in the current situation.

I'm not sure what to do, but I'll just play along for now. I quickly excused myself from the girls and went next to Ichinose.

“Can I sit down at ...?”

“Oh uh, of course.”

I sat down next to Ichinose after giving a light greeting, but I was still receiving the stares of almost everyone. I'm not sure what to do, but I think I should keep a cool head and keep an open mind.

Then leave as soon as possible.

The tea was poured into a clear cup and handed to me by one of the girls.

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

“Well then, I’ll get right to it~ we’re going to start the party to thank everyone’s hard work in the uninhabited island exam, and to thank Ayanokōji-kun for rescuing Chihiro-chan who got lost. Kanpai!”

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

“Uh, first of all, thank you, Ayanokōji-kun. You really helped me out that time.” With that, Shiranami, who was sitting to the left of Ichinose, thanked me.

I haven’t done anything to be awed so many times... For now, I couldn’t expand on the conversation, so I gave her a small nod.

“Um, Ayanokōji-kun.”

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

“What...?”

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

“Me, I’m grateful for the help. But I’m not ready to admit it yet.”

“What...?”

Without elaborating, Shiranami just said that, then squeezed and poured the orange juice down her throat.

“Pfft! I can’t say anymore!”

(TL Note: You say Kanpai when you make a toast in Japan, like “Cheers!”)

No, no, what was she talking about...? I was left behind, but the people around Shiranami were showering her with words of encouragement and praise for a job well done. Shiranami had the expression as if she wasn’t satisfied, but what did she even mean in the first place...? It was hard for me to ask her when I was in a foreign territory.

At the beginning of the party, Shiranami regarded me, but after that, the girls started talking about whatever they wanted.

I just stood by and watched like a stray cat.

Of course, if I were asked if I felt comfortable, I would immediately say yes so, I could leave. But then again...

I’ve been witnessing the amazing talk of girls who come up with topic after topic. 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.

Ichinose Honami is without a doubt the most trustworthy student in the second year. This is true regardless of whether you are friend or foe.

The criteria for what constitutes trustworthy depends on the person, but trust is something that is built up day by day. Just as no one would trust a student who had never spoken before if you suddenly told them to trust you.

However, being trustworthy and being delusional are two different things. For some reason, even if Ichinose is trustworthy, she may make wrong choices from time to time.

Even if you keep trusting such a wrong person, the results will not follow. In order to correct the mistakes, students who can say what is wrong is always necessary.

“Can I have a moment?”

As the girls’ excitement peaked, one girl, who had so far only shown her opinion occasionally, Yuki Himeno, raised her hand.

“What’s wrong, Yuki-chan?”

“The usual headache. Sorry, but I’m lazy, can I go back to my room? I’m seriously beat.”

I wouldn’t have paid attention if it was just a simple statement with nothing to say, but I was surprised by the tone of voice, because everyone in Ichinose’s class was basically polite and decent.

Himeno briefly told her why she was sick and wished to leave.

“Sure, why don’t I follow you?”

Hearing about her friend’s un-wellness, Ichinose and the girls hurriedly call out to Himeno.

“Oh, it’s okay, it’s okay. I’m not a kid guys.”

Himeno stood up, looking fed up with the overprotective behavior. I didn’t know there was a student in Ichinose’s class who was this type.

Anyway, there was a change in the atmosphere that I hadn’t been able to produce until this point. If I let this chance pass, I don’t know when I’ll be able to go home again. I decided to take the plunge and follow Himeno’s lead.

“Well then, I guess it’s time for me to go home too.”

“Oh, you’re leaving already? You could have stayed longer.”

“No, I was originally just going to show my face, and I have plans to meet someone later.”

If I said I had plans, Ichinose and the others wouldn’t be able to keep me strongly.

“Well, see you later, Ayanokōji-kun.”

I left the room with Ichinose and the girls still sitting there looking cute.

3

“Phew... I almost broke out in a sweat.”

In fact, you can say that I was already sweating.

Less than 30 seconds after Himeno left the room, I too escaped from the evil room 5034. It may be heaven for some people, but for me, it was a painful place to be. It’s hard to say that I’m good at closing the distance between people. It would be a different story if I had completely created the role from the beginning, but since I had decided to play a low-profile high school student, it was not easy to change that.

However, I think I was able to get closer to Ichinose’s class in a certain way because I had hardly ever been associated with them before. I’ve been able to get a vague idea of what kind of students are around with Ichinose at the center. 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 of the class is.

At the moment, the only one who can do that is the male student, Kanzaki. But in a class that revolves around Ichinose, the girls seem to have just as much power to speak out as the boys.

Kanzaki is the type of person who can speak up for Ichinose as an individual, but whether he can appeal to the class as a whole, and whether he can control the girls, is another matter entirely.

“Hmm?”

It was Himeno who complained of a headache and said she was going back to her room, but she walked in a different direction from the cabins. In an instant, she went around the corner, but it was hard to lose her due to her distinctive hair color.

Himeno seemed to be a little uncomfortable, so I decided to follow her.

I arrived at the aft deck at night, where there was no sign of anyone. Looking at her profile from a distance, I remembered Yuki Himeno’s OAA again.

Year-Two, Class B, Yuki Himeno

Academic ability B (63)

Physical ability C (51)

Adaptability C+ (58)

Contribution to Society C+ (58)

Overall ability C+ (57)

Except for a high level of academic ability, she is average for better or worse, and does have any outstanding abilities as far as I can see. However, this is only the ability as seen from the school side. There may be hidden strengths and weaknesses in every student. I would like to explore a little more.

Direct contact would be a shortcut here.

“What are you doing?”

“What?” She looked slightly uncomfortable and looked away. It’s not natural for her to be here since she slipped out of the room saying he had a headache.

“Are you done with the headache?”

“Geez...” she mumbled a few words that were almost drowned out by the wind, but it sounded like I said “annoying”.



“I just thought I’d stop by for a breeze to calm me down, you know?”

“Do you get headaches often? You said something like that earlier.”

I was going to ask her for more details, but she shut down, as if she didn’t want to have any more conversation. Even at the girls’ party earlier, she hadn’t said anything except when she was leaving. In addition to that, the other girls basically didn’t talk to Himeno.

It’s not as if she’s being hacked, but there’s no way Ichinose would tolerate such a thing, and if the relationship was bad, she wouldn’t show it to the rest of the class.

If that’s the case...

I’m sure I’ll see a lot more situations like this in the future. If you assume that this is due to the classmates’ desire to have as much fun as possible, you can see the connection.

“It’s because I have a migraine.” She abruptly replied.

“If it’s a migraine, then you’re right to cool it down.”

Migraines are 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 widen when warmed, so exposure to the wind is not a bad idea.

But only if it’s really a migraine.

“Great. Thanks for telling me.”

“But maybe the headache is just an excuse to get out of a space you don’t like?”

“What? You’re saying I’m lying?”

Himeno had been relatively calm up to this point, but as soon as it was pointed out that she might be lying, her color changed. She was a rare existence in Ichinose class, where most classmates are mild-mannered.

My instincts were right.

“Seeing that you’re pissed off, does that mean I’m right?”

“No, I’m not lying. I mean, what if I am? Oh look, I’m getting a headache again. I’m going back to my room.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you. But can you just listen to me for a minute?”

Holding her forehead, Himeno looked back at me in disgust.

“My headache, it’s getting more intense.”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry? So why don’t you just let me leave?”

“You sound disgusted.”

“I hate this.”

I could see her catching up with the conversation after a few beats. This girl seems to be more her true self when she’s with me.

“Oh, well, I guess I don’t have a choice then.” I shrug my shoulders in exasperation. “I’ll have to go back to the girls’ party now and report that Himeno might have a temporary illness.”

“Huh, what? Don’t take the liberty of treating me as a furlough. You’re such a liar.”

“Lie? All I said was that you ‘might’ have a temporary illness. At least since I felt that way, I should have the right to state my thoughts. Whether it’s true or false, you can prove it in front of everyone later.”

“There’s no way to prove a headache, is there?”

“Maybe.”

“What the hell, they all praised you, but you have a nasty personality.”

“Well, at least they didn’t compliment you on your good nature, did they?”
Not to toot my own horn, but they just thanked me for helping Shiranami.

“Oh whatever.”

“Then again, you’re strange, Himeno. This is unlike Ichinose’s class.”

“Unlike Ichinose’s class? If you ask me, the people in my class are too good-natured. Our class tends to get together in large numbers and do things. I don’t mind that in of itself, but the problem is that each meeting is too long and they never leave.”

If there were repeated meetings that I didn’t like, I would be fed up with it. But the stereotype was that Ichinose’s classmates enjoy the gatherings, that they’re a lively bunch. That’s probably is that no one wants to leave after each gathering, and as a result, it becomes a long event.

“If you don’t like it, why don’t you just not participate?”

“You think I can do that? I mean, even if you think it’s annoying, it’s important to keep your feet on the ground.”

“Well, I guess so.”

The class as a whole is cohesive, especially the girls, who seem to have a strong sense of unity. Even if they were unhappy inside, it would take courage to throw a stone and cause a ripple.

Himeno Yuki. 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 there was a special situation.

However, it would not be a bad idea to take a step forward here. Of course, if it ends up being a nuisance to Himeno, then so be it.

“If you want to relieve stress, shouting is the best way after all, isn’t it?”

“Shouting...? Even if I wanted to, I’d get caught if I shouted here.”

“Not many students come to the aft deck, and considering the sound of the ship, even if you shout, it won’t echo around you. It’ll just be drowned out quickly and disappear.”

“But...”

She looks confused, as if he’s never shouted that loud before.

“Well, why don’t you go ahead and shout it out first?”

“Me...?” The unexpected reply made me wince.

“I don’t know you well, but you don’t seem like the type of person who would scream. If you show me how to do it, I’ll do it too.”

I’m confused. I don’t remember ever being under strong stress myself, so I don’t have enough experience to say ‘yes’ when asked if I actually remember yelling.

“If you can’t do it, then get the hell out of here.”

If I backed down here, this would probably be the end of my relationship with Himeno.

“Okay...”

With Himeno watching, I made up my mind and raised my voice towards the ocean.

“Ah ————. Okay, now it’s Himeno’s turn.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I did it, didn’t I?”

“You didn’t even have a shred of volume in your voice. You’re seriously licking my chops.”

“Then show me your example.”

“There’s no such thing as a good example.” Himeno turned her back towards my words as she tried to walk away in disgust.

“I thought you were going to do it if I did it.”

“No, no, it’s just annoying when people think they’ve done it.”

“Whatever the volume of your voice, there’s no doubt that you would have responded to me if you do it. But if your voice is just as low as mine, then you have no right to make fun of me at all.” In order to avoid being accused of shouting in a low voice, I seal off ahead of time.

“Geez... you know what, I’ll do it just this once, alright? And then you can get out of here alright?” Taking a breath, Himeno puts her hands up by her mouth as if she had no choice.

“Wa ————!!!”

The sound of the ship’s engine and the wind drowned out the noise, so no one but myself would have heard it.

But I heard a voice echoing in my ears, twice as loud as I imagined it would be.

“Ha, what do you know? That was refreshing.” Without seeming to care about my surprised look, Himeno nodded with satisfaction.

“Right? It was worth the screaming too.”

“Yeah but this proves you didn’t scream at all.” She gave me a blank stare and shoved me.

“Well, if I was really stressed I probably could have done better.”

“Really? I don’t think a guy like you would care too much about anything.”

“You were better than I thought you would be. You must have been under a lot of stress.”

“What? You want me to kill you?” She says to me with a rather sharp look. When Himeno was angry, it seems her mouth was the first to react.

“I was a little out of line.” I apologize honestly, but she doesn’t seem to care. Maybe this Himeno has a scary side I didn’t want to see.

“I’m going back to my room now.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for holding you up in so many ways.”

“If you’re aware that you should be sorry, then it’s fine.”

With that, Himeno walked back into the ship.

“I think I’ll go back to my room too.”

I guess the party was a place for relaxing, but I was unusually tired. I think I’m going to have a deep sleep today.

Chapter 3: Everyone's Holiday

LIVING ON THIS cruise ship comes with the problem of where and what kind of lunch to eat every day. The school provides free buffet meals in the mornings and evenings, and the students are free to use them if they wish, but they are quite popular among the students because they are not only free but also very tasty. To avoid congestion, you need to make a reservation for up to 60 minutes from your cell phone. I usually have breakfast at 8:00 a.m., but on August 6, due to a late reservation, the 8:00 and 9:00 time slots were booked, so I had to eat a little earlier at 7:00. This made me feel strangely hungry at right now, which was noon. Perhaps it was because my caloric intake had been minimal during the uninhabited island exam, and my body was craving for energy.

The café terrace is a popular place to have a meal, but the prices are very expensive. If you want to have lunch with a drink, you need to pay at least 2000 points.

That might be fine if you're having a good time with friends, but unfortunately, I'm alone today. In this case, it would be natural to want to save as much money as possible.

That's where kiosks come in handy. In short, you can buy onigiri (rice balls), sandwiches, etc., just like 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.

I could have used any of the resting areas, but most of them were occupied by other people, and I felt uncomfortable sharing such 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 sea. Since there is no charge to use the deck, it's a good idea to buy some food from a store and eat it here.

I thought I would have a quick snack and enjoy the magnificent view of the ocean, but the time of day wasn't right for that. There were a lot of students who had come here to enjoy the view, and I didn't feel comfortable.

Although the deck was spacious, it's hard to find a space when there were so many people using it. I looked around and found one empty bench and Nanase's back sitting on the bench next to it.

A sandwich that she must have bought from the store and a carton of milk were sitting beside her. It's funny, it's the opposite of yesterday, when she approached me since I'm approaching here now.

In addition, many other second-year students were having lunch while looking at the sea, just like Nanase. In the end, people usually think the same way. I didn't move from my spot and turned my gaze towards the ocean.

Surely, eating with this view in front of you would be amazing. But the problem is that just as there are many students in the same grade as me, there are also many third-year students.

Although there isn't as much of them like at the pool, the third-year students who noticed me immediately began to turn their eyes towards me. But if I walked away, it would mean that I didn't want them to see me and ran away. I suppose I'll have to stay for a while before I can leave. I remembered that my conversation with Nanase was interrupted when I was approached by Kobashi, so I decided to call out Nanase.

It would be a good excuse to stop by this place just to talk to her.

"Nanase."

When I called her name, she huffed in surprise and looked backwards.

"Aghh! Sen-fy-a!" She seemed to have just taken a mouthful of sandwich and looked at me while trying to keep the ingredients from spilling out.

I felt a little bad when I saw her start munching away in a hurry. It seemed that I had made her panic with something unnecessary because I had used it as a means to counter the third year.

"Oh, my bad. Should I come back another time?" I said, but Nanase's personality would not allow that to happen.

"Uh no no, wait, I'm flustered." She started to eat, not wanting to spit it out now that she had it in my mouth.

"I'm sorry, but please give me a moment."



“Um, what can I do for you?” Nanase was still somewhat flustered, which made me feel a little odd. Her gaze is restless and she seems to be unable to concentrate on her conversation with me.

“Oh no, you looked like you wanted to talk to me yesterday. I was wondering what it was about. Because that time I was approached by Kobashi and became occupied.”

“Oh.” Her thoughts were slow and the words didn’t come out right away. After pondering for a bit, Nanase shook her head from side to side.

“I’m sorry, I’ve already resolved myself, so can you please forget about it?”

“I see. That’s fine then.”

If it was a problem, I was going to give Nanase for advice since she had helped me in many ways, but if it was solved, there was nothing to worry about.

“I’m sorry for calling out to you so suddenly. I’m going to go back inside the ship then. There are more people than I thought, and I don’t think I can get comfortable.”

“I see. I’ll see you later, senpai.”

As if I had finished my business, I left the place. I looked back at the deck one more time, and Nanase was facing the front, resuming her lunch.

1

I went off to find a place for lunch, I went to the 5th floor aft 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 where not many people usually went.

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 approached me.

“Are you having lunch alone in a place like this?”

“Sakayanagi. You just happen to be here?”

I believed she was on the same floor as Nanase just a minute ago.

“It’s a coincidence, I’d like to say, but I’ve been chasing Ayanokōji-kun.”

Chasing me? But Sakayanagi’s legs were bad enough that she shouldn’t be able to keep up with my walking speed. That said, she didn’t seem to have let anyone precede and follow her.

“It’s a simple deduction. You showed up on the bow deck earlier for lunch, but you gave up when you saw how many people were there, didn’t you? With the snacks in your hands and the fact that you were looking for a view of the ocean, it’s not that difficult to predict where you would eat.”

She had completely read through my pattern of behavior and had arrived here.

“Ayanokōji-kun, you also want to eat with a view, don’t you?”

“Unlike the one on the bow of the ship, I can’t say that the scenery is first-rate, but it’s not often that I get the chance to look out over the open sea like this.”

There was no guarantee that there would be another uninhabited exam this time next year. There are other second year events planned for the school trip, but I’m not sure of the details of those.

Maybe this is the last time I’ll be able to look at the ocean.

“Like this ocean, I’m sure we’ll be able to see a lot of scenery we’ve never seen before. In that sense, I think Ayanokōji-kun made the right choice by choosing this school.”

“Yes, I think so. I’ve only seen the ocean once before I entered this school.”

Sakayanagi a little surprised. No, maybe it’s not surprising. In fact, I had never been outside that facility until I turned 14, which was my third year of junior high school. If you know the outline of the White Room, it should be common knowledge.

The only time I ever saw it was when I had a chance to go outside for a short while after I was transported out of the facility. I had walked along a path with a view of the sea, though I had not directly touched the seawater.

However, the first time I saw the ocean, I was not moved by it. Emotionlessly, I merely went about walking in the outside world.

“Have you ever heard of ‘Under the Wheel’?”

“That’s a novel by Hermann Hesse, isn’t it?”

Of all the novels he wrote, it was the most well known in Japan.

“Hans, the hero of that story, was a gifted genius. And although he went to an elite school and was well looked forward to in the future, he lived only in academia and eventually began to have doubts. However, he began to have doubts about his ability to live up to the expectations of the elite, and in the end, 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 does it matter?”

“I don’t think he was a genius because a true genius would never fail. Even more so, choosing death at the end of it is the height of folly.”

Sakayanagi seems to have interpreted his death as a suicide, not an accident.

“I once said, ‘People can know warmth by touching each other. That is something very important. Do you remember when I said, ‘The warmth of human skin is not a bad thing’?”

“You said something like that.”

It was at the end of the third semester of my freshman year, just after the special exam.

“Hesse, who wrote Under the Wheel, was also troubled and frustrated, just like Hans, the main character. But he said that it was because of his family that he was able to look forward without taking his life.”

It seems that Hesse, the author, and Hans, the main character of the book, had very similar backgrounds. It can be seen that the story was a projection of himself.

When Sakayanagi was staring at the sea, a strong gust of wind blew for a moment.

“Ah...”

I saw her hat float up in an instant, and I immediately reached out to catch it. If I had been slightly late in my reaction to reach out my hand, the hat would have taken off into the ocean.

“Thank you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“It’s not safe to wear it on deck, you know.”

“Huh, yes, I suppose so. But it’s my trademark.”

Sakayanagi held the hat in her hands and hugged it close to her chest as if it were important.

“I suddenly remembered something nostalgic right now.”

“Something nostalgic?”

“No, it’s nothing serious. It’s just that I also have a few 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 came after me.”

“Would it bother you if I came after you without a reason?”

I was wondering what she was going to say, but he said something I hadn’t thought of.

“No reason, huh?”

“I just thought I’d talk to Ayanokōji-kun. I could have approached you at the place earlier, but you don’t really want people see me talking to you, do you?”

It was a nice gesture of consideration.

But either way, I’m not a good talker, so I don’t have any particular topic that I can talk to Sakayanagi about.

“Do you mind if I make short conversation?”

“Sure. May we talk while I eat?”

“Please, don’t mind me. As long as you listen to what I have to say, that’s all that matters.”

I took one of the rice balls from the bag and peeled off the wrapping with my hand.

“Yesterday, I had a visit from Ichinose”

“Ichinose?”

“Yes.”

Recalling the events of yesterday, Sakayanagi spoke up as she looked back.

2

“Um, Sakayanagi-san. Do you have a minute?”

I was taking a break at the cafe on the ship’s deck after lunch when Ichinose-san came to visit me. Since I was just having tea alone, there was no reason to refuse.

“How can I help you?”

I knew what the story was before I heard it from her, but I dared to tilt my head curiously.

“I just felt I had to apologize for... what I did in the special exam. On the last day, I did something selfish... for that, I’m really sorry!”

I guess she had made up her mind to some extent that I was not a person for whom excuses could be accepted, and Ichinose-san bowed her head as much as she could.

No, I don’t think she would have made a silly excuse no matter what the situation was. It’s no wonder she was so upset with herself, that she broke off our cooperative relationship.

I think she felt he had caused us too much trouble.

“Please raise your head, Ichinose. I’m not mad at you for anything.”

“What...?”

“Rather, I am aware that you have contributed to our group. You were able to bring together a group of disparate people and play a central role in the harsh island life. And as a result, you have won the third place.”

“B-but...”

“It is true that you acted a bit selfishly on the last day. But the loss you caused to the group was only a few points at most. It’s not as if you can be blamed for the loss if you compare it to your contribution. If we had fallen to fourth place by a small margin, you might have received some blame, but that didn’t happen either.”

“But that’s because of the results-”

“Sometimes, it’s good to be consequentialist. Things don’t always go all that well. Rather, if you fought as hard as you could and came in a close fourth, the psychological damage you suffered must have been great.”

I wonder if Ichinose-san’s apology was doubted by my attitude of not trying to blame her at all. The remorse would not go away.

“You look like you need to take responsibility for something to make you feel better, don’t you?”

“Well, it’s not like that. Or maybe it is...”

“If that’s the case, I can punish you, right?”

While Ichinose was overwhelmed by the stern face I showed her, she gave a small nod.

“Yes. I think that would be more refreshing for me.”

“Huh, you’re an unusual person. Then yes... please sit here.”

I urge her to come beside me and let Ichinose sit in a seat.

As she becomes quiet like a cat, I have the waitress prepare the menu list.

“Here you go, please order whatever you like.”

“Uh, what about the... punishment?”

“You are now going to have afternoon tea with me for about half an hour.”

“What? Oh, that’s the punishment?”

“Yes, it is. I’m going to take Ichinose-san’s precious half hour, and it’s nothing but a punishment.”

“Yes, I wonder if it is... but if Sakayanagi-san says so, I will obey.”

Although Ichinose was unsure of what to do, she followed my instructions and ordered a drink.

“You’re really straightforward, Ichinose-san. You’ve been humiliated by me once, but you don’t let that affect you in the slightest and go along with me like this.”

“I don’t think I was humiliated. In the first place, the mistakes I made in the past are true.”

“At the very least, you want to hide the past that you feel guilty about, the past that you don’t want people to know about. You said that yourself.”

I have seen many excellent people, both children and adults, up close and personal. Of course, there are many who have recognized their talents, knowing that they are 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’s the same for my own father and mother, and Ayanokōji-kun.

“You are hard to describe, aren’t you? That is why you seem to be a very scary person at times.”

“I’m... scary?”

I am sure she had never heard such a thing in her life. However, I am sure that there are more than one or two people who have ever been afraid of this person named Ichinose Honami.

“People who live in this world have a more or less evil side. But I don’t see any of that in you. You seem like a bundle of goodness.”

“That’s too much to buy into, you know. I’ve done some bad things, like when I was in middle school...”

Her shameful past, which she can never boast of, remains as a reality that cannot be erased.

“My goodness that has nothing to do with what I meant. In the first place, even if you were temporarily involved in evil deeds, there is an irreplaceable family love behind it.”

Even if it’s evil once you’re in the eyes of the law, it can have a good side 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.”

“Are you referring to Ryūen-kun?”

“It’s not just him. I, and Horikita-san, will use your goodness if it means winning.” Taking a breath, I continued to tell her about the most important thing.

“And so, will Ayanokōji-kun.”

All of the former applied to the leaders of each class, including Ryūen-kun, whom I mentioned. The sudden mention of Ayanokōji visibly disturbed Ichinose.

“On the last day of the uninhabited island exam, perhaps it was because of you that Ayanokōji-kun was saved.”

“W-wait what? What do you mean?”

“This is just a guess on my part. I’m not sure how much I know, but there are honestly a lot of things I don’t understand, so please think of me as I am simply talking to myself and don’t take my words to heart.”

I could easily imagine that if I pursued here, Ichinose would reveal the unclear parts, but I avoided it. It would be boring to ask in this way.

“By looking at you, I can somehow guess you harbor feelings for Ayanokōji-kun that are different from the ones you have for other students.”

“Ehhh...?! No, no, no, that’s not true...!”

“It’s alright, it’s a human instinct to have special feelings for a particular member of the opposite sex. But... it would make even more sense if that other party is Ayanokōji-kun.

“I don’t really understand what you’re saying, Sakayanagi-san.”

“Today’s incident was simply a warning. I will not go any further.”

“Let’s just leave it at that. It’s time for afternoon tea.”

I’m sure that Ichinose-san couldn’t feel the taste of the tea in her mouth as it was brought to her. I’m sure she couldn’t forget what I said and it must have stuck in her head. It was a little bit of meanness, a little bit of mercy, and a little bit of strategy on my part.

3

Sakayanagi finished telling me about her interaction with Ichinose. I had just finished eating and drinking my lunch.

“You’re a sinful person to win the heart of Ichinose, who is one of the most popular girls in the school.”

It may seem like a flirtatious remark, but I can’t take it in the right direction even a millimeter.

“That’s harsh, Sakayanagi.”

“Hmph, it’s in my nature.”

Sakayanagi is preparing to protect Ichinose, so she could use her.

“If I take action to hurt Ichinose here, you will be more trusted by Ichinose.”

“If I can gain her trust, it will be easier for me to get around in the future.”

Sakayanagi has the side of an ally, but she also has the side of an enemy. The two sides of the relationship are inextricably linked, 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 that the number of people who know about Ayanokōji-kun is gradually increasing in this school. And they are taking a strong interest in you.”

Certainly, if my relationship with Ichinose had remained thin during the uninhabited island exam, she wouldn’t have rushed to me, causing trouble for her friends.

“As a corollary to that, the third-year students were looking at you in a strange way, weren’t they?”

I see. The reason why she came to me may have been for the purpose of chatting, but I guess that’s the main point. In that short time, Sakayanagi realized that I was being watched by third-year students. She’s as good as it gets.

The conversation earlier was implicitly a preparatory step to mentioning this.

“Are you having trouble with the third-year students?”

“Well, if you call it trouble, it’s trouble. It seems I’ve made an enemy of a troublesome opponent.”

“Troublesome opponent... is the student council president, isn’t it?”

The only upperclassmen who might be a strong opponent would be Miyabi Nagumo.

“The student council president and I had a dispute on the last day of the exam. It seems that he missed out on first place because of it, and they’re looking at me like I’m the enemy.”

“So, the president lost his footing by trying to stage a dramatic victory.”

“You were aware of that as well?”

“I think the majority of people on the uninhabited island would agree that Kōenji-kun single-handedly became a warrior. However, we knew early on that the student council president was deliberately holding back on scoring points. If we made too big a difference, it would have blatantly highlighted the picture that the entire third grade was trying to make a particular group win. I could also see the strategy by looking at the flow of cards in their possession.”

I thought I fully acknowledged Sakayanagi’s abilities, but they still went even further above my assessment. It was proof that she had a perfect grasp of the entirety of the special uninhabited island exam, and its flow.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, I’m fine. Nagumo can’t make a flashy move without issues either. Besides, you took care of me a lot during the uninhabited island test. I can’t burden you anymore.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I was happy that you relied on me, and besides, I also made full use of Ayanokōji’s suggestion.”

“Use? What do you mean?”

Giggling, Sakayanagi narrowed her eyes and stared at the ocean.

“The other day, when the endgame of the uninhabited island exam was approaching, we had judged that it would be difficult to get first and second place. Because the scoring pace of Kōenji-kun and the student council president’s group was going to exceed the maximum score that our group would be able to get.”

Well, those two groups were showing a different dimension of fighting.

“Our target was third place, but one of the several rivals that existed in the final stages was Ryūen-kun’s group. He was in a small group of two with Katsuragi, but he was showing tremendous persistence. So, I asked for his help and decided to bump him up against Hōsen-kun.”

“I see, so that’s how it is.”

“No matter what form it takes, if Ryūen-kun makes a move that deviates from the main test, it would have slowed down his scoring rate. As a result, he ended up retiring, which was the best way for us to go.

This means that she succeeded in crushing his rival Ryūen’s presence while helping me. But even after hearing all this, there are still some things I don’t understand.

Ryūen had been working hard for two weeks to get on the podium, but he easily cooperated with Sakayanagi. It wasn't hard to imagine that he wouldn't be safe if he collided with Hosen.

The only thing that is clear is that some kind of promise was made. If Ryūen 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 considerable price... for example, a high amount of private points?”

If Sakayanagi had used the cards possessed by her classmates in the latter part of the exam, she would have had some income. It was no wonder that she offered it to Ryūen, 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 any transaction.

“I know it sounds like a riddle, but I can't even tell Ayanokōji-kun right now. This is a promise that was made between him and I. Until he tells me to fulfill the promise in the near future.”

What Sakayanagi really implied was that, “That wish will strangle him in the near future.” With that in mind, it's no wonder that private points are not a monetary reward in this case.

“Anyway, please be careful, Ayanokōji-kun, even if one problem has been solved, the White Room students still exist, and the third-year students' problems have also come up.”

“Well, it's a long list of niggles, but I'll be sure to take care of them.”

I hear a ringtone coming from Sakayanagi's pocket. Sakayanagi lightly turns around and receives a call from someone.

“Well... I see. I'll be right there.”

She spoke for less than five seconds before hanging up and looking over at me.

“I have an appointment with someone after this, so I'll take my leave now.”

“I see. See you later.”

“It was a pleasure talking to you. Good-bye Ayanokōji-kun.”

After seeing Sakayanagi off slowly, I decided to look at the sea some more.

4

On the same day, Ichika Amasawa was wandering around the ship alone, with no idea where she was going. Sometimes her classmates would talk to her, but she would just smile amiably and be done with it. Not once did she feel like playing in a crowd with anyone.

“I wish I could see Ayanokōji-senpai~”

Amasawa muttered as she stepped out onto the deck, her voice lightly drowned out by the sound of the wind. As she had no interest in the other students, the only time she felt blissful was when she was meeting Ayanokōji. However, due to the position he was in, he deliberately refrained from contacting her now.

“Ah mouuu~ I’m so bored.”

“Good day, Ichika Amasawa.”

The one who approached Amasawa, who was standing alone on the deck looking out at the ocean, was second-year Class A Sakayanagi Arisu.

Ichika calmly turned her head towards Sakayanagi.

“Who might you be?”

Amasawa tilted her head curiously, as if she was seeing Sakayanagi for the first time.

“I’m Sakayanagi Arisu from Class 2-A. Please make my acquaintance from now on.”

“Sakayanagi... senpai? What do you want from me?”

“Huh, no need for monkey business. I heard you’re a White Room student, Amasawa-san. Don’t you naturally know who I am?”

White room student. After hearing those words, Sakayanagi’s existence couldn’t possibly be ignored, whether Amasawa liked it or not.

“Hmm, I see. So, it was the chairman’s daughter that Ayanokōji-senpai relied on. She seems to know a bit about the White Room, so I guess you could say it’s inevitable. So, what about it?”

Without a hint of surprise, Amasawa asked Sakayanagi about her business.

“I was simply curious to learn more about the abilities of a White Room student.”

“It’s good that you’re so motivated, but are you here with the permission of Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“Permission? I don’t need anything like that. It’s my own personal decision to be here.”

“You’re quite a confident person, Arisu-senpai.”

“Because I’m proud to say that I have that much ability.”

“How wonderful~!” While praising and applauding, Amasawa seemed to be somewhat absent-minded.



“But I’m sorry. I’m feeling a little sentimental right now. Can we do this another time?”

“That’s fine. I was just planning to meet you today.” Satisfied with the interaction, Sakayanagi bowed lightly and turned to leave.

“Oh, and Arisu-senpai. Have you been telling your fellow classmates to follow me around?”

Sakayanagi had most likely told some of the Class A students to keep a constant grip on Amasawa’s position, and they had been keeping tabs on her for a while.

“I had instructed them not to let themselves be noticed, but you seem to have found out.”

“Fufu, you think you can hide behind them? You’re so cute and cuddly~!”

“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 move around. Please forgive me.”

“Oh, I have one question... I’m a girl who can hit a physically handicapped person without hesitation, is that okay?”

“Violence is one of the strongest cards, but it’s not necessarily the strongest card of them all.” With that, Sakayanagi thumped the cane gavel lightly against the deck two or three times.

Perhaps that was her cue, but her classmate, Masumi Kamuro, appeared from around the corner.

“You must be the senior who was following me around. Is it possible that senpai can compete with me?”

“Not exactly. It’s just that barbaric acts can be easily detected.”

“You mean you want to have a mental battle with me? You’re making me laugh.”

“That’s very short-sighted of you. Please don’t draw your own conclusions. After all, if we’re talking about the White Room students, everyone except Ayanokōji-kun is probably a failure. I don’t have excessive expectations for you.”

At this point, Amasawa’s gaze sharpened for the first time and she looked at Sakayanagi.

“No matter what the stage is, I will be the winner, and you will be the loser.”

“Fufu, even if it includes violence I just mentioned?” Amasawa, interested in Sakayanagi for the first time, flicked and licked her own thumb.

“Yes, of course. I’m sure you’ll use any hand you want.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for you, senpai.”

“It will be a pleasure if it is engraved in your hippocampus. Have a good day.” Sakayanagi slowly walked away, and Amasawa took a breath on the empty deck.

“Maybe I can have a bit of fun without Ayanokōji-senpai. Whether it’s playing around with Kushida-senpai or enjoying seeing Arisu-senpai’s crying face... if I was in a normal mood I would probably be excited right now.”

Amasawa put her hand lightly on her aching abdomen and thought about what’s to come.

“I guess I’ll just stay calm for now.”

It’ll take a little while until Amasawa is fully recovered.

Besides, Amasawa can’t make a move until she sees what “that” side does.

Sakayanagi, on the other hand, left the place with Kamuro and walked towards the cabins.

“That first-year looks like trouble.”

“Oh, do you understand?”

“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.”

Although she was advised not to monitor her, Sakayanagi had no intention of listening to Amasawa. If Amasawa found out that she was being persistently monitored, she would not be able to ignore her. If she did, it was conceivable that she would try to provoke them.

“Well, she noticed that I’ve been following her, right? Should I call Hashimoto now?”

“He might be able to get the upper hand even if he’s already been spotted. “Badly contacting the White Room student could be detrimental later on.

“Thank you for your hard work for the time being, Masumi-san.”

With her task done, Kamuro quickly left Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi then took out her cell phone and made a single call.

“Can you please continue with the proposal?”

She asks the caller to keep an eye on Amasawa with her cell phone, and adds one last thing.

“After all, it seems that the only person I can rely on is you, Yamamura-san.”

Chapter 4: Everyone's Growth

THE SUMMER VACATION on the luxury cruise ship is already halfway done. Students are enjoying their remaining time to the fullest, and their wallets are probably looser than ever before. This may sound disheartening to students who are systematically aiming for the top, but there's nothing wrong with spending money on a short break.

At the same time as refreshing the tiredness that has accumulated, it can also give you a sense of euphoria and happiness. In reality, this might sound like an excuse since I was also using my meager 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. The fee is not cheap at 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 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.

"Wow, it's huge!" Akito said excitedly as we arrived at the poolside only after changing. It's the same size as the pool that's open to the public for free, but it looks so much bigger when it's private.

Akito picked up the menu list that was placed near the beach chairs.

"Wow... that's way more expensive than the other menu."

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 fulfill in relation to the number of people to prepare them, but it was harsh. This is another example of unrelenting exploitation and extortion. The fact that food and drinks from outside this menu was another factor taken into consideration.

Next to us, the door which led to the female changing room slightly opened. We turned around at the same time, but there was no sign of anyone coming out of the door. Instead, the sound of talking reached our ears.

"Hey Airi, what are you doing, hurry up and go."

"But, but, but! It's so embarrassing, Haruka-chan!"

“What’s so 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 is being exchanged between Haruka and Airi.

“How do I say this, I’m kind of excited.” Akito says that unexpectedly.

“What?”

“You know... that’s normal for boys, right? It’s just that I don’t talk about it as casually as Ike and the others. You don’t either, right?”

I understood what Akito meant. Just by reading the air, I could tell he was trying to be brave. Since it wasn’t advisable to ignore it, I admitted it honestly.

“Well, I guess so.”

When I answered that, Akito laughed a little bit as if he was relieved.

“If I say something like that to a girl though, she’ll probably call me stupid or something.”

Akito usually has a calm poker face, but it’s obvious from the amount of words he’s saying that he’s getting nervous.

However, the girls still seem to be arguing, and it’s hard for them to come out.

“I’m so embarrassed!”

“You know what? I feel the same way over here!”

“Well that’s because you chose these! We’re dressed so boldly!”

“It’s because you promised to appear in front of everyone if I did!”

We were in a kind of high-tension state as we waited for them to appear.

“Bold, they say.”

“Seems that way.”

It was a sense of anticipation, accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment. Where should we look and what words should we say to the girls when they come out?

“This is 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 waiting for them to show up, but it looks like the wrangling will continue for a while longer.

“Hey, Ayanokōji. What do you think of Airi?”

For a second, I didn't know if I heard the right thing or not. However, I don't think Akito said it randomly.

“What do you mean?”

I immediately understood the flow of the conversation, but I dared 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 do you think?” When I asked that back, Akito showed a somewhat troubled expression.

“Well, I guess so.”

After a bit of silence, Akito speaks.

“It might be a lie if I say there's none at all, right?” He replied in a way that didn't deny or acknowledge the existence of such an idea. “But if it might destroy this group, I'm not going to force it.”

To leave it there, smoldering in his heart. Whether that existence is Haruka or Airi, I can't judge right now, but... I'm not sure what the right answer would be here. It's not like math, where you can get a definite answer if you figure it out.

“Kiyotaka, are you-”

“Kyaaa!”

Just as Akito and I were about to say something, the half-opened door opened vigorously. Airi jumped out in front of us. She looked at Akito again as a loud voice came out of her mouth.

“Oh, it's awful that you pushed me Haruka-chan!”

“It's because you didn't get out quickly enough!” Saying that, Haruka also showed up soon after Airi's appearance.

“Oh, hey...”

Akito looked shocked and stunned, 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 looked up and saw us.

I felt like it was criminal to stare at her, so I turned in the right direction at the same time as Akito. However, something immediately caught his attention, and Akito said while keeping his gaze elsewhere.

“Airi gives a very different impression, doesn't she?”

I didn't really want to talk about this right now, but Akito must be in a difficult situation.

“I guess. I feel like she’s a lot more innocent.”

“That’s it, that’s it.”

As we were describing our impressions of Airi, Haruka blatantly made a disappointed expression.

“Plain and ordinary.”

“Don’t say that. No, I’m just too surprised to come up with words.”

“I’m going for a little swim.”

Perhaps the two of them were too stimulating, Akito said and turned his back on them and jumped 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 destructive power of the two people in front of you, it becomes impossible to escape.

It was the right thing to do, to get rid of all the worries, to go for a swim like that. But if two men suddenly put all their energy into swimming, the atmosphere will obviously turn strange. I’m not sure what to do.

“There, there, Kiyopon, how do you like the reborn Airi?”

She said and pushed Airi forward. The distance between us was so close that if she wasn’t careful, we would be able to touch each other. Actually, it was as if she was already touching me. I retreated a few steps back but maintained a close distance.

“Wow...”

Both of them were wearing swimsuits that exposed a lot of skin, so touching them easily was a problematic action.

“Wow, I think I should go inside the pool too!”

“Hey Airi!”

Haruka tried to reach out and grab Airi’s arm, but missed. She ran towards the pool and started to climb down the stainless-steel ladders.

“Geez. She must be super embarrassed...”

I guess that’s true. In addition to the emphasis on the chest area, the swimsuit on the lower half of the body is obviously small in area.

“Just so you know, it was Airi who chose this ridiculous swimsuit.”

“I didn’t want to 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. This emphasis on her breasts and lower body was not normal.

“Background, background, huh...” She looked troubled for a moment, but began to explain, choosing her words carefully.

“This is in the form of, how do you say, going out with Airi.”

“What do you mean?”

I'm too in-experienced to understand this one.

"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 complicated 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 your eyes will be drawn to them.

"I chose a daring bathing suit to give her courage, and she replied that it was okay if I wore one too.

That was a very good response. I can easily imagine Haruka refusing to wear a flashy swimsuit. If Haruka won't wear it, she can say back that she won't wear it either.

"I can't afford to stumble on the first move of the Airi modification project. It's called willpower."

So Airi can't run away now that she's accepted the conditions Haruka gave her.

"Besides, neither Airi nor I would be able to wear something like this in the open pool over there, but here..."

It seems that because the two girls 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 see this...?" Haruka as if she was embarrassed, or rather, hiding her disgust.

"Well, to be honest, there's something difficult about being told not to look."

It can't be helped that they are contained within our field of vision when we talk to them in the first place. The only way to avoid seeing them is to turn your back to them, either directly above or below 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 strengths and weaknesses, not just men and women.

"Huh? Where's Yukimuu by the way?"

"Looks like he'll take a little longer."

Yukimura had said that he was suffering from a stomach-ache and that he would join us in a little while.

“I see.” Confirming without much interest, Haruka turned her head towards the pool.

The conversation stopped at once, and silence flowed for a short while.

“Oh no, I’m thinking too much.”

“Sorry. I’m just trying to be careful not to stare at you.”

I can’t help but look at the other person’s face as we talk, and I can’t help but see everything.

“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 like what you see.”

Well, no... I don’t exactly enjoy watching it. But I’ll keep that part to myself.

“If something stands out, it attracts attention. It’s the same with everything. I just can’t help but feel strange 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 only gathering, 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 go back and change your clothes.”

“That’s no good. As long as Airi can do it, I don’t want to break the contract.”

I guess she really was dedicated to the “Airi modification project.”

“Let me change the subject. I suppose this discussion is a little late, but it looks like Kiyopon was prepared for the uninhabited island exam.”

Since we hadn’t been able to get together with Ayanokōji group for the past few days, Haruka mentioned the topic to me as if it was late. It was a completely unrelated topic, which was probably a good thing right now.

“It’s not meant to be funny but it seems you weren’t struggling as much as us.”

“It was pretty tough, to be honest. I fought as hard as I could and that’s what I got. I’m sorry to hear you had trouble.”

“It’s fine. It’s just that I’m a little relieved.”

Letting out a short breath, Haruka looked at Airi, who was clumsily trying to swim.

“Relieved? Even though your results weren’t that good?”

“Look, there were rumors that Kiyopon was a terrible person after the math incident. 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 have the same sex drive and interest in the opposite sex as anyone else.

“Facial expressions, gazes, and the like. I feel like you have less of those than other boys.”

I don’t know what to say about that, but I didn’t want to say anything strange.

“Uh...”

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 of seeing a magnificent private pool.

“Heyyy.”

Perhaps to maintain a sense of normalcy, Haruka greeted Keisei with a dumb face and voice.

“Oh, um...” He put back his glasses, which had almost fallen off, and looked over.

I’m sure that if they were the type of people like Ryūen or Kōenji the guys would act differently.

“Well... I guess I’ll swim a little too.” Keisei jumped into the pool as if he were running towards Akito, who was swimming vigorously.

“Come here too, Haruka-chan~. It feels good~!”

“Yes, yes, I’m coming. Just wait there.” she said as she began to do her preparatory exercises next to me.

“It seems like we’ve become better friends since we fought in the uninhabited island exam 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.

“I don’t know, Airi, you’re not unreliable, but I can’t leave you alone. You’re like my best friend and my sister.”

An unthinkable statement from when they first met. However, it’s not something that’s limited to Haruka. It’s also the case with Keisei, and even if there are no major changes, it’s the case with Akito.

1

After that, I took turns playing in the pool with my friends and had a full-out blowout. After playing two-on-two beach volleyball, we are now in the middle of a five-point, one-on-one beach volleyball match.

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 to 3. Airi, who had very little energy, was probably 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 was no match for Akito at all, but...” She tried to stand up for some reason, so I stopped her and sat down next to her.

“I’m still surprised, to be honest. That you were brave enough to come out like this.”

“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.

“In the uninhabited island exam, I’m with my group almost 24 hours a day, right? So, I talked with Haruka about a lot of things. We talked about our childhood, our junior high school, and how we got to know each other at this school.”

If you have time, a little chatting will not 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 now is the only time I can start to 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, this is only the start.”

“Haruka-chan told me that it’s not good to be inconspicuous on purpose.”

Airi originally didn’t like to stand out because of her personality. That’s why she wears her hair modestly, and lives her life with unnecessary glasses. As for her posture, she often rounds her back and tries not to look up. She can’t achieve success in her studies or sports overnight, but she can keep up her new appearance.

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 on Haruka. It was now 3-1, with Akito in the lead.

“So... what do you think?” Airi, who had told me everything, looked up at me anxiously.

“It’s not too late.”

I wanted to praise her honestly for making that decision so well.

“I’ll support you.”

“Ah, thank you, Kiyotaka-kun. I’ll do my best. Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you that I’m not telling anyone about my makeover yet, because I’m going to give it to everyone after the second semester starts.”

I think it would be better to do it in a classroom where everyone is present. If she’s going to be nervous anyway, it’s better to do it less often.

“So, what did you think, Yukimuu? After seeing Airi.” As she was serving, Haruka stopped moving and spoke to Keisei who was watching the match.

“Oh, don’t ask me.”

“If I didn’t care I wouldn’t ask would I? Let me hear your frank opinion.”

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 Airi back as she growled and flapped her legs.

And after completing his observations, Keisei’s assessment was...

“Well it isn’t bad. I guess you can say that it’s totally great.” Keisei, who was usually not interested in girls, replied with a awkward expression.

“Whoa, if Yukimuu has this reaction, it seems perfect!” Haruka jumped high at that moment, as happy as she was.

She then slammed her serve into Akito, who had caught Airi’s direction and was looking at her.

“Whoa!”

“Iiiiiiiiiit! Now it’s two against three!”

“That’s not fair, Haruka.”

“It’s probably Miyachi’s fault for gawking at the girls. You need to be more careful.”

“Don’t say it like that. But tell me, can a girl change like this just by taking off her glasses and changing her hairstyle a little?”

“It means that her true self was hiding underneath. Didn’t you know that?”

“I don’t know what you mean...”

Akito and Keisei looked at each other and nodded at the same time.

“Oh dear. I’m not sure what to make of that.”

Akito shook off his worries and concentrated on his own serve.

As the game resumed, Airi leaked a few words.

“I wonder how I can improve my study, or rather, become smarter.”

Although Airi and her friends prepare for tests on a daily basis, they basically don’t have a fundamental study session like Horikita and Sudō. That part of the program would be essential for raising the academic level.

Keisei overhears something related to “studying” and turns to our direction.

“Isn’t it the part where you figure out what you can and can’t do? Starting from the first grade of elementary school, we all start running side by side at first. But gradually, they start to show their strengths and weaknesses in their 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 students who went to cram school were the smartest.” Airi nodded in agreement, though it was obvious.

“Haruka!”

The ball bounced off of Haruka’s catch, scoring the fifth goal. The result was a 5-2 win for Akito.

“Alright. I guess I’ve won now.”

“I’m sorry. But I couldn’t concentrate because I was distracted by what they were saying.” With that analysis and excuse, Haruka came up to the side of the pool.

“Why don’t you teach her how to study, Kiyopon?”

From the flow of the conversation, Haruka suggested.

“Sorry, but I’m not good at teaching studies. Besides, there are experts around who can teach, right?”

The gaze that had been directed at me turned to Keisei as if to prompt him.

“Well, if... Airi says it’s fine, then it’s fine with me.”

“No, but you see, Yukimuu, me and Akito are going to be taking care of you from now on. Won’t it be hard to teach her if we put Airi at a different level?”

“Ugh, that just means I’m an idiot, right?”

“No, no, no! That’s not what I meant!”

“I’m just saying... I’m sorry, my words were a little too much!”

Then they all laughed, and the atmosphere relaxed.

“I’ll be back. So now, Airi and Keisei will play a revenge game.”

“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. We’re at a huge disadvantage then!”

Even though he was dissatisfied, Keisei honestly walked into the pool. He’s very serious about that.

“I’ll do my best!”

Haruka and I decided to watch from the poolside as they 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 aren’t you 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 with no problem.

“It feels kind of unfair, doesn’t it, to Airi?”

“I’m impartial towards 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, she noticed that.

“And 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 you laugh, right?”

“It’s not like I’m not laughing on purpose, though.”

She let’s go of my cheeks and crosses her arms in frustration.

“There’s another reason that I haven’t brought up yet. There’s the fact that Airi and I were too close from the start.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think I’m responsible for Airi’s growth, instead it’s the environment around her.

“The environment?”

“There’s you, there’s Akito, and there’s Keisei. Being surrounded by her best friends and growing up is the most important factor for Airi. In fact, Airi is about to change a lot right now thanks to you.”

“I think the most important thing for Airi is Kiyopon, though.”

“If she was the type who grows by involving romance, that might have been a good idea.”

“I’ve heard before that you’re aware of Airi’s feelings, but I don’t know what to say, it just seems harsh that you feel that way...”

Her complicated eyes look at me, as if she doesn’t know how to express herself.

“Ever since I was a freshman, Airi has been thinking of me in no small way. I’m happy to hear that. It’s just...”

As if she were a girl waiting for a reply to her confession, she turned her anxious eyes on me. Airi’s love. It is an indisputable fact that I am her best friend who can pray for her success, but that’s where it stops.

“What Airi needs right now are friends she can trust.”

“And, but... But it’s okay if there’s a romantic element to it. It may motivate Airi to work harder.”

“Sure, there could be a synergistic effect.”

But the trouble is, romance is basically not something that can be done more than once in parallel. Basically, you can only have one person at a time, 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.

“Now Airi is going to go through a bit of a mental shock. At that time, you should be by her side more than anyone else to encourage her and cheer her up.”

“What’s that, what do you mean?”

“Sorry, I can’t answer that right now.”

Airi is the least valuable person in the class. Academic ability, physical ability, and other factors. It’s not only OAA’s opinion, but my own as well.

However, depending on Airi, who is trying to change from here and now, she will grow, albeit slowly.

Maybe in six months, maybe in a year, maybe in that time, she will be able to escape from the bottom of the class.

2

Our time in the private pool was quickly coming to an end, and we began to change our clothes. There was no way to extend the time, as there was a fixed amount of time for employees 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 when we were done changing, probably because it takes time to change clothes.

"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.

"Ayanokōji-senpai!"

"Hmm?"

I suddenly felt a pair of eyes looking at me, and it was Nanase.

"Who is that?" Akito asked, turning towards Nanase.

"I asked Nanase to help me find a partner for the special written exam. And Nanase also helped me out a few times on the uninhabited island."

"Huh? She seems like a pretty awesome girl."

Could it be that Nanase is the next one to book the private pool? I thought so, but...

"I just happened to be passing by here." As if to deny it, Nanase interjected that it was just a coincidence.

"I see."

"I don't want to bother you, so I'm going to leave."

The only place in the vicinity where the students could play was the private pool. Nanase seems to have a grasp on my movements and is checking on me regularly. However, I don't feel any malice in it. If that's the case then what's the motive?

Nanase walks away, and not long after, the two girls come out after getting dressed.

"That was fun, wasn't it, Haruka-chan?"

"Well, yeah. If it's between friends, it's not so bad to play in the pool."

The two girls seemed to be very satisfied and were smiling constantly even after they finished changing.

"Oh..."

As we all gathered and were about to leave the private pool, the next person who seemed to have a reservation showed up.

“You’re next Ike?”

“Oh, hey. Yeah, that’s right. It’s the only time I could get an appointment.”

“You’re not alone, are you?”

Akito looked curiously behind him, but there was no one in sight.

“Ah... no, well, I mean...” Ike chokes on his words and is restless, but I catch something out of the corner of my eye.

“Sorry, sorry to keep you waiting!”

“What a rare occasion, a combination of Shinohara and Ike. Where are the other guys?”

Akito and Keisei didn’t think anything suspicious, and asked such a thing in a matter-of-fact manner.

Of course, Airi and Haruka immediately picked up on the situation, and she pushed the boys away.

“Here, here, don’t worry about that, time to leave.”

“What? What’s with you all of a sudden?”

“Come on, Satsuki, let’s go.”

“Yeah.” Taking Shinohara’s hand as we ran away, the two of them took the reception desk of the private pool.

The time was fixed, so they wouldn’t have time to waste at this place.

“Satsuki?”

Akito finally notices something strange about the two after Ike calls Shinohara by her first 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 do you mean?”

“What do you think? It means they’ve started dating, right?”

“What are you talking about? Ike and Shinohara are water and oil, why would they be going out with each other?”

Keisei denies it with a straight face. To him, it seems illogical that two people who hated each other could be going out.

“Yukimuu is smart, but he’s... stupid.”

“I think they might have disliked each other at first, but they got 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 more interested in this kind of romantic stuff.

“Well, yeah. But I was surprised that they actually started going out.”

“So... Ike and Shinohara are... No, I still can't get my head around it.” Keisei, who had more or less grasped the situation, stared at their backs, completely stunned.

3

“That guy is crazy...”

Not long after I finished playing and returned to my guest room, Miyamoto came back, mumbling.

“Did something happen?”

“It’s not like anything happened but in the nearby restroom, the guy called Tokitō was pinning Katsuragi against the wall.”

“Hey, hey, didn’t you stop him? Tokitō Hiroya is pretty scary when he gets mad, you know?”

Miyamoto looked a bit annoyed at Akito, who was talking as if he had abandoned him.

“I’m not going to stop him. It’s none of my business, and it would be a disaster if I got involved.”

Katsuragi and Tokitō. They were both students in Ryūen’s class.

“Katsuragi just moved from Class A. Considering that they were enemies not too long ago, it wouldn’t be surprising if a problem or two occurred.”

“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, so it’s not surprising that they don’t get along.”

“But... we’re in the same second year.”

“Are you sure getting involved with Ryūen’s class, or Ryūen himself is a good idea?”

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 arrived on the scene.

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’re struggling. If it’s a trivial dispute, it’s best to leave it alone, as Miyamoto said.

When I hear the name “Tokitō” I think of Ichinose’s classmate who was in my group last year at the training camp. The person who’s involved right now is a different person, Hiroya Tokitō. I remember being surprised when I heard that the relatively rare surname of Tokitō was not just a coincidence, but they were distant relatives.

Since then, I have not had any deep friendship with him, but I have shared food, clothing, and shelter with Katsumi Tokitō. I’ve heard that they don’t really know each other, but if it’s okay for an outsider like me to step in, I’d like to offer my help.

Well, that was my plan.

Now that I’m here in the restroom, I can’t see anyone. Maybe the problem was already solved.

“Ayanokōji-kun~!”

As I was about to take a look around the area, Hiyori called out to me.

“Have you seen Katsuragi?”

“So, you heard about it too? I also came here after hearing that Katsuragi-kun and Tokitō-kun were having a dispute.”

As I started to walk up to Hiyori, I heard a faint voice coming from the corner. I made a signal to Hiyori to be quiet, and I quietly peered into the corner. As reported by Miyamoto, it was Katsuragi and Tokitō. However, it seemed that another girl, Okabe, had also joined them.

“Katsuragi, are you really following Ryūen?”

“You keep going on. This is the third time you’ve asked me this, but I suppose this time you’ve changed the wording somewhat.”

“That’s because you won’t answer.”

“I can’t answer that. I’ve repeatedly asked you what you mean by ‘follow’.”

While Katsuragi was handling the situation calmly, Tokitō 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 becoming a dog, and I don’t think I’m listening to orders.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think that’s true. If that’s the case, why did you work with that guy on the uninhabited island?”

“That’s a statement I don’t understand. Of course, it was for the class to win.”

“What else could it be?” Katsuragi replied as if it was 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.”

“That’s a stupid statement, fourth place and below are all the same. The flight card is meaningless now.”

“Ryūen has more things on his mind than you think.”

“You’re a stranger, aren’t you? Then you can tell me what Ryūen is planning.”

“It’s not at the stage to tell you yet. I’m sorry, I can’t do that.”

“What the hell? You don’t have anything to tell me, do you? I knew that guy was messing with us.”

The push-and-pull exchange went on and on.

One thing was for sure, Tokitō really hated Ryūen.

“If you ask me if I’m a person who looks at situations without bias. Giving you an answer here for your own satisfaction does not make sense.” Katsuragi nodded in agreement with his own point.

However, that attitude also didn’t seem to sit well with Tokitō.

“You say all that, yet you seemed to have your fun on the uninhabited island and you guys were eating well today as well.”

“You’re going in circles. It seems that there’s a misunderstanding...” Katsuragi was about to deny it, however Tokitō leaned in aggressively and interrupted him.

“You were such an adversary, and yet you were so easily taken advantage of. I thought you’d have more backbone than that.”

“I’ve had more than one run-in with Ryūen, friend or foe. But now I’m fulfilling my role as a member of the class, and as Ryūen’s classmate. And if this class is moving around Ryūen, it would make sense to follow it.”

“I don’t think that’s a valid statement coming from the guy who went against Sakayanagi.”

“That process was different; when we started as freshmen, we hadn’t even decided on who would be the leader, and Sakayanagi and I were at odds with each other, so I put myself forward as the leader and we had a confrontation. The current class had already decided on Ryūen as the leader and he has been steering the ship. Above all, are you even going to recognize me as the leader even though I just transferred?”

“That’s...”

“Besides, Sakayanagi and Ryūen operate differently. You can see that in the way the respective classes do things.”

Katsuragi returned the admonishment with a good argument, but Tokitō didn’t seem convinced at all.

“That’s why I told you, Tokitō. Katsuragi-kun is not worth talking to.”

Okabe, who had been watching quietly up to this point, tapped Tokitō on the shoulder and told him that there was no point in going any further.

“In the end, Katsuragi-kun, who had no place in Class A, was happy to be picked up by Ryūen, right? In other words, you’re his dog.”

“Even if I deny it here, I don’t think you guys will understand it.”

I see, I’m starting to get a rough idea of the root of all this trouble. I tapped Hiyori on the shoulder and we both pulled back to be face-to-face.

“I think it’s understandable that some of your classmates have started complaining.”

“I suppose. It’s just that the resentment they’ve been feeling has been building up.”

Ryūen’s dictatorial regime would naturally create a strong backlash. Up until now, he’d probably been forcefully suppressing it, but now it’s finally starting to bounce back.

“What is Ryūen’s take on this? In the past, he wouldn’t have shown mercy to rebels.”

“That would have been the case before.”

“So, the fact that it’s gone is the reason for something like this?”

Hiyori gave a small nod.

“Everyone is changing, you know. I didn’t have strong feelings about the class in the beginning either. I almost didn’t even insist on changing, as long as I could spend the next three years surrounded by books.”

It is true that Hiyori’s presence wasn’t strong from the beginning.

“Tokitō-kun has always hated Ryūen-kun’s methods. No, it’s not just Tokitō-kun. Even Okabe-san, who is standing beside him right now, is one of them.”

“So, you’re saying that they want to embrace Katsuragi and turn against Ryūen?”

“That may be so.”

Ability-wise, Katsuragi would be more than capable of being a surrogate leader. And because he’s a transferred student, he can cut into Ryūen without hesitation.

“When the time comes, you’ll be in charge,” Tokitō had told him. It seems Ryūen-kun has made yet another troublesome opponent.

Tokitō reminded me somewhat like Akito with his dislike for Ryūen, but he was also known for his winning personality, rough language, and vindictive nature.

“Do you think so too, Ayanokōji-kun?”

As Hiyori feared, this situation was not in anyone’s best interest.

“Certainly, your class is doing well right now. I think one of the main reasons for that is that Ryūen, who came back after being out of the front line for a while, has shown growth.”

Compared to the beginning of the first year, Ryūen and those around him, such as Ishizaki, have also shown great growth.

“But it’s a different story if you assume this rapid progress will last forever. It may be true for any class, but if Ryūen-kun were to be expelled from school in the future, I think our class would collapse at once.”

“Ryūen’s fighting style is always fraught with danger.”

The development of taking big risks in order to win big is also likely to appear in the future.

I’m also very curious about the ‘promise’ he said he made to Sakayanagi.

“When that happens, it is essential to have someone who can be on the receiving end.”

A potential leader in an unforeseen situation, I mean. Hiyori smiled at my words.

“In that case, why don’t you come to our class, Ayanokōji-kun...?”

Hiyori, despite her appearance, is not optimistic and talks about a desperate strategy for the class to win.

“How daring of you, again.”

“I solicited you last time, but that was just a half-joke to go along with Ishizaki-kun. But this time, my invitation is different from that.”

That means she’s serious.

“I don’t consider us to be a weak class at all. But it is also true that we lack someone who can lead us in case of emergency. What do you think?”

A fight with Hiyori, Katsuragi, and Kaneda backing them up as general staff, huh?

“This isn’t necessarily a development that will result in Ryūen dropping out of school. Right?”

“Of course, it’s best if he 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 something about me?” I asked boldly, but Hiyori just smiled a little and didn’t answer.

While I was talking to Hiyori, the discussion between Katsuragi and Tokitō continued to be a push-and-pull affair. Katsuragi’s rigidity was finally broken by the fact that he never gave a reply that would please Tokitō.

“I’m wasting my time. I told you because I thought you would understand, but I was wrong.”

“I guess you do understand.”

“I’m not going to ask you to keep quiet about this. If you want to report it to Ryūen, do what you want.”

“I’m not going to report it.”

“Are you sure? I’m telling you, I’m serious. You don’t know what I’ll do, so would it really be best to leave me alone?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I think what you’re doing is quite imprudent. However, there are many things wrong with Ryūen’s methods, so I don’t think it’s wrong to be frustrated like you are. However, I do not admire excessive behavior.”

It was obvious that Tokitō had something on his mind. And there was no doubt that it was his intention to get rid of Ryūen .

“Shut up.”

After saying that, Tokitō turned around and started to walk away.

We ducked down and watched Tokitō and Okabe leave without noticing us.

I was going to leave quietly after that but...

Hiyori tugged on my arm and pointed towards Katsuragi who was looking in our direction.

“What do you want, Ayanokōji?”

It would be strange to run away here, so I walked up to Katsuragi and went with the flow.

“It seems you’ve got a lot going on in your class.”

“That’s probably the same for every class. If I could, I wouldn’t have wanted you to hear about it.”

Katsuragi looked once at Hiyori, who stood next to me.

“I’m not impressed, Shiina. You seem to trust Ayanokōji, but it’s not the right decision to bring your personal feelings into a class problem matter.”

It was harsh, but what Katsuragi was saying was correct. 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 I told Ryūen-kun, one of the parties involved, he would not leave Tokitō-kun and the others alone, and the same goes for the rest of the students. They might try to score points by selling the friends who betrayed them.”

“This isn’t something that can be solved by putting it in Ayanokōji’s ear.”

“Isn’t this a good opportunity for Katsuragi-kun to organize 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?”

A schemer, huh? Hiyori is trying to use me to have a positive influence on Katsuragi. It’s not easy for Katsuragi, who is a solitary thinker, to get along with others. This behavior must have gotten through to Katsuragi, and he agrees with her despite his dismay.

“You seem to be thinking about the class more than I thought, Shiina.”

“Of course, I am. Because I’m planning to graduate with all my classmates in Class A.”

As if encouraged by these words, Katsuragi put more of his thoughts into words.

“As the only second year student who has experienced two classes so far, I feel that there is a definite difference between Sakayanagi’s class and Ryūen’s class. In both cases, the leaders are likely to be dissatisfied with their classmates, but even so, Sakayanagi’s class has a certain cohesiveness. On the other hand, there are many students who are still unconvinced and dissatisfied with Ryūen’s class.”

This is exactly the kind of students that Tokitō and Okabe, who were just cramming into Katsuragi, are.

“This dissatisfaction will continue to accumulate and endure as long as the class is on the rise.

“So, you’re afraid of the next time it starts to go downhill?”

“Precisely. In some cases, a single mistake could destroy half the class. I don’t think Ryūen can’t foresee that, but I also don’t think he’d change... the current system.”

“If you can read it, I’m sure Ryūen knows it too.”

“But if he does know, then he should step up to Tokitō and the others and make a move.”

“Well, there will inevitably be a backlash against Ryūen’s methods.”

Apparently, Katsuragi believed that Ryūen himself should solve this problem.

“In anticipation of that, isn’t that why Ryūen pulled you out of Class A?”

“What are you getting at?”

“If something were to happen to Ryūen himself, you would be able to take his place. I think that’s why he invited you over.”

“It’s hard to believe all of a sudden.”

“In the case of Ryūen, which demands high risk and high return, you can graduate from Class A, or you can drop out of school after some exams without a moment’s hesitation. That’s why you need an insurance policy just in case.”

It's also very possible that one person's betrayal could cause the Ryūen administration to unravel.

"If that's the case... I don't like it."

Katsuragi must have assumed that Ryūen invited him over because he thought highly of him, and he didn't try to hide his displeasure when he found out that might not be the case.

"Ryūen and I are enemies because of our different values. That hasn't changed even now that we are classmates. However, now that we've become friends, I think the minimum goal is for both of us to graduate from Class A without any expulsions."

Knowing that this is the kind of person he is, Ryūen probably won't tell Katsuragi directly. In terms of personal growth, Ryūen's evolution has been remarkable, but his classmates haven't been able to keep up with his momentum.

"About earlier, you made the right decision to keep Tokitō from getting aggravated further."

"It would be nice if we could just leave the rebels alone, but if we don't fix this issue, it'll cause bigger problems down the line."

It would be a headache to worry about, but at the same time, it would be a rewarding experience for Katsuragi. At the very least, the situation is very different from when he was in Class A, where he was tamed and killed without any opportunities. Perhaps he had something new in mind, but Katsuragi's expression softened slightly.

"I understand what you mean Katsuragi-kun." Hiyori speaks up from beside me.

"Now that you've listened to me, I'm starting to see what I should be doing. Thank you. And thank you too, Ayanokōji.

"It's fine, I was just saying what I thought."

"I wasn't going to discuss it with you if I thought you were speaking crap, but what you said was right on the money. I'm sure Shiina made you listen to it because she was certain you would give the right answer."

Hiyori smiled and giggled happily.

It was a form of being taken advantage of, but hopefully this would give the slightest advantage with the matters in Ryūen's class.

"And yet, Ayanokōji. I'm sure some of the other students have higher evaluations of you now. After all, what you did was quite surprising."

"Surprising?"

"I'm referring to the results of the uninhabited island exam."

I'm sure there were many students who became skeptical of my abilities, such as Matsushita.

“Is that your true ability? Or did something unplanned occur to prevent you from going full out?”

“Well, I don’t know.” I gave a half-hearted reply, but Katsuragi didn’t seem to buy it

“Shiina, I’m sorry, but Ayanokōji and I would like to talk alone for a moment.”

“I understand. I guess I’ll go back to my room. See you later, Ayanokōji-kun.”

I exchanged a quick goodbye with Hiyori, and the two of us stayed here.

“During the uninhabited island test, Ryūen told me everything he knew about you.”

“So Ryūen told you everything?”

“He was a little skittish at first, but he told me that if I was to be accepted as a member of the class, it was essential I knew this.”

I see how it is. This means everything starting from chasing “X” in Horikita’s class to the incident on the rooftop, is now known to Katsuragi.

“It looks like you’ve been up to quite the mischief Ayanokōji.”

“I thought that if I could have a quiet school life, it wouldn’t make much difference to me whether I was in Class A or Class D.”

“Is that why you’re hiding your abilities? I won’t say anything else, but it probably won’t take too much longer for them 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 in a real fight.” With that, Katsuragi nodded once significantly and started to walk away.

4

It was late afternoon, and I was walking with one of my friends to the cafe terrace.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other like this, hasn’t it, Satō-san?”

“Yes, it’s been a while. Maybe since that time.”

Since that time. That was when I told her that I was going out with Kiyotaka. Even after that, Satō-san and I have become good friends... much closer than before, and now we can even call ourselves best friends. But our group basically consists of four or five people. That’s how many of us are always hanging out together, taking turns. So, it’s not often that I get to be alone with Satō-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 hang out with seven or eight people.

Anyway, there’s a reason why I forced myself to spend some time alone with Sato-san today.

We walked around until we could find an empty seat. Unlike the school, the café terrace is spacious, so there’s no need to worry about where to sit. 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 some distance away from the other students, it tends to be in a place with poor sunlight.

“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?” Satō-san, who had guessed it, said and gave me a cute little smile.

“Thanks.”

I thanked her and 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. I’m the one who called you out today.”

Pushing past Satō-san’s seeming hesitation, I ordered two identical coffees before taking my seat.

“So... what’s the story?” As soon as we took our seats, Satō-san started to ask me that.

I didn’t intend to drag it out at all either, but...

“Hmm... 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 his head curiously.

“Strange? I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it...”

“Yeah, 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 that I’ve acquired from spending so much time with him... Whether it’s someone’s facial expression, emotions, or the atmosphere of a place like this. No matter what it is, I can detect it and see through it. Maybe I’ve acquired such an eye for picking out such things...? I don’t know what it really is, but it can’t be that serious.

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.

“Fufu, I agree with you. But if we continue like this every day, we’ll run out of money.”

“That’s true. Pools, movies, and delicious food, I’m sure I’ll run out of money soon.”

Before I knew it, 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~, Kiki from Class B is here~?”

“Oh, really? I didn’t know that~”

They were laughing out loud, chatting amicably and having a good time. Even though the ocean side is popular, it’s not surprising that some people choose to stay here to avoid the crowds 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; first-year juniors or not, they were seniors.

I know very well that bullying can start from such a trivial thing.

“Actually, I thought I’d tell Satō-san first.”

Let’s not worry about the existence of irrelevant third-year students and just focus on Satō-san here. It would be rude to worry about anything else.

“I’m thinking it’s about time you told everyone. About you and Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yeah...”

It seems that Satō-san had almost guessed what I was going to say. Maybe she was thinking about the possibility that we might have broken up...

No, I don't think so. If that's the case, I wouldn't be in a normal state of mind. I can't imagine myself being able to laugh it off and say, "We broke up." without a care in the world.

"So that's why I wanted to talk to you about..."

"Wouldn't everyone be very, very surprised when they find out? That you two are dating."

I simulated it over and over in my head. 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 "cute." However, I can find a lot of things to make my life easier. I've even used my sexy eyes on boys who weren't interested.

"So, when are you going to tell them?" Satō-san asked me about the timing, to which I immediately replied.

"Well, it's summer break right now, so I'm thinking I'll wait until the second semester."

"What does Ayanokōji-kun think about it?"

"He said I could adjust the timing to my likings."

Satō-san sucks on the straw and takes a sip.

"I see. So, you guys are in love?"

"Ehhhh? Hold on—"

"That answer made everything clear."

"Uh-huh. Well, it would be weird if we weren't lovey-dovey."

"Did he kiss you or something?"

"Excuse me?"

Satō-san pretended to hold a microphone to my mouth as she asked me,

"You've been going out for quite a while now, right? How is it going?"

"Yeah... and it's going fine."

I answer honestly, and Sato-san smirks.

"That's nice, I'd love to be kissed by surprise."

"Oh, really? I wasn't prepared for it or anything, and it was my first time..."

Hearing such a statement, Sato-san rolled her eyes a little.

"Didn't Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san have a thing going a while back? You were dating for a quite a while, right?"

"Eh?"

"And if you're Karuizawa-san, it wouldn't be surprising if you had a boyfriend in middle school or something."

I felt my blood run cold as I listened to Sato-san's penetration. I was a woman at the top of the 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.

“In any case, I’m very firm with myself.” I stated, trying my best to look nonchalant.

“Are you sure that only your soulmate should be able to kiss you?”

I poured a third of the cup of coffee down my throat in one gulp as I felt my throat grow thirsty rapidly.

“I mean, Hirata was a super cool boyfriend, right?”

“Well, yeah. But I guess he wasn’t exciting enough for me.”

No need to worry, I can do it. Now that I’ve slipped up, I have no choice but to go with the flow and cover it up.

“Hirata-kun is an herbivorous guy, so he didn’t come on too strong. It was a little too much for me~”

Sorry, Hirata-kun! I apologize in my heart, but I sacrifice him for myself.

“I see. Well, it’s true that I do want my boyfriend to take an active lead.”

“Right, right?”

“But even Ayanokōji-kun looks like an herbivore, but he’s pretty much a carnivore.”

I felt that Satō-san was oozing a bit of frustration when she said that.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Karuizawa-san. I didn’t mean it like that!”

Today’s occasion was just to tell her that I was going to announce that we were dating.

When I first entered this school, I thought it was fine the way I acted with Hirata-kun. I was just a sarcastic girl, going on and on about everything that happens with Hirata-kun.

But now, I think that’s not enough.

I should have avoided saying anything unintentional 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’m just thankful Kiyotaka felt the same way about me.

“Just to confirm, if Karuizawa-san rejects Ayanokōji-kun, it would be... okay, right?”

Okay, what do you mean by okay? She continues without letting me interrupt,

“See, it’s okay for Hirata-kun to go freelance and get a new girlfriend, right? So, it’s the same for Ayanokōji-kun, right?”

“That’s well, yes, but...”

That's absolutely not okay! I mean, I'm not breaking up with him! But I couldn't bring it to the surface, so it was tough.

"See, I think Karuizawa-san can aim for a better guy."

"Who's a better guy?"

"It's a little difficult to say who, but maybe Tsukasa Shiroki-kun or Miyabi Nagumo-senpai."

"Huh~?"

For me, both of them are just out of the question. It is true that Tsukasa is one of the best in terms of visual appeal, and the student council president may be one of the best. But... I don't think either of them can rival Kiyotaka.

He's strong, cool, and mysterious. But above all...

He understands me.

"Wow... I'm sorry, that was unnecessary."

"Eh, what?"

"Because it's written on Karuizawa-san's face, you know? It says, 'Ayanokōji-kun is the one for me.'"

My poker face didn't work on Satō-san, who knew the details of my love life.

"Thank you, for being the first to hear it. I'm so happy you're here with me."

"I'm glad to hear that."

We talked about other people's love stories, about the uninhabited island and 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.

5

Same day. Just after 2:10 pm.

Many of the students had finished their lunch and were hanging around. I was quietly looking out at the ocean, waiting for the person I had called.

I took out my cell phone and clicked on my name, Horikita Suzune, and opened OAA. I was expecting to see some changes in the results of the uninhabited island exam, but it looks like there are no changes here. There were only a limited number of situations where each of the teachers could check on their students, so it's possible that the results were not reflected.

This was also the case when I looked at her OAA since I might need it for 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 exam. My body was no longer tired, but I found it strange to be back to an everyday lifestyle, 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 Ibuki using another student who was in the same class as her.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t have any other way to contact you. Or did you want to be approached at lunch with a lot of people in the same room?”

“I definitely don’t want to do that. But I’d just as soon not be approached in a way like today.”

“Then can you tell me in advance how I should proceed if I want to talk to you?”

“It’s best if you don’t even think about talking to me.”

Ibuki, with a disgusted look on her face, arrived about ten minutes late for the meeting. Without a single word of apology, she only complained.

“You don’t seem to have been late for some reason. Could it be that you simply want to bother me?”

“What are you even talking about?”

It doesn’t seem like she was trying to aggravate me. In any case, if that’s what she was trying to do, she should make me wait two hours instead of ten minutes.

“If you’re not harassing me, I’d like to hear why you’re late.”

“Huh? As far as I’m concerned, you calling me is harassment.”

“I suppose it is.” I replied seriously and sighed in exasperation.

“If I don’t respond to you, you’re going to pretend I ran away right? I had no choice.”

“If I called you out normally, you’d just ignore me, is that correct?”

“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 as a challenge. I wish I could take her mind off of it, but whatever I seem to do just backfires.

“Shall we talk while we walk? It’ll take longer than standing around talking, and we’ll stand out here.”

It’s a good place to meet up, but it’s not the best place for a confidential conversation.

“Huh? Damn, whatever.”

She obeys me rather obediently, despite her irritation. Ibuki is most likely frustrated that she lost to me in the uninhabited island exam. It’s no wonder that she’s contacting me for a chance for 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, the girl we fought in the uninhabited island exam.”

“Ah... that 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 pick up your walking pace a bit?”

“That’s too much. It’s up to me what pace I walk at, right?”

“It is when you’re alone.” I stop and look back at her.

“As for you, I know you want this to be short. So, on 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.”

“Ugh whatever. 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. Of course, she’s not a child in the good sense, so it can’t be a strong point. As I was watching Ibuki’s back with dismay, she looked back at me with an irritated 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 agree to my revenge match! Understood?”

“Yes, and I expect that there will be a sports festival in the second semester - depending on the situation, I might be able to make it happen.”

“You mean I’ll be able to get my revenge, right?”

“Correct. I’ll make it happen, depending on the situation.”

After sorting out the meaning of my words, Ibuki bit her lip.

“So, you’re saying you won’t accept it depending on the situation, is that it?”

“Oh, you can decipher that kind of thing with your mind, I’m impressed.”

I clapped my hands together and she slapped them, as if I were being ridiculous.

“No need to get violent for no reason.”

“Shut up! If you don’t promise to take the deal, we’re done here!”

“That’s fine, but you’ll never get the revenge match you want.”

“What...?”

“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.”

“Why you-”

“So? I don’t listen to what you have to say. The choice is yours, Ibuki-san.”

“All right, all right, all right! I’ll listen to you!”

“It’s 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 that really depends on the future. Of course, if it doesn’t coincide with the class policy, there’s no way I’ll be able to deal with her if I have my hands full. 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 let her be willing to talk to me.

Ibuki-san stopped and began to walk in step with me.

“So? Is it about that cocky first year?”

“How did you feel when you fought her?”

“How did I feel...?”

“Stronger than anyone you’ve ever fought, I guess that’s how you felt.”

“Well... I have to admit that fight didn’t go as planned.”

Whether it’s me or Ibuki, there’s a difference in strength that makes it impossible for me to win against Amasawa.

“It’s true that a first-year called Amasawa has immense strength. Ah, I don’t think you like to think about it because it makes you sick to your stomach, right?”

“Don’t say that. You’re currently the only one who needs to talk about this.”

It was only because she had directly confronted her that Ibuki-san could understand this. If I were to explain Amasawa-san's strength to someone who didn't know anything about it, they wouldn't be able to understand a single millimeter of it.

"It's a strange circumstance, but you may have suffered some damage as well. 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."

"So, you're going to stick your neck out for that girl? I don't think you should do that. The Amasawa chick seems to have a screwed-up head, and you never know what she might do."

The image of Amasawa-san was so strong that it made Ibuki-san say so.

"Yes, she's a dangerous girl. But I have a feeling that if we leave her alone, something bad will happen in the future."

"That chick doesn't seem like she was interested in you, though."

"I'm not concerned for myself. I'm looking for Ayanokōji-kun's sake."

Hearing that name, Ibuki-san turned her gaze to the ocean side, as if she understood.

"Ayanokōji, huh? I don't know much about him, but she sure seemed to know a lot about Ayanokōji."

Yes, Amasawa-san knows about Ayanokōji-kun. As a mere junior, she didn't look like she knew him from this year.

"He's my classmate. If there's anything I can do, it's only natural that I lend a hand."

I thought it was a bit of a toothy story myself. If you had asked me when I first started at this school, I would have slapped you and denied it with all my might.

"But if Amasawa 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-year 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, so let me buy you a drink. What would you like?”

“I don’t really care what it is, but I’ll have... iced lemon tea.”

I finished ordering for Ibuki-san and myself then paid with my phone. 1400 points for two drinks, that’s expensive.

I accept two drinks from the waitress who’s ready for us.

“Here you go. My treat.”

“It feels strange to have it be bought by you...”

“You should be grateful.”

“Well, okay. Whatever.” Ibuki-san accepted the cup with her left hand and took a sip while looking the other way.

Then she moved a little further away and stopped in a less crowded area.

“Having 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.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

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 this matter too hard.

“If you ever confronted her alone, you would end up getting completely crushed. I don’t think that outcome can be reversed.” Ibuki-san, not trying to bring me down or anything like that, just stated the facts.

Even if I were to re-train from here, it would probably just be as she pointed out.

“It’s up to you to think about it, but isn’t it best to just leave it alone?”

“Have you been listening to what I’ve been saying? To Ayanokōji-kun this is-”

“Yes, but you’re missing something.” She turned her hand, the one holding the cup, towards me, interrupting my words.

“No matter what Amasawa does, wouldn’t Ayanokōji be able to handle it alone?”

“What do you mean...?”

It’s true that Ayanokōji-kun is an excellent person. That’s because I’ve been watching him from the sidelines for a year, and I’ve had the chance to learn a little about him. But there are still a lot of mysteries, and not all of his academic and physical abilities have been figured out yet. Even I, who was in the same class as him, didn’t understand him, and I’m sure Ibuki-san, who was in another class, didn’t understand it any better. From the outside, all we have is the information that Ayanokōji-kun is good at math and not bad at athletics.

“If you ask me, I think you’re buying into Ayanokōji-kun quite a bit.”

“Buying or not, anyone can see that it’s possible considering how strong he is.”

“I know all about his strength,” is what Ibuki is implying. But... how is that possible?

“Could it be that you overheard about him and Hōsen-kun somewhere?”

“Huh? Hōsen? Who is that...? Ah, that gorilla-like guy?”

The conversation didn’t mesh and I was wrapped up in a bit of a sullen feeling.

“Where did you get the information that Ayanokōji-kun is strong?”

“Where...?” She was in the middle of choosing my words, and made a face that wasn’t a great memory.

“Was that something you were told not to say? Or did you forget...?”

Ibuki-san closes her eyes and crosses her arms, as if trying to remember something.

“Something happened that I don’t know about, didn’t it?”

I’m going to push a little here.



“So, you’re one who doesn’t know anything about it?”

“I do not know what you’re referring to, but I don’t think I know anything about “it.”

As the two of us began to check each other out, I decided to go ahead with the conversation.

“I think we need to open up, don’t you?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Not so fast. At this point, I want to hear everything you know. What I don’t know and you know about Ayanokōji-kun.”

This is sort of a once-in-a-thousand-years chance to gather information. If Ibuki-san knows a little bit about anything, anything at all, she can help me...

“Well, okay. What do you want me to say?” Ibuki-san asks in a troublesome tone, as if she can’t define what she’s going to say.

“I’m curious about what you were trying to tell me earlier.”

“What I was going to tell you earlier was about the rooftop of the Ryūen and Ayanokōji. You know, about when he called Karuizawa and waterboarded her.”

“Huh? What? I have no idea what you’re talking about. At all.”

Ryūen-kun? On the roof? And Karuizawa-san? What water torture?

Question marks keep popping up in my head.

“Ahhh, I see now. That means that guy hasn’t told anyone in your class.”

I nodded my head as if I was satisfied with what Ibuki-san had told me.

Then, Ibuki-san started to tell me things about Ayanokōji-kun that I didn’t know. While I listened to her, I stared at the shining sea, trying not to let my emotions get the better of me, while at the same time trying to clear my head. Ryūen-kun had turned his attention to Karuizawa-san in order to find out about Ayanokōji-kun hiding in our class. In order to save her, Ayanokōji-kun went to the rooftop alone. There, he showed his overwhelming power and overpowered Ryūen-kun and the others.

I’m sure I knew about him to some extent, but my surprise still outweighed it more than once.

“So that’s what happened when Ryūen-kun stopped messing with our class. I had no idea.”

“Anyway, now you know. That guy’s strength is not normal.”

“Yes, it is. Ayanokōji-kun is a man of immeasurable potential. 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 judge it on the fact of men or women, but I think Ayanokōji 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 can dish out physically, that might be the case.

“But physical strength doesn’t necessarily mean you’re safe. It doesn’t mean you can avoid being expelled from school. In fact, your strength can be your downfall.”

On the uninhabited island, Amasawa-san was able to do whatever she wanted, but that’s not the case in the school.

“Thank you, Ibuki-san. Your information is going to be more useful than I thought.”

“Aren’t you going to talk to Ayanokōji about this?”

“Not yet, no. It’s not surprising that he probably already knows about this.”

He’d been in contact with Amasawa-san a few times, especially before the uninhabited island exam.

“And then there’s the matter of the paper...”

“Paper?”

“Besides Amasawa-san, there was another thing that bothered me about the uninhabited island exam.”

I explained that a piece of paper had been placed in my tent. It seemed that Ibuki-san had figured out why I was in the northeast of the island on the last day.

“I see. Someone other than Amasawa sent you a notice suggesting that Ayanokōji was the one.”

“You know the word ‘suggest’, don’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, okay?”

Even though Ibuki-san has a low academic level in OAA, she is surprisingly easy to talk to. I don’t have the uncomfortable feeling that I’m talking to someone who’s obviously at a lower level.

“At that time, Amasawa-san looked at the paper I received and tore it into small pieces. That action has been bothering me for a long time, but I think it was because she didn’t want to leave any evidence of the handwriting. Anyway, all I remember clearly is that the handwriting was clean and beautiful.”

“Beautiful handwriting?”

“Yes. I don’t think there are many people who can write at that level.”

“I see. So, there’s a possibility that someone who can write good handwriting is playing at a bad game. But it’s going to be difficult to find just that, isn’t it? And 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. And one more thing, and this is still a thinly-grounded deduction, but it means that the person who wrote these letters may have high physical abilities. Whether it’s Ayanokōji-kun or Amasawa-san, if they have extraordinary strength,

it wouldn't make sense to get involved otherwise. Furthermore, there's a high possibility that the person who wrote the note is a first-year student."

"Ayanokōji and Amasawa they're pretty strong yeah, but how do you know it's first year?"

"The student in question is someone who knows Amasawa-san, in that case, it's highly unlikely to be a second or third year."

Ayanokōji-kun, Amasawa-san, and a third party. What kind of connection each of them has, we still don't have the full picture at this point. But I can't just leave it at that. I can't guarantee what will happen next. If Amasawa-san shows any strange movements, I shouldn't hesitate to go to the school..."

A light clank sounded on the deck.

It was because Ibuki-san pressed the cup of tea hard against the railing. The contents, which were still more than half full, spilled out of the cup and onto her hands.

"What's wrong?"

"What if you fail? 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 I don't know what the unseen enemy, including Amasawa-san, will do, so..."

"There are two of them, so shouldn't there be two of us?"

"That's..."

"If I, the strongest of the two years, were to join, it would be a different story. If you want, I'll lend you a hand. I mean, it's whatever."

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 done by a year, and I don't like the idea of you losing to anyone but me. Besides... you were really planning to rely on me when you came to me, weren't you?" Straight away, Ibuki-san looked me in the eye.

"No, not at all?"

"Huh? Why don't you at least be that honest? You said you needed my help."

"I've never thought of it that way before, but I suppose so?"

"Then fine! Never ask me to help you again! Bye-bye!" Just as an angry Ibuki-san was about to walk away, I grabbed her left wrist.

"What!"

"I'm going to ask you to work for free to pay for the drinks I bought you earlier."

"Huh? You said it was my treat, 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.”

I continued as Ibuki-san took out her cell phone.

“In that case, I’ll take three million points.” I raise my eyebrows and tilt my head, pretending not to understand what Ibuki is 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.”

I was embarrassed to ask Ibuki-san for some reason, so I ended up doing it this way. But I kept my normal demeanor and continued in a high-handed manner.

“Really, you 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.

“My hand tasted better than this lemon tea.”

Such a phrase was kind of funny, and I laughed a little.

6

It was dusk, the sun was setting beyond the horizon. At the promised place, Ichinose was waiting for me, staring at the sea.

I hesitated to call her by her name when I saw her fragile profile.

“Ichinose.”

“Ayanokōji-kun. Hello.”

We exchange light greetings and I stand in front of her. I wasn't in the mood to suddenly cut to the chase, so I decided to interject a bit of small talk.

“Are you still continuing with the strategy of saving up your private points?”

It was irrelevant to the main topic, but Ichinose didn't show a 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 return the points you kept to everyone.”

She said it was easy, but it was a strategy that Ichinose could continue to implement because he was a trustworthy person. As she said, it's not a bad idea to keep the points. If the money is automatically depleted, it may be inconvenient, but if the money is promised to be returned, it is a good idea to have a large amount of money available when the need arises.

It's also a great factor, as it's the one and only advantage Ichinose has.

“But the strategy of pooling the money is to prepare 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 status quo.

“Ayanokōji-kun, what do you think we lack?”

“Things that your class lacks?”

“Yes. It's just that we can't really see that on our own. I was wondering what our class looked like from Ayanokōji-kun's point of view.”

“During the uninhabited island, I had the chance to talk with some of your classmates. The first thing that I notice is that too many of your classmates are kind-hearted.”

This is something we both know without saying it, but it's also an inseparable factor. However, because the class doesn't like to fight, 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 have to be firmer to fight, don’t we?”

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.

“So, let’s discuss the conversation we had on the uninhabited island exam.”

“Yeah, yeah... that’s right, it’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

I moved close to Ichinose’s face and was about to start speaking, however...

“What are you talking about, meeting up with Honami in a place like this?”

Surprised by the owner of the voice, Miyabi Nagumo, the Student Council President, Ichinose hurriedly distanced himself from me, but the scene where we were almost at zero distance would definitely have been seen. Was I being followed? No, I’m not stupid enough to be followed without knowing it. Then was Ichinose the one who was marked from the start? No, this is probably due to the countless eyes that Nagumo has. 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 us on our way here.

However, there was no sign of Nagumo wanting to contact me in the past few days.

It was as if he had planned it, and the contact came at the timing I had wanted to avoid the most.

“Thank you for your hard work, Student Council President Nagumo.”

Breaking the flow at once, Ichinose hurriedly worked to return to normal mode.

Ichinose, however, wasn’t able to hide her agitation and confusion. But even if she had mended it perfectly, it would have been meaningless to the current Nagumo.

“It seems like you two met on the last day of the exam, are you two sneaking around together again?”

“Eh? I... No, well, I mean...” Ichinose choked on her words as she was suddenly reminded of what happened on the island.

I was about to intervene, but Nagumo stopped me with his hand. I was given strong pressure not to interrupt him now.

“Well, it doesn’t matter what it is. It’s just that, if it turns out that Honami, a fellow student council member, is being made to cry, the student council president can’t just leave her alone, right?”

I see how it is. I had already guessed this might happen when I fully realized that Kiriyama was on Nagumo’s side.

Nagumo moved even closer to us and stood next to Ichinose.

“So, tell me, are you being made to cry?”

Silence.

“I hope I’m wrong, but this is about Karuizawa-san isn’t it?”

He doesn’t dare to speak all at once, but slowly and in small bursts of words to make Ichinose understand him deeply.

“Karuizawa-san... what do you mean?”

Naturally, Ichinose couldn’t understand why Kei’s name was mentioned at this point.

“It seems you’re still only telling people close to you, but I’ve overheard you’re dating Karuizawa for quite some time now. Isn’t that right? Ayanokōji.”

I’m dating Karuizawa.

Even after hearing those words, Ichinose probably didn’t understand what they meant right away.

“What, first time hearing that? I thought you were already talking about it.”

After a slight pause, he continued.

“You weren’t thinking of two-timing, were you?”

I didn’t reply to Nagumo’s one-sided attack.

Now, there’s no point in telling Ichinose I called her out here to tell her I was going out with Kei. At this point, it would only be running salt in the wound

“Is this... true...?”

“Hey Ayanokōji, Honami is asking you, why don’t you answer her? Or am I wrong and you have nothing to do with Karuizawa? If that’s the case, deny it, and I’ll apologize profusely, okay?”

Kiriyama 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 me into verifying that I am actually dating 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 is better to assume that Nagumo would have backed up his claims before stepping in.

“I hadn’t explicitly told anyone about it, but where on earth did you get that information?”

“Ah...!” I could see the obvious shock of Ichinose at my admission.

First of all, without a doubt, Nagumo must have realized that Ichinose’s feelings were directed towards me.

“It looks like you’ve realized that I didn’t just jump to gossip and speculation, huh?” He grinned broadly, but refused to reveal the seed or talk about how to back it up.

I vividly recalled Kiryūin's words that I wouldn't be able to handle Nagumo.

"I'm not going 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 could well understand that the relationship between me and Ichinose was unnatural in the eyes of Student Council President Nagumo. However, I think it was premature for you to step in at this stage, wasn't it?"

"That's true. However, this could be about Honami dating you and being tricked, and you can't deny it wouldn't look like it from an outsiders perspective. It also may have been a completely unrelated discussion. In any case, I'm sure your girlfriend would be sad to see you in this situation."

"Indeed, it may cause unnecessary misunderstandings."

"As the student council president, I did what I was supposed to do to protect one of my own."

Miyabi Nagumo looks at Ichinose one last time, with a pitiful look, before approaching me.

"You should introduce me to your girlfriend sometime. I'd like to see her face at least once."

After tapping me on the shoulder, Nagumo whispered in my ear.

"You're free to think what you like about my methods. But, you know, I haven't even started yet."

"It hasn't even begun?"

"You can mix one lie with a hundred truths and no one will notice. You have to make a decision before you are unable to retract it. If you ever want to fight me, you are welcome to visit me at any time. If you get down on your knees and show me your dedication, I'll be your opponent."

In other words, unless I agree to fight Nagumo, the relentless surveillance and harassment would continue unabated. He was planning to drag me 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 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 being exposed. And then there is the saying, "One lie for every hundred truths." For now, he was just leaking the truth, but that means that lies will start to be mixed in. If you look at it from the side, it's just an extension of harassment. It could be said that Nagumo's behavior is childish. However, he has done more damage to me mentally than anyone else I've fought so far.

He doesn't care that he's antagonizing his classmates by sticking to me. I wonder if he doesn't think that he will lose trust because of something like this, or if he has no intention of gaining trust from the start.

Regardless, it was clear that Nagumo was prepared to do whatever it took. As Nagumo left, all that was left in this place was a moment of silence. It does not contain any of the buoyant air that was flowing when we first arrived.

It was just a heavy, quiet time.

"Oh... it seems we've gotten off-track haven't we...?"

"Seems so.

"Well, that... Why did I get called here again?"

"It's about the uninhabited island..."

"Oh! That thing, that thing? That's... that's... that's..." She shouted loudly, then her voice gradually faltered.

"Can you just forget about it and... me?" Ichinose spat out, her smile never faltering the entire time. "Sorry, I didn't know anything about you and... I got carried away on my own and said something selfish and, well..."

"Like Nagumo said, I didn't tell anyone around me anything. It's no wonder you don't know."

"Yeah, isn't that right? Maybe so, but... I knew I was being stupid! I'm sure you're not the only one who has a girlfriend. "

In spite of Ichinose's strong will to never break her smile, her eyes were clearly moist and her eyes were beginning to overflow with tears. She was trying to keep her composure and pretend that nothing was wrong, while trying her best to hold back the tears from overflowing.

I wondered what kind of emotions people feel when they fall in love with another person and there is another person in love with them. 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 able to experience it right before my eyes.



“Goodbye...” Ichinose ran off, leaving behind a single word that she squeezed out.

I didn't say a word to her or extend my hand to her back, but just saw him off 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 this didn't change the path I was aiming for.

Even though I was feeling a bit annoyed at the disadvantageous situations that were piling up against me, I couldn't help but feel my curiosity welling up from deep within my chest.

Chapter 5: A Treasure Hunt of Girl Troubles

THERE WERE ONLY three days left of the summer vacation on the ship. The days passed by very quickly. Early in the morning, when everyone was starting to feel sad that they would soon be departing from this paradise, a text message was sent to all the students at once from the school. Hondō, who was the first to open his phone, read out the message.

“Today at 10:00 a.m., a treasure hunt game will be held? What’s this?”

All of us read the email at the same time, which contained the strange word “game” in it.

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 10:00 a.m.).

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. Voluntary participation sounds interesting, doesn’t it?”

In addition to voluntary 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. As I’m always short of money, I’m willing to participate if there’s a chance to get an extra bonus. The fact that you can participate with only 10,000 points seems reasonable, too. Miyamoto, and Hondō seemed to be participating, and after the meal, they started talking about going together. I wonder if Akito was going to participate too.

“Don’t worry about me, just go and have fun...” Akito exhaled sluggishly on the bed, where he was suffering from a fever.

Maybe it was because he had overexerted himself at the private pool yesterday.

“If it wasn’t for the prohibition of bringing personal items, I would’ve lent you a game console!”

“I can’t even bring myself to play games in this state.” Akito nuzzled his face into the pillow with a little bit of disgust.

After finishing the meal in bed with Akito and relaxing in the room until around 9:50 a.m., the three of us decided to leave Akito behind and head to the venue, despite the fact that it was difficult to leave him alone.

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 than that, but maybe the students who were not interested in the treasure hunt would take the opportunity and go to a less crowded place like the swimming pool or have a full meal. As the event was open to all, it was up to the students to decide how they wanted 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 Mr. Tohru Takato, the homeroom teacher of third-year Class A, who was explaining the contents of the game.

Almost all the teachers seem to be here, but I can't see the acting director, Tsukishiro, or Shiba Katsunori, the homeroom teacher for first year Class D. If Shiba had also been hired by that man, it would not be surprising if he stepped down after this incident.

On top of that, he has made his appearance and role known to Mashima-sensei, Chabashira-sensei.

“Good morning, everyone. It is now 10:00 a.m., so we will close the registration 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 clarify how we came to have this treasure hunt game. This treasure hunting game stems from a suggestion from the student council president, Miyabi Nagumo, that we should have an interesting and enjoyable recreational activity in the sense of deepening our friendships after competing with each other by grade level and immersing ourselves in the harsh uninhabited island life. Please greet the students, Nagumo-kun.”

Nagumo stood in front of the participants when Takato-sensei called him by name.

“We are pleased to announce that the bonus game will be held with the full cooperation of the school. We came up with this idea in the student council to enrich and improve school life. In the uninhabited island exam, all grades competed against each other in a cutthroat manner, but in this treasure hunt, it is possible to make friends 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 showed up in front of us yesterday. One of the members of the student council was Ichinose, who was sitting beside the teachers and listening to the conversation.

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. I'm sure the wounds she sustained were not light, so I'm sure it will take some time for her to heal, even though she is behaving naturally now.

Due to that incident, she may now lose her love for me, or she may even become hostile to me. What kind of changes she will undergo will certainly be a major turning point for her in the future. After Nagumo's speech, the microphone was handed over to Takato-sensei again.

"The members of the student council will not be able to participate in this treasure hunt as they will be managing the operation. We will be working on administrative tasks on our days off, so please take care of the students." Takato-sensei said, turning towards the student council.

Several student council members, including Horikita and Ichinose, stood up and stood next to Nagumo.

"Now then, let me give you an overview of the treasure hunt game, there are no complicated rules, it's very simple." Takato-sensei raised his right hand. He holds a square piece of paper between his thumb and forefinger. It is probably about five centimeters square in size. The paper had a QR code printed on it.

"We have placed a total of 100 stickers with a QR code on them all over the ship. Participants will be asked to play a treasure hunt game to find these stickers. By scanning the stickers with a special app, they are rewarded with private points. However, a phone can only scan a sticker 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 scan a QR code that has already been scanned on another phone, it will not be valid and you will not receive the reward. Also, anyone who does anything illegal, such as removing the sticker without permission or using a pen to make the code un-scannable, will be severely punished, even if they aren't playing the game, so please avoid doing something like this at all costs."

I see, it's a very simple game where luck is very important.

"The lowest payout you can get is 5000 points, and there are 50 of them, which is exactly half of the total amount of stickers. And the next highest payout are 30 cards with 10,000 points."

Unfortunately, that means that half of the 100 cards won't be able to singularly cover the entrance fee. 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 QR code, the more private points you will receive. With about 200 participants, that means that one out of every two people won't get profit. But they're offering one million points if you find a sticker? 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 QR codes prepared for the number of students participating, and there are around 200 students it seems. 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 scan the QR code while paired up, and the reward for that QR code is 30,000 points, each pair will receive 30,000 points.

This means that if we all paired up and scanned 100 codes, 200 people would receive the reward, greatly reducing the possibility of losing out on a single point. The only disadvantage is that if you find more than one QR code, you may have trouble deciding which one to scan. Despite these disadvantages, which require some adjustment, there seems to be a lot of merit in pairing up.

“Also, the areas where the QR codes are posted are predetermined.”

Even though he said throughout the ship, there are naturally many places that are considered inviolable areas.

Using a screen, Takato-sensei explained,

“To summarize, toilets and cabins naturally do not have QR code stickers hidden in them, and employee-only floors and rooms are 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's what the letters on the map referred to.

“There are three riddle questions written here. If you solve them, the system will tell you where three individual QR 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 QR 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, and the QR code needed to be scanned before then.

Like most people, I pull out my cell phone and decide to join in. 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 here. 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 noticing something is off, the number of gazes on me temporarily decreases 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. As long as I don’t know what their ultimate goal is, I need to be on top of it. It is important to think that all information is being recorded and to act accordingly.

I saw my girlfriend, Kei, among the participants, 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.

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka and Karuizawa Kei would not normally pair up in a place where everyone around them knows about it.

And at this point, Horikita appeared in front of the students with a microphone.

“I’m Horikita from the student council. I have a request to all 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 game. 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 me to use a different phone to participate.

I don't know how much of a problem this is in of 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 pay, 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, students will pay the participation fee from their cell phones and write their names by grade before leaving the room.

It's also possible that those who haven't paid the fee will secretly download the app.

Meanwhile, those who had finished installing the apps left the room in order. I got lost in the crowd and got in line, eventually arriving in front of Horikita at the reception desk.

"Give me your name. And I'll collect 10,000 points from you." She said in a clerical manner and I entered my name in the list.

Then I put my phone on the payment 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.

2

Well, the treasure hunt game suddenly started and is going to last until the evening. There are a few rules to follow, but basically, they are only about violations.

All you have to do is pull the lucky sticker...

The area around the starting point is very crowded because it is within the area where the QR codes are posted. Like locusts devouring crops, the students are going at a very fast pace. If I were to join in now, there would be no room for me to intervene.

Some of the students, seeing the swarm of other students, started to change their search points.

What's more, many of them are using their cell phones to keep in touch with each other. Perhaps they are looking for a QR code while simultaneously recruiting a partner to pair up with. Since pairs can be formed on the app without meeting in person, there is 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 our classmate Nene Mori.

It seems that Kei grabbed her classmates early and made a pair.

I'm still single, of course, so I decided to go down to the lowest level for now. If you go from the upper floors like Kei you will be sharing the same space as other students.

But still...

In this kind of situation, wouldn't it be nice if I could invite someone to join me?

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 by email or chat. The only one available in the Ayanokōji group was Keisei, but he quickly announced that he would not participate, as if he was not interested in this kind of game. Akito isn't feeling well, and Haruka and Airi have been a pair from the start.

“Ah...” As I started to move, I bumped into Satō in front of me. I raise my hand lightly to greet her and then try to walk away.

“Oh, wait, wait!” She grabs my arm and stops me in a panic.

“Hey, Ayanokōji-kun, have you partnered up with anyone yet?”

“No, I'm just a group of one.”

I didn't add "for now" because I had no plans to pair 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 empty saying that to myself, but I tried to hold back.

"So... would you be willing to be a pair... with me?"

She made an unexpected suggestion, and I was at a loss as to what to say. Satō 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 had never expected her to offer to be my partner after I had done something she should have hated me 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 because she was keeping the relationship with me a secret, but whether that meant I could partner with Satō was another matter.

"Do you care about Karuizawa-chan...?"

It was hard for me to answer that I do, but Satō 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."

Kei appears to have told her that we would announce our relationship in the second semester. I knew that Satō was aware of our relationship from my past conversations with Kei.

"It's been a while since we've been together. It's not like we can keep it a secret forever."

"Well, there are couples who go out in secret, but I think only a very limited number of people would notice the combination of Ayanokōji-kun and Karuizawa-chan."

Satō told me that she suspected a relationship between me and Kei and talked about it with several girls she was close to.

Of course, I didn't hear that she told them directly, but from the way Matsushita, the person who contacted me, said it, I'm pretty sure she did. Of course, Sato didn't do anything wrong, because she was just guessing without knowing anything about it.

"Yeah, but you know what? The reason why I suggested that we partner up is because I thought that you would be a reliable partner. So, there isn't any hidden meaning here..." 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, I'd want to find a difficult QR code and pair up with her.

"All right. If you're okay with me, I'll pair up. I can't promise anything, though."

"Really? Yes!"

Satō's attitude of being happy made me feel good as a partner.

We took out our cell phones and accepted the pairing through an app. We are now officially paired and will receive the reward of the QR code that is scanned on 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 me a strange piece of paper, didn't they?" Satō pulls out a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket.

"Oh!"

I guess she forgot she had crumpled it up when she saw the state it was in when she took it out, and quickly put it away in her pocket, looking embarrassed.

"Oh, wait, it's just a thing. I didn't understand anything when I looked at it. Fuuu~ You have it too, right, Ayanokōji-kun?"

She didn't think she could solve the mystery, and seemed to have rolled up the paper at random.

I took out the paper folded in four and unfolded it in front of Satō.

"This means you can see the three places that show where the QR code is, right?"

"Yes, it does."

"So, if I can solve this, is there a chance I can get a million points?"

"No, I don't think so."

I felt bad to crush her hopes, but I answered immediately.

"Huh? Really?"

Only three of the 100 QR codes have the answer in the form of a question. That's why it's tempting to get your hopes up for the QR code at the end of solving this riddle...

"These three clues are all similar in terms of level. I'm not sure that there is any difference in the rewards you get for solving any of them. There is a reasonable number of 100,000 points... Or it could be 50,000 points."

"Yeah? 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. If a student who works hard or solves a problem gets less than a million points, or 500,000 points, or 300,000 points as you said, many other students might react in an unconvincing manner. Don’t you agree?”

If all of them were worth 300,000 points, then there would be none left in the game that were supposed to be found by luck. That would make the game unsuccessful.

This paper is just a part of the relief measure, and should be seen as a modest reward.

“I see. It’s true that if these were all expensive QR codes, I might get annoyed... “

I thought about how I would feel if I couldn’t solve it, and it seemed to make sense right away.

“There’s nothing wrong with finding a QR code based on this clue, but you won’t know the result of the QR code you find until you read it and get your private points. If you’re not good at it, it can lead to missed opportunities.”

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 one.”

“If we are ever going to use this clue paper, it’ll be when we don’t find a good QR code until near the end. I’ll tell you where to find it. “

Well, by the time we tried to rely on it, the other students had most likely already retrieved it...

“Hold on... did you already solve the riddle, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“Sort of.”

“Wow!”

Each clue was not designed to be difficult; the structure of the puzzle, which could be played by first through third graders, made it more akin to a riddle than a straightforward solution.

While we were talking, around us, the students participating in the treasure hunt were searching for QR codes at random. Even though the area where the QR 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 QR 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 Ayanokōji-kun to decide where to start looking.”

Satō and I walked side by side to the lowest level designated as the search area. The two of us searched for QR codes for the next five minutes, but we only found two blatant stickers. Was it the wrong place, or was it hidden in a more difficult place?

While we couldn’t get a grip on the situation, the number of students around us started to increase little by little.

“Um... hey Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What’s the matter, did you find something?”

“No, I didn’t... Er, can I go to the bathroom for a minute? I had too much to drink this morning. I actually wanted to go earlier...”

Satō asked me this while looking extremely embarrassed.

“I see, so that’s when you found me, huh?”

She nodded her head, blushing.

“Sorry, I’m supposed to be in a bit of a hurry.”

I have no intention of telling her not to go to the bathroom. I gladly sent Satō off.

“I’ll be right back!”

“Don’t rush, I can wait.”

I sent Satō off to the bathroom for now, and resumed my search of the area alone.

“Are you participating in the treasure hunt game, Ayanokōji-kun?”

As I was peeking under the sofa, someone called out to me from behind. It was my classmate Matsushita.

Today seems to be one of those days where I keep getting approached by unusual classmates.

As we were talking, someone who must have been friends with Matsushita came over with a suspicious look on his face.

“Oh. Hello Tadara-senpai.”

“What are you doing here... oh. Ayanokōji.”

“You know Ayanokōji-kun?”

When Matsushita curiously looked into Tadara’s face, he turned away with a bashful look on his face.

Although Matsushita had no way of knowing, it was certain that some sort of communication had been sent to the entire third year by Nagumo regarding me.

“We’re in the middle of a treasure hunt, so let’s talk later. I don’t want to waste time, so, let’s go, okay?”

“If you’re going to say that, you should pair up with someone else. Don’t bother with me, please pair up with another girl.”

The presence of the third-year Tadara who appeared 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, he turned away his gaze with a blatantly disgusted look on his face.

Hearing a small cluck of his tongue, Matsushita also sensed that Tadara’s attitude had changed.

“What’s wrong Tadara-senpai?”

When she called out once more, Tadara clearly started to show an attitude of wanting to escape.

It was clear that he harbored some sort of fondness for Matsushita as it 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 I could safely assume that he had been instructed not to engage in inadvertent conversation.

“Matsushita, another time.”

“Ah, yes.” Laughing lightly without really understanding, Matsushita waved goodbye to Tadara.

He looked at Matsushita as if he had some regrets, but glared at me and left.

“Phew. I don’t know what it was, but he seems off. Ayanokōji-kun, did something happen with Tadara-senpai?”

Even if she was unaware of Nagumo’s instruction, she would be suspicious if she saw that attitude.

“Nothing, we haven’t even talked before.”

“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 you’re alone too, Ayanokōji-kun? If you’re alone, do you want to pair up?”

“Oh well, actually I-”

Just as I was about to be invited by Matsushita, I heard footsteps running from behind.

“Hey, Matsushita-san, I’m the one paired with Ayanokōji-kun!”

Satō, who had just returned from the restroom, made a mad dash to close the distance between her and Matsushita and grabbed me by both shoulders.

“Eh? Oh, is that so?” Matsushita turned around, surprised by the unusual speed and pressure.

“I mean, I saw Tadara-senpai just now, isn’t he part of your group?”

“I wouldn’t say I was with him, I’d say he was just following me around...”

Apparently, when it came to a third-year student named Tadara, not only Matsushita but also Satō knew about him; he was a third year Class A student who was doing slightly higher than average on the OAA, with an overall grade of B to C. He also has an unusually long haircut for a boy.

I’m curious as to what kind of hairstyle that is... That is something I am not sure of.

“I’m a little turned off by his strong personality. I’ll reject him in a roundabout way. “

“Oh, I understand!”

I don’t understand.

For the time being, I’ll return to the area under the sofa that I was previously inspecting.

“I mean, Ayanokōji-kun, it’s not there, is it? Even if there is, I think it’s a cheap QR code.”

Indeed, under the sofa is easily chosen as a typical hiding place for QR codes. In fact, on the floor of this sofa, when I crouched down at a slightly different angle, there was a QR code peeking out in front of my face. Of course, I wouldn’t choose to scan this one.

“What’s important is the school’s pattern.”

“Pattern?”

“When they decide to implement this lottery game, it’s important to know how to determine the value of the QR code.”

“Uh, what do you mean?” Satō tilted her head, unsure.

In response, Matsushita replied without really thinking about it.

“Naturally, you’d prepare a high-value QR 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 that ‘hard to find’.”

“Sensei!” Sato says before Matsushita does, as if to answer this time.

But as if to supplement, Matsushita adds;

“It’s quite a task to put up a hundred QR 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 the teachers take their time to decide where on the ship to put the QR code while students were doing the uninhabited island exam, 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."

"Do you know what that means now, Matsushita-san?"

"Yeah."

"That's awesome, Ayanokōji-kun!"

"I think it's an interesting point of view, but you could just play a treasure hunt game and take it a little easier."

"I guess so..."

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 who asked to partner up with you before me. "

"That's a shame."

"I think I'll look for a more reliable partner. See you later."

Standing around talking would only make everyone in this place miss their opportunity.

3

Less than an hour had passed since the start of the treasure hunt. Many of the participants had dispersed, and although we could no longer see dozens of people gathered in one place, we could still see them repeatedly passing each other, searching hard in the same place.

Psychologically, it is difficult to scan the first QR code you find. Even if it's the most difficult QR code, you don't have any other criteria to assume that. There were most certainly a few students, like ourselves, who discovered the 500,000 or 1,000,000 point QR codes but decided not to scan them, thus missing out on the big prize.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-senpai!”

“Ah, good morning Nanase.”

I guess today is the day that I've broken the record for unusual consecutive encounters since the holidays started.

“Who...?” Satō, who for some reason showed blatant caution, glared at Nanase.

Nanase, on the other hand, did not take the glare as unpleasant and bowed her head.

“My name is Tsubasa Nanase, I'm in first year Class D.”

“Hmm, I can't believe you're in the first year.”

Sato said as if trying to point out a fact, but Nanase tilted her head curiously.

“Really? I don't think I'm respectable enough to be seen as older than I am.”

“Huh? I never said that's what makes you respectable. You're probably respectable no matter how you look at it!”

“Thank you senpai. If you've praised me, I'm happy. I'll devote myself every day to become more respectable.”

“There's no use in becoming more respectable, I mean, how are you going to become more respectable?” Satō asks somewhat forwardly, as if she wants to become respectable too.

“It's hard to explain in concrete terms, but... um, I think it's essential to grow in mind.”

“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, I've never heard of anything like that... It's convincing.”

It's nice to be impressed, Sato, but I don't think you and Nanase are probably on the same page...

"You're playing the 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. But if that's the case, then what's the reason for showing up at a place like this?

"I'm glad to see that Ayanokōji-senpai is looking well today. Well, I'll be leaving now."

As I parted ways with Nanase, I also passed Izumi Nakaizumi, a student in Ryūen's class, shortly after.

"Nakaizumi, huh?"

"What's wrong with Nakaizumi-kun?"

I've been trying not to pay attention to it for the past few days, it's not just a coincidence that I'm running into Nanase every day. First of all, Nanase has been trying to contact me to check on my condition. On the third day, I found her having lunch on the deck, but even if I hadn't been there, I'm sure she would have come to me.

And then there's Nakaizumi, who is chasing after Nanase. He may not be following Nanase every time, but he is certainly plotting something.

This situation confirms Ryūen's involvement.

I thought he might be investigating the relationship between me and Nanase, but he has never shown any sign of paying attention to me. If that's the case, it's better to assume that he's genuinely marking Nanase.

I'll try to deduce why he's after Nanase.

I know Ryūen is trying to find the culprit who attacked Komiya. If he's involved in that, then Nanase should be clear of any suspicion.

That much should be evident from the testimony of Shinohara.

In that case, I can't understand why he's keeping such a close eye on Nanase. The day we met with Amasawa on the island, Nanase and I held a similar view on the conflict.

If Nanase, however, is hiding new information....

I decided to put it in the back of my mind for the time being.

"Ah, there's one Ayanokōji-kun! In a place that's a little hard to find!" Satō pointed and smiled happily.

It was a sticker with a QR code attached to it, hidden from view. 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 scan it, right?"

"That's a tough call."

I have a feeling it's not the most generous QR 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 do it..."

It's definitely a QR code that's too good to throw away. I took out my phone, turned it to camera mode, and pointed it at the QR code.

"What? Is it okay? You want me to scan it?"

"No, it's alright."

"Huh?"

I pressed the button and took a picture of the enlarged QR code.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking a picture of a QR code that's potentially worth a lot of private points. If we can't find any other good QR codes later, we can use your phone to scan the QR codes from my saved photos."

"What? Oh, really? Will it react to the photos I take?"

"As long as you take a clear picture, it will work fine."

It would be inefficient to return here to look for the QR code we had found before. Other participants 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 one phone, it is possible to point the camera at a QR code and display the URL. However, the cell phones we use can't 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 use this kind of strategy. Now we just have to hope that they don't find this QR code.

As soon as they see us looking around, this place will be exposed.

"Let's move."

"Yep."

Then we change the levels on the ship and start searching for the QR code again.

I'm groping under one of the couches when I notice a snag.

"There's another one here."

"That's a pretty obvious pattern. Under the same kind of couch."

"Satō. Can you keep an eye on the perimeter for a minute?"

“Sure, but what’s going on?”

I sat down in front of the couch and lowered my face to peer in.

“I thought there was only one QR code in the same place.”

“Said who?”

Normally, I look underneath the sofa, but not at the back of the sofa. It would be more correct to say that I couldn’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 was 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 QR code in the dark.

“Wow, it’s real. It’s a QR 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 QR code. If I had the flash on, I could save the picture with the QR code after taking it, but I couldn’t scan it with my phone.

Even if I were to turn the couch over, I would have to be prepared to scan the QR code if I wanted to be seen by other students because it would be quite large and conspicuous.

However, if you’re a pair, you can just have the other phone scan this picture, so the process is smooth.

“Looks like the school is pretty sneaky!”

Having found a new QR code to scan, we decided to move on.

4

Even though the ship is spacious, students are not free to move around everywhere. Inevitably, they focus on places where they can play and relax, which leads to a lot of unexpected encounters.

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 pretense of wanting to talk to anyone. Noticing each other's presence at almost the same time, the men stopped about a meter in front of each other.

"Yo Ryūen, I just wanted to thank ya for the fun time on the island."

The first to open his mouth was Hōsen Kazuomi of the first year Class D.

"Are you sure you're okay with not sleeping? You should really sleep for another week or so..."

Ryūen Kakeuru from second year Class D returned Hōsen's words of provocation with his own.

"Don't worry. Even if I kill half of you here, or even all of you, it won't make me feel any better. The number of targets I have to beat the shit out of has increased from one to two, and I'll be busy from now on."

"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 put out their fists.

"Ha. More importantly, I heard that you've been secretly buying the effects of the flight card from the first years. I heard that you made a bet on the third year Nagumo, so ya must've made a lot of money, right?"

"Kuku. Who's the one who peed his pants and told you? I said to keep it quiet in the contract."

Before the uninhabited island exam, Ryūen approached a first-year student with a flight card and made a deal with him. If a group they chose won a prize, they had to give up all the points they earned. If they only won the top 50%, they would only get 30,000 points. As a result, Ryūen correctly predicted Nagumo and received 280,000 points for the number of students who signed up. This fact was not known to most of Ryūen's classmates, but only to those who used it to execute the contract.

“If you lick my shoes, I’ll give you a little extra for your trouble, okay gorilla?” Ryūen continued to walk, laughing, without once taking his hands out of his pockets.

He could have walked straight to Hōsen, but he took a step to the side to avoid making contact.

Ishizaki followed hurriedly, keeping a wary eye on Hosen.

Hosen walked proudly alone down the middle of the corridor without looking back.

“You’re so strong ain’t ya? But you’re so scared that you moved to let me pass.”

“You’re such an idiot.”

“You-”

“It’s a sign of determination that if you attack me, I’ll let you have it this time. So, go ahead.”

The moment they turned their backs to each other, Ryūen sensed the outpouring of murderous energy and violence.

“You’re a nasty bitch.” Hōsen called out to him before turning the corner.

“That guy is something else...”

“Leave him alone. I know he’s a pain in the ass, but first we need to find the culprit.”

“Huh. I’ve got Nishino holding them down right now.”

Ishizaki, who took out his cell phone to check, then led Ryūen around. Not long after that, Ryūen and the others arrived at their destination.

Before Ishizaki could say his next words, Ryūen approached one the lone girl.

“Nanase Tsubasa, right?”

“Yes. What can I do for you, senpai?”

Nanase, who had been stopped in her tracks, stared at Ryūen 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 with you.”

Normally, Ryūen alone or with Ishizaki would have been enough, but he let Nishino, the girl holding Nanase, accompany him. They know that a situation with only men surrounding a junior girl can be a disadvantage.

“I have a question for you about what happened on the uninhabited island.”

“About the exam, you mean?”

Nanase still didn’t understand the situation, but the next words made her understand.

“Komiya was injured. I’m trying to find out who the culprit is.”

“Why me, senpai?”

“The five of whom were the first to arrive at the scene of the crime that time were Sudō, Ayanokōji, Ike, Hondō, and you. I wouldn’t even waste my time with Ike, Sudō, or Hondō.”

“Then why don’t you ask Ayanokōji-senpai, who is also a second-year student?”

“Of course, I’ll listen to him as well, depending on the situation. But first, let’s start with you. It seems that you’ve been following Ayanokōji during the exam, what’s the reason?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with this case.”

“I won’t be able to judge whether it’s unrelated to the case or not until I hear what you have to say.”

When cornered by the high-handed Ryūen, most of them readily confessed.

“I’m sorry, but I have nothing to tell you.”

But Nanase, instead of wincing, calmly refused.

Nanase lowered her head and tried to leave, but Ryūen kicked out his foot and slammed the bottom of his foot against the wall.

“You have no right to decide whether to talk or not.

“You’re very violent, aren’t you? I’m afraid you’ll get in trouble if anyone sees you like this.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a couple of other guys on watch to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“I understand that Komiya-senpai is Ryūen-senpai’s classmate. However, I don’t think I can help you in any way. I have no clues whatsoever.”

“Really? You say that, but you’ve been moving around a lot these past few days, haven’t you?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

She replied that she didn’t know what he was talking about without even looking at him, but that was an opening for Ryūen to take advantage of.

“You’ve been keeping an eye on Kurachi, a first year Class C student, all day, while all the others are playing around and having fun, right?”

“I…” It was then that Nanase opened her eyes for the first time and showed her agitation.

“As soon as I heard what happened from Komiya, I set up guards on you, Sudō, Ike, and Hondō 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 first-year. That’s not normal.”

“It’s just a coincidence.”

“Coincidence? Today, a lot of people are playing a game of treasure hunt. Kurachi is participating, but you’re not. And yet, you were following Kurachi all the way to the west until Nishino caught you. Is today’s action also a coincidence?”

If you participate in the game, you have to imitate the search for the QR 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.

“It seems I’m too inexperienced for this. I can’t believe I didn’t notice that you’ve been following me day after day. I’m surprised.”

“You should be grateful that I reached out to you first.”

“That’s brilliant, Ryūen-senpai. However, Komiya-senpai’s matter has nothing to do with Kurachi-kun’s.”

“I see, then I’ll have to talk to Kurachi directly.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Then tell me what you know. Or can’t you tell me anything without ‘someone’ telling you what to do?”

“No, that’s not the case. What’s irrelevant, is irrelevant.”

“Don’t make me repeat it. It’s not you who judges that, it’s me.”

The air that Ryūen gave off changed, even though he’s been smiling all this time and continues to do so now.

Ryūen can’t quite understand why his tactics aren’t working on Nanase. He feels like giving in even though he is not the one being questioned.

“No, you do not have the authority to make such a decision senpai.”

In spite of this, Nanase stared straight back into Ryūen’s eyes without showing any signs of agitation.

“What the hell are you wondering about? Why don’t you just tell me quickly?”

Indeed, Tsubasa Nanase was lost and troubled. Her problem began during the middle part of the uninhabited island exam.

It was back in the middle of the uninhabited island exam, after Amasawa appeared in front of Nanase and Ayanokōji with a deadly weapon on the day she took out her uncontrollable anger on Ayanokōji.

This is when Ayanokōji stated that there was another person besides Amasawa.

At that time, Ayanokōji had denied doing a GPS search, but Nanase had secretly done one in the tent they had just assembled. She knew that if she were to find out something, he would see through her surprise and agitation. As a result of the clandestine GPS search, there were two people, aside from Amasawa, who

were close to Nanase and Ayanokōji: Kushida, a sophomore, and Kurachi, a freshman. Normally, both of them should be investigated, but the second-year student, Kushida, was Ayanokōji's classmate, so she had put it off.

And apart from that, she had been in regular contact with Ayanokōji 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 turned her head 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 QR code.”

Ryūen lets out a small laugh and pulls out his cell phone.

“Where's Kurachi? Fourth floor... cabin floor, right? Yeah, I'll be right there.”

Ryūen, who had predicted all of this to happen, finishes the call briefly and puts it away in his pocket.

“You had people watching Kurachi-kun after you pulled him away from me, didn't you?”

“Unlike you, I have a lot of people who can be my hands, feet, eyes, and ears.”

“Kurachi-kun might not be involved at all.”

“I don't need you to tell me that, I'll just eliminate them one by one.”

Kurachi was the only clue that could help lead Nanase or Ryūen.

“Decide quickly whether you want to come or not.”

If Nanase refused at this point, there was no need to think that Ryūen would go to Kurachi alone. Nanase nodded once and decided to go with Ryūen to Kurachi.

Not long after that, they saw Kurachi looking for the QR code with a first year named Taguri. They seemed to be a pair.

“First of all, let me and Kurachi-kun have a talk.”

“What?”

“I'm going to draw out the information from him.”

“What guarantee do I have that you'll put down the information you've learned from him?”

“You'll have to trust me, senpai.”

“I'm sorry, but I don't trust you.”

“You have no choice but to trust me, even if you don't. I'll tell you everything.”

“That’s okay. But if you do anything wrong, even though you’re a woman, I won’t spare you, okay?”

“I’m aware of that.”

Ryūen instructed Nishino and Ishizaki with his chin, and pulled the confused Taguri away from Kurachi. If you’re a first year, and Ishizaki and the other second years are calling you, you have no choice but to obey maturely.

“May I have a moment, Kurachi-kun?”

“Huh? I’m pretty sure 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 Ayanokōji-senpai during the uninhabited island exam.”

“Huh? Nah, what are you talking about?”

If Nanase took her time, Ryūen would intervene.

Nanase had a need to find out while they were alone.

“There’s no point in hiding it. During the heavy rain on the seventh day of the test, I used my GPS search to find out who was in the vicinity. It was only Amasawa and one other person, you. And there were tools near the scene to hit people. There’s no excuse for it.”

“I don’t get it!”

Kurachi denies out loud and tries to run away, but Nanase grabs his arm.

“You see the second-year senior behind you, right? He is desperately trying to find the culprit who almost attacked Ayanokōji-senpai. In some cases, it is possible that he may resort to violence.”

“W-what? Hey, don’t be silly, what the hell do you mean?!”

“Shhh. It’s better for your own safety if you don’t antagonize them by shouting too loudly.”

“I- But I’m Just... just...”

“Just?”

“They... they told me I would get private points if I attacked Ayanokōji...”

“Money for attacking him?”

“Normally, I wouldn’t take it. But I used up my private points, and...”

“And?”

“They said I could just ‘pretend’ to attack him and it wouldn’t be a big deal. I didn’t do anything wrong, you know that, right?”

It’s true that pretending to attack someone can be treated as a joke.

“Who gave you the order to pretend to attack him and offered you money?
When was this?”

“It was before the exam...”

“What? 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 it was. 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 from-”

“Kurachi-kun, I don’t know if you know this, but because of your actions at that time, apart from Ryūen-senpai, there was also a change in Hōsen-kun’s plans.”

Kurachi’s expression immediately hardened after the conversation switched gears.

“Right now, he’s desperately searching for the culprit. What would happen if I were to report you? I’m sure that Hōsen-kun will... pay you a visit.”

Ryūen, a sophomore, and Hōsen, a freshman. She threatened that two fighters were against him.

“No, wait, wait! Okay, I’ll talk! I’ll tell you, but please don’t do that!” He whispered, but desperately raised his voice.

Hōsen is the most hated and feared of all the first years. The potency of the name is more than Nanase could have imagined when she tried it out.

“It was... my classmate. Utomiya...”

“Utomiya-kun...?”

“He told me that he would give me some money after the exam as long as I did a pretend attack on Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Is that true?”

“Seriously, seriously, it’s true!”

Seeing that look in Kurachi’s eyes, Nanase nodded once.

“I trust you, Kurachi-kun. Let me ask you one more thing at the end, do you know anything about the matter of Komiya and the others? In particular, who attacked them?”

“Komiya? What are you talking about, I don’t think... No, I really don’t know. Anyway, don’t ever tell Hōsen that I had anything to do with it, okay? Promise?”

“Okay, I promise.”

She instructed Kurachi to go, and at the same time, Taguri was released.

Ryūen approached Nanase right after Kurachi started to walk away. Kurachi didn't seem to know anything about Komiya's case, but Ryūen wouldn't believe Nanase anyway.

Because even if he was watching from a distance, he could tell that Kurachi was telling Nanase information that he didn't know.

“He said that... Utomiya-kun might know something about it.”

“Utomiya?”

“Same as Kurachi-kun, this is Utomiya Riku-kun from first-year Class C.”

Immediately pulling out his cell phone, Ryūen checked Utomiya and Miyamiya's faces 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, no matter how many Ryūen's there were, he would be tough to deal with.

More importantly, Nanase felt the fact that he was proceeding this far without Ayanokōji's permission was not wise.

“This is a case without conclusive evidence. Even if Utomiya-kun was the culprit, he could deny everything.”

“Kurachi just spilled everything. This is enough to threaten him, right?”

“It's only because I've been sticking around him for the past few days and was able to do some research beforehand. Considering his original personality, I thought I could drop him if I pushed him. But as for Utomiya-kun, he is an unknown existence.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Please give me some time. Of course, I'm not saying for free.”

“Huh? Explain.”

“I've been silent for a long time, but there is a witness that Ryūen-senpai doesn't know about during Komiya-senpai's matter. I don't mind telling you who that person is.”

“Who?”

“I can't tell you right now. I will tell you if you refrain from contacting Utomiya-kun.”

“You’re bargaining too hard with me. Well, I don’t mind, I’ll accept your terms.”

“Thank you, senpai. I’ll get back to you with the details.”

“But if you lie to me, 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 left the place.

5

I found several QR codes, but only one that seemed to be worth a lot of points so far. I could see several students looking for the codes, so I guess the competition was quite high. Since they don't allow any external people to participate in the event, it's unlikely that any of the students will be cheating openly, but even so, with over 200 participants, it's inevitable that this will happen.

I suddenly noticed Satō standing still 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 wasn't just a random thought, you know? I've been thinking about it since before the uninhabited island exam, wondering if I'm helping the class.” Satō then looked at the palms of her hands.

“I wish I could tell you what it was like for me before I entered the school, when I was floating around thinking that I could live a random and interesting high school life and get a job anywhere. I wish I could tell you that this isn't just a normal high school, it's a hell of a place.”

For lack of a better word, Satō is generally less capable than the average high school student. However, she is still on the upper side of the caste and has a good amount of say in the matter of class issues.

Academic ability, physical ability, and communication are all things that most people can improve with some effort, though they may have varying degrees of difficulty.

As a simple example, Sudō's name comes first. Sudō, who was at the bottom of the class, made remarkable achievements and improved his academic performance at once.

As you can see from this, the important thing is room for growth.

“If you're going to work hard for your classmates, I guess studying is essential.”

“I suppose so.” Satō said with a nod of her cheek.

“Oh, you're not going to teach me how to study, are you?”

“Me?”

Right after I asked that back, Satō hurriedly thrust her hands out in front of her and waved them.

“I'm sorry, Forget about that! Karuizawa-san will be mad at me...!”

“Wouldn’t it be better to learn from Horikita?”

“Horikita-san? But I don’t get along with her very well, you know?”

Even the word “not much” was probably wrapped up quite mildly. For almost a year and a half, Sato hadn’t acted like she could call Horikita a friend.

“Aside from the fact that you need to be friends, I think she’s pretty good at teaching people how to study. After all, she trained up Sudō.”

There was absolutely no need to give any details about Horikita’s humanity or teaching methods. The important part was that she was able to teach Sudō, the most problematic boy in the school year.

“Before I knew it, Sudō-kun had overtaken me...”

“You don’t want to take the dishonorable title of lowest in class and lowest in grade, do you?”

“No, absolutely not.”

Satō was also one of the candidates for that lowest rank, so she had a strong sense of urgency in that regard.

“Then, can I ask Ayanokōji-kun to be the bridge?”

“If it’s that easy, it’s a small price to pay.”

If it could improve the academic performance of the class, Horikita wouldn’t refuse. Sudō would be complicated by the fact that there would be more people around Horikita, whether of the same sex or the opposite sex, but he wouldn’t reject her.

6

“Horikita-senpai, it’s time for your shift. Please take a break.”

Yagami-kun, who was next to confirm the rewards, approached me about two hours after the treasure hunt game had begun

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 a few people around me.

“Not so fast, senpai. I have my own assigned task. If I leave that to Horikita-senpai, I can’t call myself a member of the student council.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Clearly, he didn’t want to be taking things easy and relaxing. It’s unlikely that someone with that kind of thinking 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 to 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 the rewards so far?”

Looking down at the list of names, Yagami-kun asked me that.

“I’d say about forty, including the pairs, and although there were some students who got half a million points, I get the impression that a surprisingly large number of students read the wrong stickers and got only five thousand points.”

“I guess they don’t want other people to scan the QR code that they found, so they want to scan it quickly. I kind of understand.”

After missing that QR 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."

Although 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 the ability to do simple work. He is a reliable junior in the sense that I can trust him with my next job, and he is definitely much more capable than the two first-year students who joined the student council at the same time, and although he still has a long way to go, he seems to be the best candidate for student council president in our school.

When I left my post, Kushida-san left without staying by Yagami-kun's side.

It was only natural that she would not interfere with my work later on. I could only think that there was some kind of meaning in the fact that she walked alongside me.

"You were with Yagami-kun, weren't you? 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 lot of students who feel that way, 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 if you like?"

"With me?"

I couldn't hide my suspicion at Kushida-san's suggestion.

"Is it weird that I'm asking you out? I mean, it's weird, right?" She smiled and chuckled in an amused manner, but never lost the smile she showed to everyone. This isn't a scene I need to think about.

"Okay, I still have work to do as a student council member after this, and I was thinking of getting something in my stomach. It's just that I've got 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 were smoldering inside me.

“May I ask you a simple question?”

As if biding my time, I spoke as soon as I started to move.

“Why did I invite you?”

“There’s that too, but...”

“The reason why I’m getting along with Yagami-kun?”

It seemed that the questions we 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 behaving in a way that was hard to understand under normal circumstances.

“You’re 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 Ayanokōji-kun, who found out about your past... it doesn’t make sense.”

Kushida-san kept her eyes forward and listened without looking at me.

“Even if Yagami-kun didn’t know anything about this, I have the impression that you’ve avoided getting along with only certain boys. I’ve always thought of you as a person who is pretty on all sides and treats everyone equally.”

“Well, that didn’t need to be worded so harshly, did it?”

“I guess so. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“Fufu, don’t worry, I’m not mad.”

I hadn’t intended to say anything bad, but I had mentioned my personal impressions. I felt that I had been careless, but I couldn’t swallow the spit I had spit out.

“Why do you think I’m so close to Yagami-kun?”

It was a question in reverse, 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 manner.

“That kind of relationship, like we were dating or something?”

“Yeah...”

“Unfortunately, nothing like that. I’m not planning on dating anyone in particular while I’m in school, you know?”

Even though I don’t usually care about such things, I know that Kushida-san is very popular among boys. But if she has a boyfriend, junior or not, it’s inevitable that her popularity will decrease.

I knew it wouldn’t suit Kushida-san, who wanted to be seen better than anyone else.

“If that’s the case, 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. It’s because the best way to get rid of someone who’s in your way is to get into their pocket.”

“I... see.”

I had imagined this was the case, but I was overwhelmed by the reply and smile. In other words, Yagami-kun is a target that should be eliminated, just like me and Ayanokōji-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?”

“You may be right. There’s no guarantee that he knows for sure, is there?”

“Then...”

“But you can’t guarantee that you’ll never know, either, right?” Keeping the smile on her face 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 by. That’s why I’m waiting by his side for him to show an opening.”

Even if it’s 1% or 2%, unless it’s 0%, eliminate it. That was Kushida’s stance on the matter. So that means that even her junior, Yagami-kun, is no exception...

“I’m not sure what to make of it. You haven’t expelled me or Ayanokōji-kun, so are you going to make more enemies?”

“You think it’s stupid, don’t you, Horikita-san?”

At least, it didn’t seem like a smart move.

“Essentially, you don’t think we need to antagonize each other. I don’t care if it’s another girl who doesn’t talk too much, or Ayanokōji-kun who won’t let it slip. Either way, 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 me, does it?”

Kushida-san paused before continuing.

“You know the past I have to protect. That alone is already like exposing my heart unprotected. Eventually, Horikita-san is bound to come and grab that heart, you know.”

“I don’t understand. There’s no need for me to do that.”

“You don’t because there is no need. Then what if there is a need to do it?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if I took a class secret and tried to leak it to another class? What if I betrayed you and tried to move to another class? At that time, can you be sure that

you and the others won't absolutely nail me, saying 'don't betray me if you don't want your past to be revealed'?"

"That's..."

Certainly, I can't guarantee that I won't mention Kushida-san's past when a situation comes up where I have to suppress it. If you have to do so in order to protect your classmates, you can't erase the possibility that you'll bring up the sword that can save multiple people at the expense of one...

Of course, even if someone were to leak her story, Kushida-san will try to get away with it in the form of "fake, fake, fake". However, there was a slight breakdown in Kushida-san's credibility. A strategic error in the class poll exam resulted in a waste of prominence.

"It's hard for me, you know? I'm feeling a strong sense of frustration at the situation when we have to talk about these things. I'm still feeling nauseous, and it's really a painful thought." Despite her words, she really did smile and her tone of voice remained calm the entire time. 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."

"Fufufu, don't worry about me, Horikita-san. I'm fine."

"Are you fine?"

"I'm also thinking that it's time for me to end this nasty problem."

"You mean..."

"I'm thinking of ways to get rid of this burden in my own way."

"So, you're saying that Kushida-san approached me with some kind of solution?"

"I've been thinking that if things continue to go on like this, more and more people are going to find out about unnecessary things. So... first of all, Horikita-san, would you be willing to drop out of school?"

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 between our stories. What about Ayanokōji-kun? 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 relieve her of the mental burden she carries.

“I’m well aware that Ayanokōji-kun is a tricky opponent. But did you know? Ayanokōji-kun is paying me private points.”

“Paying... you?”

It was a story that Ayanokoji-kun had told me before. I’ll pretend I don’t know here and ask her back.

“I think he said it was a defense measure to avoid being expelled. That means it’s proof that he knows I’m his enemy, but also that he’s afraid. If I try to get rid of you, no matter how furious Ayanokoji-kun will have no choice but to keep quiet or face expulsion, right?”

Her face moved a little closer to mine as he gave me a creepy smile.

“Anyway, even if I can’t expel everyone except Horikita-san right away, I can still have a certain amount of peace. In the meantime, I can just think of another way to get rid of Ayanokōji-kun. And as for Yagami-kun, I guess he can be dealt with at any time. He’s just a guy who likes me.”

Her large eyes seemed to have color, but they didn’t.

People can read emotions through 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 I want you to be the first to disappear is because you’re in the same middle school as me. If they look it up, there might be other people who can reach that fact. But since I met Ayanokoji-kun in high school, even if he were to expose me, I could get away with saying that he was just lying.”

Indeed, what Kushida-san said was correct. If you were to ask me or Ayanokoji-kun who I would want to be in trouble for revealing my past to, it would definitely be me, since we went to the same junior high school.

“Do you think that even if I say I’m going to expel you, it won’t be easy, don’t you? I haven’t been able to get a hand or a foot in front of you for the past year and a half. That’s why you think I can’t expel you right?”

“Well, 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, Kushida-san, and all our classmates are aiming to graduate from Class A. And in order to do that, your power is essential.”

“Bitch.” She cursed at me, so quietly that the end of the word almost disappeared. “I’m not going to cooperate with you. Stop saying things that make me want to throw up.”

“Kushida-san...”

“I’m looking forward to the second semester. I’m sure we’ll have a great time together.”



As we could hear people coming closer, the evil in her expression faded. Still, it was obvious that behind her smile was a mixture of hatred and anger.

“You just can’t help it, can you...?”

She turns away from me, as if we’ve finished talking.

“But I believe... that one day you will understand.”

The words must have certainly reached her ears, but she didn’t stop walking.

7

It was a little past two in the afternoon. There's plenty of time before the treasure hunt game is over, but I think it's safe to say I've seen most of it. There was a total of six QR 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 scan?"

"You can choose the one you think is intuitively better, Satō."

"What? You're letting me choose? What if I get the wrong one?"

"I'm going to leave only carefully selected QR codes. Besides, there's a possibility that all the codes have been scanned, so you might end up winning nothing."

We would have a better chance if she made a quick decision rather than being able to think it over slowly.

"Wow, okay."

Pulling out her phone, Sato slides up a picture of me.

She seemed to think about it for a few seconds, but then she decided to point her phone camera at one picture. It was a QR code that I had found by inserting my phone under the couch.

But then...

"Oh, no. It says it's already been scanned..."

It was quite difficult to find, but it seems that there were other students who found it.

"Never mind, on to the next QR code."

I nodded, and this time she didn't hesitate to scan the QR code I slid in.

However, the second one seemed to have been scanned as well, and Satō stepped on the ground in frustration.

"That's so frustrating!"

She hurriedly scanned the third QR code.

After that, Sato 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 we can get for this..."

Satō tried to tap the treasure chest with her index finger, but stopped just before her finger touched it.

“Oh, Ayanokōji-kun, press it!”

Apparently afraid of seeing the results, she handed the phone to me. For Satō, she was using her precious 10,000 points to participate in the tournament. She was afraid to see the results.

I took the phone from Sato and pressed the treasure chest on the screen.

“Wow, Ayanokōji-kun, you’re so bold!”

I didn’t do anything so bold as to be called bold.

The treasure chest glowed simply, and blue light spilled out from inside the box.

And then...

“Ah...! Ah~” For a moment, Satō was intensely surprised, but she soon realized the truth and her joy began to wane.

She had been dreaming of 300,000, 500,000 or even a million points, so she was a little disappointed.

“Apparently, the QR code wasn’t 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 on my face that I was glad to have participated in.

“Thank you, Ayanokōji-kun.”



“I’m the one who should be thanking you. It was Sato who found this QR code that hadn’t been scanned yet, you know.”

“Ah... well... it was nothing” Sato beamed, showing a happy and embarrassed face.

8

Students who scanned the QR code in the treasure hunt are still obligated to report it to the school. Satō and I returned to the starting point and approached Horikita, who was waiting at the reception desk.

“Good work, the procedure is now complete.”

Receiving such a report, Satō also expressed her joy honestly.

“Well then, Ayanokōji-kun, thank you for today. Let’s hang out together sometime.”

With that, Satō waved her hand and walked happily away. Now that she had some extra income, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to spend it in a somewhat opulent manner.

“Excluding the participation fee, the two of you ended up with a total of 180,000 points. That’s quite impressive.”

“Yes, it is.”

At this time of the day, most of the participants seemed to have reached their goal, and only a few were coming.

“You’ve been hard at work, too. Did you take a break?”

“Yes, 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.”

If she can make a good impression with this kind of thing, it will 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.”

“So, who got the highest private points in the class?”

“Who do you think?”

I asked her, and she returned my question.

“I’m hoping it’s not us.”

“Good for you, you’re correct, there’s a pair that won half a million private points. It’s Mei-Yu Wang-chan and Kōenji-kun.”

“Kōenji? I suppose I find it normal that he participated in the game to win points, but I find it surprising that he paired up with someone.”

So many people had gathered at the briefing that I hadn’t noticed Kōenji’s presence.

“I’m with you on that. I don’t know how he ended up joining or pairing up with her, but I’m sure he’s made quite a lot of money in the last two weeks or so.”

“No matter what you make him do, Kōenji is substandard.”

I didn’t know that he had luck in addition to his incredible physical abilities. Or maybe it was the QR code that his partner had found.

“It’s a big minus for the class if we can’t use that Kōenji-kun in the future.”

“He wasn’t a helpful student 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?”

A way to use Kōenji as an upper hand? It’s a waste of time to even think about it anymore.

“I don’t think so.”

“That’s a quick answer.”

I’m confident that I can control a certain level of opponent. However, the only exception among them is Kōenji. I have run several control simulations on all my classmates. No matter how many times I tried, I could not find a way to get Kōenji under control.

“Even if you give up, I won’t. His capabilities are vital to us.”

Trying to control the uncontrollable. It’s just a contradiction.

“Even if it’s a waste of time?”

“Are you saying that we don’t need Kōenji-kun?”

“If it doesn’t do any harm, I believe the best course of action is to leave him alone. And now that Kōenji has a protection point, he can be left alone more easily.”

“I’m sure it’s a rational thought.”

“If it’s a class that can’t win without Kōenji, I can understand why they would want to wake up. But the class has already grown to be strong enough to compete with other classes. And it will continue to grow in the future.”

“Yes, it’s true that we’ve become much more reliable compared to a year ago.”

Horikita continued.

“Aiming for Class A is my top priority and ultimate goal, but I want to bring the class together as one. I want to lead the way so that we can all work together.”

So, she doesn’t want even Kōenji to be lacking. Horikita’s eyes were so straight that I couldn’t help but choke on my words. If Horikita could get this Kōenji to join her, he would be an irreplaceable ally. The hurdle, however, would probably be more difficult than trying to reach Class A. In the past, I would not

have taken this statement seriously. Horikita's growth is proceeding slowly, but one step at a time. Horikita might be able to convince Kōenji someday.

Because Kōenji is the only one who doesn't seem to be able to see the benefits.

“What's wrong?”

“What?”

“Because you seemed to be thinking about it.”

“No, I was wondering what I should spend the private points I got.”

“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. I'll do that.”

I decided to leave, since staying any longer would only get in the way of her operation.

9

It was a little after 5:30 p.m., and I had a meeting scheduled with someone before dinner at 6:00.

As I left my guest room and was about to head for the fifth-floor deck, I ran into Sudō, the guest room two doors down.

“I’m about to eat. Where are you going?” Sudō asked as he was about to return to his guest room.

“I’m going for a little walk before dinner.”

“You sound like an older man. I’ll see you at the restaurant.”

We exchanged a few words and were about to part, when Sudō remembered something and spoke up.

“Actually, I’ve got a bit of a surprise for you!”

“Is it that Ike and Shinohara have 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, that guy said he wanted to study with me. He wants me to join my study group with Suzune.”

That’s surprising, or rather, a faster move than I expected.

“Because poor academic performance is fatal in this school, you know.”

The thought that “I’m often in danger of being expelled from school,” is still about academics, which is 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 from the second semester on, Kanji will also be studying hard.”

It seems that he is planning to start studying immediately after this trip is over. Whether the results will show up right away depends on Ike’s efforts, but we might see some growth early in the second semester. Both Sudō and Ike may turn out to be big names as their love lives take off.

“You never know, you might even get another member.”

“Oh? Seriously?”

“I guess that means Ike isn’t the only student who’s starting to want to be taught how to study by Horikita.”

“It isn’t a guy, is it?”

He grabbed both of my shoulders while making a serious face.

“N-No... it’s only Satō.”

I wasn't going to say her name, but the pressure made me confess.

"Girls, huh? Well then, it's only Satō. She's not going to join the study group if Ike and I aren't present, is she?"

"I think you're assuming that's what's going 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 and showed 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 boast about it. The first time I turned my head, I fell asleep within a minute, but now I can concentrate... 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, I don't understand why Kanji got a girlfriend first." Laughing, but sincerely regretful, Sudō lamented.

"I'm going to push and help him when he comes into our study club. I'll give him spartan level training, like we do at the basketball club."

He seemed to have a mixture of love and hate for his best friend.

"Because it's not easy to fall in love if you hate studying."

"I know. I remember how much I hated studying." He stuck out his tongue as if he had bitten into something bitter.

After parting ways with Sudō, I approached my destination. I spotted Kushida in front of me on the deck and hid myself. The meeting time was already five minutes past, so of course she was waiting for me.

I took out my cell phone and called Kushida, who picked up after about two rings.

"Hello?"

After confirming the voice, I walked out and walked to the deck where Kushida was. The nature of cell phones is that they prioritize calls. Even if she 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. Are you still waiting for me?"

"Yeah, let's see... Ah, it's this way!" She looked left and right and immediately saw me and waved.

I didn't hang up my phone, but instead ran straight to the front of the room. At about the same time, we both hung up our phones.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I took a little wrong turn."

“Ayanokōji-kun, you do screw up too. 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 should be honest with you.”

“Hmm? Confide in me? Tell me what?”

“You know that I participated in the treasure hunt game, right?”

“Yes. You were paired with Satō-san, right?”

“What about it?” She looked at me strangely, not understanding the flow of the conversation.

“In this treasure hunt, the reward for the QR 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 you.”

After saying that, I took out my cell phone and showed him 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 was surprised by the unexpected story, but she refused to accept it while holding her hands together.

“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 chance that you would say you didn’t want it, but if I kept quiet, I wouldn’t know. I was ashamed of myself for thinking that way, so I decided to give it to you.”

“But...”

No matter how I tried to reason with her, it would be a difficult point for her to accept.

“To tell you the truth... I want you to accept this as my sincerity.”

“Sincerity...?”

“I’m buying safety from you by giving you half of the private points I get. I expect you to be sincere with me as long as I am sincere with you.”

At this point, Kushida seemed to understand.

“There’s no harm in having as many private points as you can. Don’t you agree?”

“That’s true, but isn’t Ayanokōji-kun in a lot of pain too?”

“Not at all. It’s not a big deal compared to breaking our truce.”

“It’s kind of... scary in reverse.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ayanokoji-kun, you see, there’s been a lot of talk about you being an amazing student. Are you really giving up half of your private points just because you want to have a truce with me?”

“As far as I’m concerned, I’ve concluded that making an enemy of you, who are in the same class as me, is more dangerous than making an enemy of a student like Sakayanagi or Ryūen.”

Somewhat guardedly, Kushida nodded, as if in some sort of agreement.

“All right. So, you’re sure about this, then?”

“Of course, I am.”

I transferred my private points again, this time through my cell phone to the account Kushida had.

“I’m sorry to say this after I’ve given them to you, but if I get into any money-related trouble, I might ask you to help me.”

“Huh~? That’s a bit uncool, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Kushida laughed a little, probably amused by my pettiness.

“But I think it’s a much better way of doing things than Horikita-san, I don’t hate this kind of thing.”

“Really?”

“I don’t want to make enemies with you either, so keep up the good work.”

“Ah. I’m hoping we can keep this truce.

After saying that, we parted as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 6: A Connection to the Past

I WAS WORRIED about Akito's health, but his fever had gone down in a day and he was healing just fine. I've been spending the night using my cell phone, occasionally interjecting a few small jokes, but basically just watching from the sidelines.

While I was surfing the net, waiting for sleepiness, I received a chat message.

It was a message from Kei;

[I'd like to call you now, if that's okay.]

It's been a while since we chatted, but we've been exchanging messages at least once a day. Today, she didn't use emoticons or stamps, suggesting that it was a serious conversation.

[I'm in my room, give me three minutes.]

It's not difficult to get out of the room since it's not curfew yet.

After sending a reply, I decided to get out of bed quickly.

"I'll get myself 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 says something cute and cuddly, as she always does. I wondered if this was a request from a lover when they wanted to hear their lover's voice.

"You know..." After a slight pause, Kei speaks up.

"I've heard rumors about you that aren't good. Can you explain it to me in detail?"

"Bad rumors?"

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 hold back and asked her twice, but she just gave me 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. The first thing that comes to mind is Ichinose. In addition to that, the fact that I was paired up with Satō, who had confessed to me once, and the fact that I had chatted with Matsushita.

“Are you sure you can’t think of anything else?”

There was a pause, and she looked like 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 referring to, I would have confessed, whether it was with Ichinose or Satō. However, as long as I have not identified it, if I say something inappropriate, the wound may spread. It’s like letting the flesh cut the bone.

Why is... this a mess instead of being 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, uh, messing around with a junior!”

“Huh?”

I heard what the rumor seemed to be, but I couldn’t understand it and tilted my head. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but I guess I was wrong. It’s 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 that comes to mind is Nanase...

It’s true that over the holidays, I had talked to Nanase repeatedly. However, it seems people have gotten the wrong impression.

“She’s just a junior.”

“I’m aware of that! I mean, the one who isn’t a junior is the one who is dating you!”

Indeed.

“And also! I heard that you and Satō-san were paired up for a treasure hunt!”

Damn, apparently Kei was aware of that as well.

“I didn’t tell you, but since it’s you, didn’t you know about it right away?”

Even Matsushita knew about it, as she and Sato had been walking around on a treasure hunt and there were many witnesses.

“Yes, that’s right, I knew right away, 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, but you realize what that would mean?”

“Fuuu~”

“By the way, what was the result of your pairing with Mori?”

“Do you really want to hear about it...?”

“No, thanks.”

The atmosphere suddenly worsened, so I decided not to go deeper into it. I could continue to listen to her complain like this, but since the topic of Satō has come up, I’m going to ask her about it.

“You told Satō about what you’re going to do, didn’t you?”

“Eh? Oh, yeah. I just wanted to tell Satō-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 café.”

“A café, huh? Do you remember anyone listening to you?”

“Nope, 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. Neither the first nor third year students are generally interested in the love stories of other grades.

Unless if the subject is me.

The third-year students, however, are the complete opposite, and it's no surprise that they're only interested if it's about me.

“Oh, but it was a little difficult to talk to them when a third-year girl came to sit near me.

As if answering a question, Kei recalled the time she had met Satō.

For Kei who was unaware of the situation, marking a third-year student was not something she would have expected.

“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 this back, the more troublesome the rest of the process will become.

“Well, when I say open up, I don’t mean to declare it in front of our classmates. It’s just going to spread naturally from your friends and they’ll know about it over time.”

I'm sure there'll be a reaction to this later, but it's not that big of a deal.

"But you see... Kiyotaka is very popular."

"Is that so?"

"Wow, that feeling that you don't seem to understand anything is super disgusting..."

"Then why don't you just not talk 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 she's saying, but there are contradictions.

"Isn't this a declaration to avoid unnecessary worries?"

As long as you and the person you like haven't explicitly stated your relationship, other people might still aim for you. 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 to this rule are those who are frightened of an unseen enemy.

"You may not know it yet, but there are even girls who are passionate about falling for and stealing away boys who they know have girlfriends."

"I see."

"Okay? I'll never allow you to cheat on me."

For the dependent Kei, there was no way she would 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."

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 love 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 love you."

Now that I knew no one was around, I could say it without hesitation or worry.

“.....nhmmm.”

“What’s with the creepy laugh?”

I expected her to be pleased or to reply in the same way, but I didn’t expect her to laugh at me.

“It’s kind of funny to think that you’re saying that while worrying about your surroundings.”

Apparently, Kei had the powers to 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 to say it again.

“I left when you said you were buying drinks, so I should probably get back.”

“Hey! Tell me you love me!”

“I just said that.”

“I want to hear it one more time!”

How selfish of me. No, it’s the same word, but the weight of the word changes so much.

“I love you.”

“pfft.”

“Hey.”

Kei tried to hold back his laughter, but in the end, she couldn’t hold it in and let out a broken giggle.

“Yeah, you’re the best. I’m never going to give you... to another girl.”

She says that like that isn’t the case right now, but her anxiety seems to be growing.

“Don’t you want me to say that 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.”

“Hold up! You don’t seem to care! I don’t like it!”

“Please say it.”

“Huh? I don’t know what to say~”

I held back the urge to retort and waited for Kei's response.

"I love you."

Kei replied with a short, slight laugh.

"Good night, Kiyotaka."

"Yeah, good night."

As I hung up the call, Kei's words reverberated in the back of my ear.

"Not bad, huh?"

Love is a really interesting thing.

That's what I thought at night.

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 could have rested enough, you should have used the fifth and sixth days for rest.”

“Only two days, right~? I was busy yesterday and today~. What’s with the treasure hunt bonus game? I want my bonus!”

“I understand how you feel, but we’re working people, Chie. We don’t get a long summer vacation like students.”

Chabashira, sitting to Hoshinomiya’s right, admonished.

“It’s not a big deal when you consider that the students had to work hard 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 but we don’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 on the counter table with her left hand and demanded a drink.

“You never change at all...”

Chabashira glares at Hoshinomiya and sighs in disgust.

“Is it because my goal is to always look young and beautiful?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Then what~?”

“No, don’t worry about it. It would be useless to explain.”

Mashima and Chabashira also ordered beers, and when they were all together, they tipped their glasses and toasted.

“However, this special exam has been strangely rough, hasn’t it? There were too many unplanned things.”

“There was the student’s big scandal, the watch malfunction that was obviously the result of the students doing as they pleased. And then there was the unexpected incident where only the third-year students were expelled.”

Taking a sip of the cocktail that was served, Hoshinomiya took a breath.

“After all, the problem is letting the students have too much freedom. It hasn’t been reported, but I’m sure there are things going on between boys and girls in places 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 no matter how much you try to stop her.”

“That’s only in your mind.”

He said crisply, and Hoshinomiya immediately demanded a second glass.

“We’ll be busy again once the summer break is over.”

“Ugh, I can’t take it anymore. I don’t want to be a cheaply paid teacher.”

“All you’ve been doing is complaining.”

“Of course, I am. I didn’t set up this meeting to not 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, though.”

Chabashira requested some nuts as a light snack.

“Anyway, I’m relieved that the second years didn’t lose this uninhabited island exam.”

“Although it was eerie that only the third year had an odd number of withdrawals.”

Sandwiched between Hoshinomiya and Chabashira, Mashima was quietly listening to the conversation. But just as he was about to move on to another topic, he placed his half-empty glass of beer on the table somewhat forcefully.

“The sophomores 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 class poll exam.

“I’d like to believe that there won’t be any more special exams with no way out like that, ever again.”

Even Chabashira, who usually treats her classmates with a cool-headedness, was not without heartache. She was not in a position to agree with the idea of forcing a student who had not made a mistake. She also agrees with Hoshinomiya on this point.

Seeing this, Chabashira looks into Mashima’s eyes as if peeking in.

“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 class poll isn’t something the school can do so easily in the first place.”

“That’s not a problem then. As long as it’s not a forced expulsion measure, my class will get through.”

“Oh dear? You’ve come to say a lot of things, haven’t you, Sae?”

Hoshinomiya poked Chabashira over Mashima’s back.

“Stop it!” When Chabashira grabbed her hand, somewhat angrily, Hoshinomiya turned her sharp eyes back on her.

“You don’t think you can move 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...”

Hoshinomiya, along with Chabashira, looked at Mashima as he choked on his words.

“The outline for the next special exam was announced the other day. It’s really 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 senior 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 the brain and disappeared.

What conversations did they have, what special exams did they take?

If asked to recall all of them immediately, most likely none of them would 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 students don’t leak the contents of the special exams during the school year, right?”

The Advanced Nurturing High School 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 conduct special exams for the purpose of information sharing, but basically we have a predetermined It’s a rotation. However, depending on how the year goes, they may bring in special exams that are further back than four years.”

“So, it’s not that uncommon for old special exams to be used, is it?”

“You’re correct. 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 showing their eagerness for the new special exam to begin.

“Maybe me and Sae have to fight each other~”

“You seem to be expecting that to happen. Do you think you can win if you fight with us?”

“That’s not true. But it’s better than fighting Ryūen-kun’s class or Sakayanagi-san?” With a grin, Hoshinomiya let out a mouthful of alcohol.

“Our class has grown a lot. Don’t expect it to be easy.”

“Heh~. I can’t believe Sae-chan would say something like that. I guess you’re getting bossy because there’s a special student named Ayanokōji-kun?”

“It’s true that Ayanokōji is also an excellent material. But there are many students in my class who show potential.”

“Are you sure? Isn’t Sae-chan relying on Ayanokōji-kun too much?”

“What the hell are you talking about, when did I rely on Ayanokōji?”

Even though they seemed to be casually catching each other’s words, the conversation between the two of them could be chilling for Mashima who was sitting in between them. 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.”

While expressing her remorse, Hoshinomiya gulped down the glass until it was empty.

“Your pace is getting fast.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine - I’m not so weak that I can be crushed easily.”

“No, you’re not. I’m saying that today... will affect tomorrow’s work.”

“Don’t worry, it won’t affect it.”

Hoshinomiya showed no signs of stopping drinking at all, and demanded a third glass.

“You’re something else. Let’s talk about it before you get too drunk. You might want to take a look at the outline for the next special exam.”

Mashima, pulling out 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 peer into the phone almost simultaneously.

And the moment they saw it, Chabashira gasped. The same goes for Hoshinomiya.

There was a special exam that Chabashira and Hoshinomiya had experienced when they were students.

The news was that it had been decided that it would be held at the beginning of the second semester.

“Even if it was eleven years ago... long ago, I’m sure you remember this special exam well.”

Chabashira was speechless as she looked over and over at the name of the special exam that was listed.

Hoshinomiya turned away from the phone and held the third glass that had been brought to her. She looked at his own reflection in it and smiled to herself.

“I never thought that this special exam would be held again, you know....”

Chabashira didn’t answer anything and just quietly looked down once.

“I thought that last year’s class poll... was a substitute for this one?”

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. They said 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. I can’t even make the written exam hard enough to get people to drop out. Sae-chan’s class will probably be the most in danger right~? So you’ve got a special exam that’s a big problem, huh?”

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 another trivial exam.”

“But if you make the wrong choice, it will turn into a difficult problem. Isn’t that right? Sae-chan?”

With her eyes closed, Chabashira didn’t answer either yes or no.

“Yes... you two were especially tormented by this special exam.”

“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 for me?”

Even though she was asked, Chabashira couldn’t speak, as if she couldn’t get her head straight.

“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 you challenge us with the intention of winning, there’s a great chance that you’ll walk down the same road as us.”

“I have a feeling this isn’t going to be good... I guess.”

Hoshinomiya muttered and asked the bartender for a fourth round of drinks.

“Well, I think my class is probably okay but kind of in a bad way, but what about Sae’s? Right now, they’re crawling up from the bottom, and if they can increase their class points here, they 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, stood up saying that before finishing her first cup.

“Just when I thought you were finally talking, you say you’re going home... I can’t believe this...”

“I’m sorry, but the two of you can discuss this.”

As Chabashira turned her back, Hoshinomiya’s expression, which had been stagnant, changed drastically.

“You know what?” Hoshinomiya slammed her glass down hard on the table. Then she stands up vigorously.

Not only Chabashira, but also Mashima were surprised by this action, and showed a slight agitation without being able to speak. It was fortunate that there were only three guests in the room.

“How long are you going to chase after your boring love?!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you know how old we are now? Twenty-nine? How many years ago did we compete in love...”

“Hey, you drank too much at once...”

“Shut up, Mashima-kun!”

The bartender, who was wiping glasses nearby, felt the need to leave immediately and excused himself to use the restroom.

“It was in the third-year of high school! We’ve been stuck in time for a long time, and yet we’ve grown older and older. Isn’t that stupid?”

Chabashira paused momentarily, but continued to walk out without saying a word. A silence flowed between Hoshinomiya and Mashima, who were left in this place.

“Oh my, she’s gone.” Seemingly out of sync, Hoshinomiya retrieved the drink left by Chabashira and sat back down.

“You’re a stubborn one too, Hoshinomiya.”

“Because it can’t be helped. It’s worse than anything else that this special exam is coming up.”

“Because it was this special exam that brought about the decisive thing in your relationship.”

“If Sae had chosen the right answer, we could have graduated in Class A, you know?”

“You’re still holding a grudge, aren’t you?”

“Of course, I’m holding a grudge. Everything failed and now I’m a teacher in this school. If it were true, I could have gone to a more glittering world.”

“After that exam, dormitory life became very difficult because you and Chabashira were in the same room.”

“You can’t live together after something like that. We would 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 my precious hair...?”

“No thanks.”

Ignoring the offered hair, he demanded a second drink from the returning bartender.

Seeing this, Hoshinomiya also urged for a fourth drink.

“You shouldn’t share a room,” she said. “It’s fine as long as things are going well, but if there’s trouble, the relationship will change drastically. When love and the future are involved, you know.”

Before Mashima knew it, Hoshinomiya was back to her usual hilarious expression.

“At the very least, all the second-year students stayed safe for the uninhabited island exam. The school is being 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 their sophomore year. Oh, I guess that 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, which is somewhat of a relief compared to what we did in the third semester of our junior year.”

“It’s definitely not my fault... It’s Sae-chan who’s at fault...”

“It depends on how you think. 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 glass.

“What’s up?”

“My class won’t make... it up to Class A.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You already know. I don’t feel like I can reach Sakayanagi’s class. But... but even if I did, I would never let Sae’s class reach Class A. It was a long-held dream of ours to graduate from Class A. But you already knew about this, didn’t you, Mashima-kun?”

“Isn’t that a different matter from this?”

“It’s not different. Absolutely not.”

“Besides, Ichinose’s class is excellent. There’s still a way to get to Class A. Ichinose’s class will probably get through the next special exam with ease.”

“That’s not good enough,” she said. “No matter how outrageous the future may be, you need to become a monster to graduate from Class A. Just like I tried to do.”

“Even with the dropouts, huh?”

“Even if it means dropping out of school.”

She made a pause.

“Hirata, Kushida, Horikita, Kōenji, Ayanokōji... no matter how many times you think about it, it’s too unfair.”

“As usual, the class is full of students who are considered problematic, but a strange sense of solidarity has developed. It’s as if their flaws are being eliminated one by one.”

“I hope the next special exam will destroy that.” Hoshinomiya said, resting her head on Mashima’s shoulder.

“I think I’ve gotten kind of badly drunk... I’d like to take a quick nap, Mashima-kun, in your 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 should 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 in trouble?”

“I’m not in trouble.”

“Eh, then at least take me back to my room~. And then we can go into to my room for a drink? 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.”

“You’re so strict~”

At the empty bar counter, Hoshinomiya quietly sipped her drink.

2

On the day of the drinking party that included the teachers complaints. The students, unaware of what was going on, went with their friends to make memories on the remaining luxury cruise ship.

However, I, Suzune Horikita, was going to use my few remaining days off for something completely different. In front of the entrance to the private pool, there is a counter set up for employees and receptionists. If the pool was open, you could 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 wait if it's full."

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 were timed every hour for each group and could be booked up to a few days in advance, all reservations were made on paper. I pretended to look for the day and time I wanted to make a reservation and paid attention to the handwriting of each name. This is a private pool for multiple people, but the representative of the group is supposed to fill out the form. I had actually planned to compare the data 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 the note I saw was really clean and beautiful. I flipped through the pages and checked everyone's handwriting, 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.

Class 1-B, Hayashi-kun, and Class 1-D Mochizuki-kun, I checked their handwriting yesterday after participating in yesterday's treasure hunt game, so they're excluded. Thankfully, the receptionist had a lot of work to do and wasn't paying attention to me as I looked at the list with my cell phone in hand. 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. I was about to get suspicious of the receptionist when someone unexpectedly called out to me from behind.

"Um, is it going to take much longer?"

"What? Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm having a little trouble picking 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 almost no students would come to the appointment, but... It will be difficult to keep him waiting while I try to add all these students to the exclusion list.

I decided 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." Said the male student who took the board from me.

He was tall, about the same height as Sudō-kun or a little shorter. I operated my cell phone and waited 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...”

The name of the representative, Ishigami Kyo. The number of members was 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, which was already open, I also found out that he was in first year Class A.

His handwriting was refined, and it was no question that he had been doing penmanship for years. However, handwriting is very prone to habits. It was not the beautiful-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 could have checked it in detail, but it was torn up and thrown away by Amasawa, and I was no match for her. There was no way to be sure that the letters in my memory and the ones written by Ishigami were really different.

As I stared at the letters, I felt a sensation similar to a Gestalt collapse.

I've been staring at 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 overlapped with the time you wrote about. So, I was wondering if I could ask you for some advice.”

Whatever the topic, I want a hint to see if he's the one involved with Ayanokōji's bounty.

“It's not that I can't compromise with you, but my friends just agreed on that specific time slot.”

I lifted the phone up to my face with the back side facing me. I had succeeded in calling him off at first, so I was able to connect with him. 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."

My heart rate quickens slightly as my name is called from behind me.

"You know my name...? Although I don't remember talking to you."

"I learned most of the names and faces of the academically advanced sophomores 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 one who stands out."

The discussion went smoothly without any trouble or suspicion on my part. I 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 decided to let him go.

"Can I ask you one question, Horikita-senpai? When you stopped me, you said that you thought you remembered the students with high academic ability, but you didn't recognize me, right?"

"Correct, what does that matter?"

I don't remember saying anything crazy, but...

"Are you sure you didn't remember me?" He confirms as if to make sure.

"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 have a high academic ability? If you and your friend were meeting at the time of your appointment, I'm sure it wouldn't take you a good amount of time to activate OAA and confirm it."

I couldn't react quickly enough to his sharp remark, which I hadn't anticipated. 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 his response to the situation to coincide with his relief at being able to finish it 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 quickly double-checked to confirm 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 he seemed to be hesitating to say the next word.

“What?”

“No. Let’s meet again, Horikita-senpai.”

“Right. See you.”

It didn’t turn out the way I thought it would, and Ishigami-kun turned away and walked away. I don’t think he’s black just from his handwriting, but he’s an oddly curious student. I think it’s better to position him as gray with a hint of white for now. 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 we didn’t get any clues, we’ll have to figure out what to do next.

“You look like you’re in a lot of trouble~ Horikita-san.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei, who was unusually present here, called out to me. Such a teacher seemed to be sitting with Kanzaki-kun from Class B, and our eyes met.

“Isn’t that right, I guess it’s the same as usual.”

“Yeah? Maybe so.”

What bothered me more was the fact that Hoshinomiya-sensei, the star-honored teacher, had her hands on the wall.

“Um, you’re not feeling well?”

“Ahh~ Don’t worry about this, it’s a disease specific to adults.”

Adult-specific illness? What 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.

“He’s Ishigami from first year Class A.”

Before I could answer, Kanzaki-kun, standing next to her, answered.

“Eh? First year? I mean, well, if you’re a second or third-year student, it’s only natural that I would know...” Hoshinomiya-sensei tilted her face curiously as if wondering about something.

“What’s wrong, sensei? 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 have looked at him wrong. I’m sorry, Horikita-san, but I want to go!” Wobbling on her feet, Hoshinomiya-sensei ran out and headed for the deck.

I followed her, wondering what was going on.

“Oh, no, no, no!”

I don’t know what’s going on, but she let out a painful cry as she walked out. Then, with a loud gulp, Hoshinomiya-sensei clamped her mouth shut and grabbed the deck railing.

“Not again...” Muttered Kanzaki next to me.

A strong sea breeze blew the glittering (though not really that pretty) vomit and objects away. Together with Kanzaki-kun, I just stared at them.

What on earth are we witnessing?

“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-mmmf!”

The least I can say is that I’m thankful the contents fell into the ocean...

“Sorry, I think I’ll go back to my room and sleep... Sorry, we were 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 too~ 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 like this.”

“You’ve seen this a few times?”

“I’ve seen something like that about three times during homeroom.”

I felt bad for Kanzaki-kun.

I waved lightly at him and turned to leave, having lost sight of Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“Horikita-san, what is your business with Ishigami?”

As soon as I turned around, Kanzaki-kun asked me an unexpected question.

“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 him beforehand.”

“Well, I had a lot of opportunities to have contact with first-year students during the special exams right after the second-year promotion.”

The best students of the first year, many of them were associated with Ryūen-kun and Sakayanagi-kun’s classes. It’s no surprise that Kanzaki-kun knew Ishigami-kun in the process, but...

I was a little surprised that Kanzaki-kun, who doesn’t usually talk to me, decided to pursue this topic.

“I bumped into him at a private pool reservation. That’s all.”

I explained the situation briefly, but Kanzaki-kun seemed a little unconvinced.

“By the way, do you think he’s a trustworthy junior in your eyes?”

I still don’t know how much of a clue I’m following, and how much Kanzaki-kun has witnessed. 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 an impressive A.”

In contrast, his physical abilities were not so good, and he received a D.

“But being able to study is not the same as trustworthiness.”

“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 must seem surprising that I’m inquiring about such a thing during vacations.

Kanzaki-kun seemed like he knew something, so I asked him, but let’s stop here.

“It’s okay, 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 the handwriting.

But he didn’t turn away from me and continued his words.

“It’s not like I don’t have the right to know if I can trust that guy or not.”

It’s a strange way of putting it, but it means that Kanzaki-kun knows something 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, Kanzaki-kun's expression at this time seemed different from the calm one he usually showed, and it stuck with me.

“Question? I wonder what it is.”

“I've been pondering about Horikita's class for a while now.”

“My class?”

“Among other things, I want to know what Ayanokōji is really capable of.”

“I have no way of answering that question, even if you were to ask me. Can you ask him directly?”

I was inwardly surprised that Ayanokōji-kun's name was mentioned here, but I tried to deflect the conversation that way.

“I don't think he's someone who would answer honestly if I 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 me out even a little, 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 still don't have the qualifications to proudly call myself a leader. At the very least, I'm not as good as Sakayanagi-san, Ryūen-kun, or Ichinose-san.

“Can't you just answer honestly? I'm sure he's a valuable asset to your class.”

“Just being alerted like I am, gives sense of the value of his existence, doesn't it?”

Regardless of whether he's capable or not, 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 I don't think the information I gave him was enough to warrant his own thoughts on Ishigami-kun, however...

“The student named Ishigami is excellent, compassionate, and can execute well. He is already recognized as the leader of the first year Class A, and his fellow students definitely have full confidence in him. Perhaps the best way to describe

him is to say that he is a man who has extracted the best parts of Ichinose and Sakayanagi.”

“That must be a very reliable thing for your companions.”

“But that’s only for allies, not for those who threaten him. He’ll probably be the type to bare his fangs without mercy.”

He seemed like a mild-mannered student to me, so it was hard to picture him with the materials I had.

“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 was speaking in front of me, stopped moving.

“You’re not supposed to care about an existence that doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“He told me, ‘I’ll see you again.’ I wonder if an indifferent person would leave such words to indicate and inspire a reunion.”

“Ishigami? No, he’s not the kind of man who says things like that easily. Did he really say that?”

“Unless I misheard him, 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.

“It’s true that the man is only interested in either his friends or his enemies. That means that you’re already classified as one of those two in the eyes of Ishigami.”

“Even if you say so, I don’t really understand.”

Today was the first time I had any 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.”

Inexplicably, there was something about Kanzaki’s story that I couldn’t understand. Kanzaki-kun was pondering for a while, but eventually he quietly muttered,

“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 or any other name came up, it would add depth to his statement. Or so I thought...

"The only first-year student I would be concerned about is Ishigami."

Kanzaki-kun replied, then turned away and started walking.

From behind me, I heard Ibuki call out.

"Are you on good terms with Kanzaki?"

"No. Not at all? We just happened to have something in common to talk about today, what's wrong?"

"I don't like the fact that he looks so smart, don't 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 shared similar handwriting to the handwriting we're looking for."

With that, I accessed OAA and brought up Ishigami-kun's profile.

First Year Class A Kyo Ishigami

Academic ability A (95)

Physical ability D (25)

Adaptability B+ (77)

Social Contribution D (31)

Overall ability B (61)

"And there was also something a little creepy about the way he talked and acted, like he was trying to understand me."

"Hmmm? 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 evaluation isn't a real reflection of his ability, then I might get suspicious all at once."

But there was no way to be sure of that at the moment.

"This Ishigami is white." Ibuki-san interjected, as if to deny the deduction.

"How can you be so sure?"

"The day before yesterday, I was vaguely watching the people playing from the floor overlooking the pool."

"By yourself? That must be lonely."

"What? Do you want me to stop talking?"

"Just kidding, go on."

“As I was saying... The guy stood out a bit because he was tall. He had a normal body with no upper or lower body workouts. I’m guessing the guy you’re looking for is as strong as Amasawa or Ayanokōji, right?”

“Maybe the reason you went to the pool was to look for someone who works out...?”

“Did you finally realize?” Shrugging his 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 you’re judging from an amateur’s perspective, 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 plausibility.

“That’s a good point for you to focus on.”

If the information from Ibuki-san is correct, then his physical ability is unmistakably around D. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily mean that he isn’t hiding other abilities but...

I think it’s safe to say that he’s completely white.

“Either way, the vacation days 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 don’t know if I want to be dismayed, but I don’t have any conclusive evidence right now.

We’ll just have to keep at it for a while.

3

It was the time when most of the students were heading for the ship's facilities. Ichika Amasawa, from first-year, Class A, was walking into a cabin where one of the first-year students was waiting.

"How are you going to excuse yourself if the guy in your room comes back at this time? I mean, normally I would say that, but since it's you, you're calculating he'll probably be gone for quite a while?"

The student smiled thinly and didn't answer to Amasawa who asked him that.

"Do you understand the situation now? It seems that Nanase, Horikita, and Ryūen are all looking for you with bloodshot eyes. Can you just leave it at this?"

"The plan is progressing in an interesting way."

"Then tell me the details of the plan... Takuya."

Yagami Takuya, who was part of the first year Class B, quietly got up from the bed.

"You don't learn, do you Ichika?"

Amasawa, who was alerted by the approaching Yagami, stared at his actions without blinking for a moment. This was because 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 an enemy to me."

He reached out his right arm and gently touched Amasawa's cheek.

"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, you can't act so carelessly."

"I might be recording this conversation."

"You can do whatever you want with it."

Yagami knew that recording this conversation would not be detrimental in any way. If Amasawa was completely on Ayanokōji's side, all she had to do was inform him about Yagami.

Even if it's not enough to believe that it's true, it's enough to put Yagami on maximum alert.

“The reason why I called you here is because I wanted to confirm your true intentions. Did you really want to protect Ayanokōji-senpai and repeatedly interfere with my plans?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about- oh my~”

Yagami laughed at Amasawa’s frightening display and parted her hair before moving his hands away.

“There are too many instances to point out, so let’s hear about the one point that forced you to change your plans. Why did you interfere with Kurachi and Kushida when I sent them towards Ayanokōji on the island?”

“I don’t have to explain, you know that, right? It’s because it’s a painful strategy for Ayanokōji-senpai. I didn’t want Kushida to film a scene where Nanase and Kurachi, two unrelated students, were involved. I’m sure my senpai would have been able to get away with it, but even so, it was inevitable that the footage would be disturbing.”

“Yeah. It’s true that he would have handled Nanase and Kurachi without difficulty. But if we had recorded the scene of him dealing with them, we could have used it as a bargaining chip. If Ayanokōji forcibly took the tablet from Kushida, he wouldn’t be able to unlock the password, 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 made for a more interesting performance in the end. I also got to know his personality, and his way of thinking. 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, you’d do a GPS search like Nanase did and go after Kurachi or Kushida.

After returning to the ship, there was no change in his behavior in that regard.

“As a result, Nanase-chan and Ryūen-senpai have stepped into the arena, right? It seems that they haven’t made contact yet, but there’s nothing that can be done by questioning Utomiya-kun in the future. But what about Horikita-senpai? It seems that they are trying to identify you by getting a hint from the paper you wrote. Is that why you relieved her of the list during the treasure hunt game?”

“I’m sure if I give her a few more hints, she’ll eventually get to me.”

There was no hint of impatience in Yagami, in fact, he seemed to be waiting for things to happen.

“You mean the paper was a deliberate act?”

“Of course, that was my doing, too. I hope she’ll do her best to reach me.”

Yagami has hinted at what might happen in the future. Even without asking about it directly, Amasawa understood it well.

“What’s beyond that? If she matches your handwriting, that information will also be heard by Ayanokōji-senpai.”

If that happens, Yagami will 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 false lies I’ve been spreading. Now that I’ve retreated, the need for it has diminished. There’s no point in beating up Ayanokōji in a prepared advantageous situation.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t care when he finds 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 Ayanokōji. 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, you 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 was the only place to return to.

“I have to completely crush him in a perfect way. I can catch up on my studies whenever I want.”

The smile on his face, a clumsy toothy grin, was nothing like his usual freshness.

“You’re really twisted in a different way from me, Takuya.” Amasawa continued to speak in disgust. “Utomiya-kun is also cute. He only cares about his friends, but he’s teaming up with you to protect Tsubaki-chan. I bet he’d be furious if he knew that you were the one who got his classmates expelled.”

“We’ve known from the start that he’s a clumsy and companionable person, and if he lets one classmate drop out, he’ll definitely want to stop it next time. The only way to encourage them to cooperate is to give them a common enemy, Hōsen. Thanks to you, I’ve also been able to see that you’re connected to the leader of Class 2-A, Sakayanagi.”

“Ah~, I remember she came to me. Arisu-senpai is interesting.”

“There’s a possibility that she’ll intervene in the fight between me and Ayanokōji in the future, so I have to think about how to deal with her.”

“Yes, yes, do as you please.”

Amasawa, who was tired of watching Yagami talk, sighed in boredom. 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 at risk of having his identity discovered.

“Are you satisfied with your speech? Can I go home now?”

“Before that, I wanted to call you out to confirm your intentions, Ichika.”

“Hmm~ what do you mean?”

Showing a childish smile, Yagami instantly grabbed both of Amasawa's forearms.

“Eh?!”

Amasawa, who had been on guard with the intention of avoiding him at all costs, wasn't caught off guard, but she simply wasn't able to react.

“It doesn't matter who it comes from. He'll find out about me soon enough, and that's when it'll really start.”

“So, you're going to play the waiting game?”

“We'll recognize each other as enemies, and then we'll compete to see who's really good.”

“Why don't you decide with your fist like a man, instead of trying to get around it? With your fighting ability, you should be able to compete with Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“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. It's not as if he's going to be able to use any other means, but now that he's not fully prepared, he can't even compete.

“Can't you understand that the fact that I'm doing this now means that this is the minimum amount of violence necessary?”

Amasawa smiles back at him, but she's already imagining what's going to 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 you, who knows about me, is only a hindrance to me no matter how I can put it. Have you noticed that?”

“Fufu... wait, are you being serious?”

With Yagami's looming face in front of her, Amasawa began to prepare herself but then...

The pressure was removed from her clenched forearm, and the restraints were released.

“What a surprise.”

He laughed gently, as he always did, and put his hand on the door behind Amasawa's back.

"Tight joke."

"Sorry, but really, I was going to crush you today. But I stopped."

"Wow, you were?"

At such a response, Amasawa drew herself back.

"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 you are going to remain calm. If you had made the decision to completely go with Ayanokōji, I would have ended it already."

"It's a little difficult to balance my adored senpai and the good will of my peers."

"Don't worry. The only thing I need to win against Ayanokoji is a head-to-head match. 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, he opened the door to the guest room and Yagami let Amasawa leave in a gentlemanly manner.

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, right? Chabashira-sensei.”

Chabashira doesn’t even turn to look at me.

“Don’t worry. The teacher’s nightly patrol is only until midnight.”

“That’s fine then. So, what kind of idea was it to call 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 sports 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 the fact that she called me here is all at the sole discretion of Chabashira. I don’t know what she was thinking, but she suddenly fell silent. It was no use standing by her side, so I made my way to the stage. Normally, this concert hall is a great place to listen to live music.

The large grand piano is still in place. Perhaps because the performance was held in this hall today, there was naturally no dust or dirt on it.

“Acting Director Tsukishiro, even risked his own career to get rid of you on the uninhabited island. Even if your father is powerful, his persistence is extraordinary.”

“I’m sure you’re right. The only thing I have to correct is that Tsukishiro has never been interested in the position of Director from the beginning. He only used the position to get rid of me.”

“So that’s how powerful your father is?”

Chabashira crossed her arms, completely unable to understand.

“Are you ready to talk about it?”

“Hmm?”

After a pause, Chabashira speaks up quietly.

“How do you analyze your own class?”

“How? What do you mean?”

“Do you think you have the strength 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.”

This is very unusual of Chabashira. This proves that the topic she wanted to discuss with me, was quite serious.

“Yes, I think we definitely have the highest potential out of the two years. However, that doesn’t mean that we can just leave the class like this and automatically move up to Class A. It will be quite difficult to catch up with Sakayanagi’s class, which is currently running alone in Class A.”

The teacher would know this school better than most.

“The class must become one, I believe that is the minimum requirement. And that includes you, Chabashira.”

When I say this, Chabashira-sensei looks at me with a surprised look.

“I’m... What kind of teacher do I look like to you?”

In the past, Chabashira has been rather cold-hearted towards her students. She had spent her days shunting them down and abandoning them.

“A teacher who knows she can’t win but refuses to give up. Isn’t that it, in a nutshell?”

“That’s harsh.”

“The fact that you tried to use me hasn’t changed at all.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

As long as she didn’t sincerely correct 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 your students who strongly desire to be in Class A.”

“Ayanokōji...”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to find the answer.”

“You said that the class needs to become one.”

“Yes.”

“That includes you, of course.”

“Of course, it does.”

Our gazes crossed each other's, and Chabashira gulped heavily.

"What if I told you that I would abandon my past?"

Through her eyes, I knew her resolve was strong. She knows to 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 give up on you."

"I see."

What will or will not change in Chabashira with these words?

That remains to be seen at the moment.

"When you're able to look forward, I'm sure the class will start to change for real."

"I guess so." Looking up at the high ceiling, Chabashira-sensei closed her eyes.

It seemed certain that something was casting a deep shadow over her mind. I should just leave it at that, but for some reason I feel a little differently at this time.

As a homeroom teacher Chabashira's reputation remains low. But when you look at her as a person, her reputation begins to change, albeit only slightly. She was much more fragile than I had expected, as if she had only grown up on the outside.

I took a seat in the chair and lifted the piano lid.

"What are you doing? Don't tell me you can play the piano?"

I did not answer the question at all, but ran my fingertips and began to play a tune.

When I finished playing, Chabashira-sensei applauded.

"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-sensei hurriedly stood up and turned around.

"Beethoven, Fur 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 it was only me and Chabashira-sensei who were watching the performance. However, it is forbidden for students to go out unintentionally during this time. You know that there are penalties awaiting you if you break the rules, don't you?"

Emerging from the darkness was a smiling Tsukishiro.



“Acting director Tsukishiro.”

Chabashira-sensei hurriedly tried to excuse herself, but Tsukishiro stopped her softly.

“Don’t worry. As of today, I have been dismissed as acting director. It has been decided that Director Sakayanagi will be reinstated, so I am now just an irrelevant ordinary person. I will not be reporting this to the school.”

“Can I really trust you?”

“There is no need to trust me. However, from the moment I showed up here, Ayanokōji-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. What’s the reason?”

“It’s simple. Even if you could punish me, it wouldn’t be enough to expel me. Our fight is to expel me. There’s no point in reporting this incident if you can’t achieve that here.

“Even if you knew that, you’d usually panic if you were seen at a scene you didn’t want to be seen. Do you think you have the courage of 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 a number of surveillance cameras. I wonder if they were constantly checking the corridors and keeping an eye on my room. They’ve got a lot of time on their hands it seems.

“If you’d prefer to leave your seat, I’ll leave mine.”

“No, this situation is fine as it is. It will be more inconvenient for you if I were to take you down with me. It’s better that you 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 want to talk, please do so as soon as possible.”

I knew it was a joke, so I urged Tsukishiro to speak quickly.

“It’s a bad idea, but I’m here to negotiate one last time. Do 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 interrupts him with a bit of anger.

“What do you mean, what do I intend to do?”

“You intervened in a special exam without permission, and tried to expel Ayanokōji. That alone is an act that would normally be unforgivable.”

“It’s the same for you, 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 the purpose of our meeting.

“It’s certainly not something to be praised. But I’m not going to tell him the details of the exam to gain an advantage.”

“That may be true in your mind, but I 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 this. You understand, don’t you?”

At this moment, the crime of Chabashira was to call out a student at this time when he was supposed to be in his room. 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.

It’s possible for Tsukishiro to persistently exploit this small gap.

“The one who will be troubled by the noise is not me, but you, Chabashira-sensei. And Ayanokoji-kun, too.”

If it became a fuss about lewdness with a teacher, it would be more than a warning.

It was a threat from Tsukishiro, “If you understand, then don’t interfere.”

“I understand...” Chabashira, who had lost ground, understood her position and stepped back.

“That’s fine.”

Without breaking his 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 I wouldn’t call an outrageous strategy. Manipulation of exams, violence, kidnapping, that’s about it. Perhaps if this man had his way, it would not have been as bad as it had been.

“I won’t let you expel me.”

“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 follow the rules of the school and don’t get expelled.”

“No matter how much you want to stay in this world, you certainly can’t fight it.”

We don't mention it, but the shadow of the White Room student still flickers around us.

"You are clever. And strong. So good that anyone who knows your abilities 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 sent me to you for this reason."

In other words, that man also foresaw the future where Tsukishiro would leave like this...?

"If you want to stay in school for even one day longer, think about it carefully."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Smiling thinly, Tsukishiro laughed once by himself, and I wondered what he was thinking.

"However, this school is surprisingly interesting. I'm sure it's the only school in the whole world that can hold 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.

"This time, this is goodbye, Ayanokōji-kun. Could you please shake my hand?"

This offered left hand didn't seem like a mere farewell greeting or anything like that.

When I held out my left hand in the same manner and shook it back, Tsukishiro nodded as if satisfied.

"Well then... I hope I'll see you again sooner or later."

With a final tap on my left shoulder with the palm of his right hand, Tsukishiro nipped back at his heels.

"Oh, and make sure you disperse within five minutes. If you break this deal, I'll report you."

Chabashira looked away until Tsukishiro was out of sight.

"It's no use worrying about the details, but how dare he ask 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. I'm not sure if he knows what that means or not.

"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 that it’s meaningful, but meaningless.

“I’ll go back first.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

Ignoring the warning here would only be a risk since Tsukishiro had already found me.

“I’m sorry, Ayanokōji. I gave the acting director a chance to take advantage of me just because I called you out so easily.”

“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 some words to 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 as long as the homeroom teachers of each class could lead the way.

Epilogue: When Hearts Touch

AFTER OUR HOLIDAY on the luxury cruise ship, we boarded a 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 spent so much time doing nothing and self-defeating that I could almost call myself lazy.

During that time, the number of members I hanged out with increased incomparably compared to last year.

Ayanokōji group members, Sudō, Ike, and other students that I was friends with in the early days, as well as Ishizaki, Hiyori, and even Ichinose class members beyond my class, I started to have small chats with them.

And then...

“Ah, the summer vacation ends today, huh?”

As I sat down on my bed, Kei looked up at the ceiling in a depressed manner and muttered to herself.

My girlfriend, Karuizawa Kei, and I had been having regular secret dates since the second semester to keep our relationship working. Today would be the last of these dates.

Although we shared a somewhat uncomfortable time, it would most likely not be uncomfortable at all in the future. If we were just a couple of friends who hadn't known each other for a while, we might have been in a hurry to exchange a few words, or felt somewhat misty-eyed. However, our interactions flowed like a calm river.

“You don't mind if I tell you about my relationship with you to others tomorrow, do you? I'm kind of nervous.”

“You don't have to force yourself. It doesn't matter that much to me if my popularity falls.”

“If something happens, you 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.”

With that timing, I place my own lips on her soft lips.

“Ki-Kiyotaka...”

“Are you surprised?”

“Uh, yeah I was surprised. Can’t you give me a little more advance notice or...?”

I don’t answer that question with words, but with actions.

I grab her shoulders gently and pull her close.

“...!”



A second kiss. The moment our lips touched, Kei's shoulders bounced upward a little, and I could feel her surprise.

When we parted our lips immediately, 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 we had only touched for about a second, but this time was different.

It was a long time, five or ten seconds.

Then she moved her lips little by little and repeated the kiss like a little bird pecking.

For Kei and I, the flow of time had come to a halt.

The second year of high school, the last day of summer vacation. My relationship with Kei has reached a new level. The first half of the year 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 lead to some 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 cherished.

While repeatedly checking the taste of her lips, my thoughts wandered to the future.

I know that when the season of parting approaches, this love affair will reach its final stage and Kei will have to face an extremely difficult ordeal.

It will be if Karuizawa Kei has the ability to stand alone and look forward when she is cut off from her host.

That is the most important thing in this story of love.

Postscript

Hi, I'm Kinugasa and I'm having a hard time because it's getting hotter and hotter. I've been dreading it because it's the harbinger of my least favorite season, but I'm lucky 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 hope there is 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 this was the summer vacation in volume 4.5 of the second year.

The summer vacation when I was a student was a long time ago, but... I've never once thought that I want to go back to the past and redo my school days. It's not that I had a bad time, and I enjoyed 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. Ayanokōji's relationship with Kei, and the changes in their classmates. The changes in the new first-year students and the third-year students like Miyabi Nagumo. I think that 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 too.

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? The real story starts here. Volume 5 will be the second act of the second-year chapter, 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 for each grade. I hope you enjoy the next volume as much as I will, 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. 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!

RoyalMTLs Afterword

Yo guys, it's Prince here. I hope you all enjoyed reading Y2V4.5 as much as I did. I think this was really a great volume, and may even be the best year two volume yet.

My favourite scene was the Ichinose rejection scene, because of Nagumo's interaction (I'm a huge Nagumo fan) with Ayanokōji. Besides that, this volume developed a lot of the characters and I'm excited to read/translate Y2V5!

Big shout out to my friend and proof-reader/editor BGS for helping me get this novel out faster! Thanks a ton chief.

Also shout out to Kinugasa (the author) for writing this novel in the first place, please do support him by buying one of the official copies of *Classroom of The Elite* somewhere down the line.

See you in four months guys!

Bookmark/Favourite our website to keep updated on *Classroom of The Elite* translations and join the discord!

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