



Haruki Kuou

Illustration by  
konomi

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# Liar, Liar

The Lying Transfer Student

Is Tested by His **Childhood Friend**



Sarasa Saionji





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Is Tested by His Childhood Friend





C O N T E N T S

# Liars & Lovers

The Lying Transfer Student  
Is Tested by His Childhood Friend



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**Tested by His Childhood Friend**

**Haruki Kuou**

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NEW YORK

## Copyright

# ***Liar, Liar*** ⑤

The Lying Transfer Student Is Tested by His Childhood Friend

**Haruki Kuou**

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by konomi

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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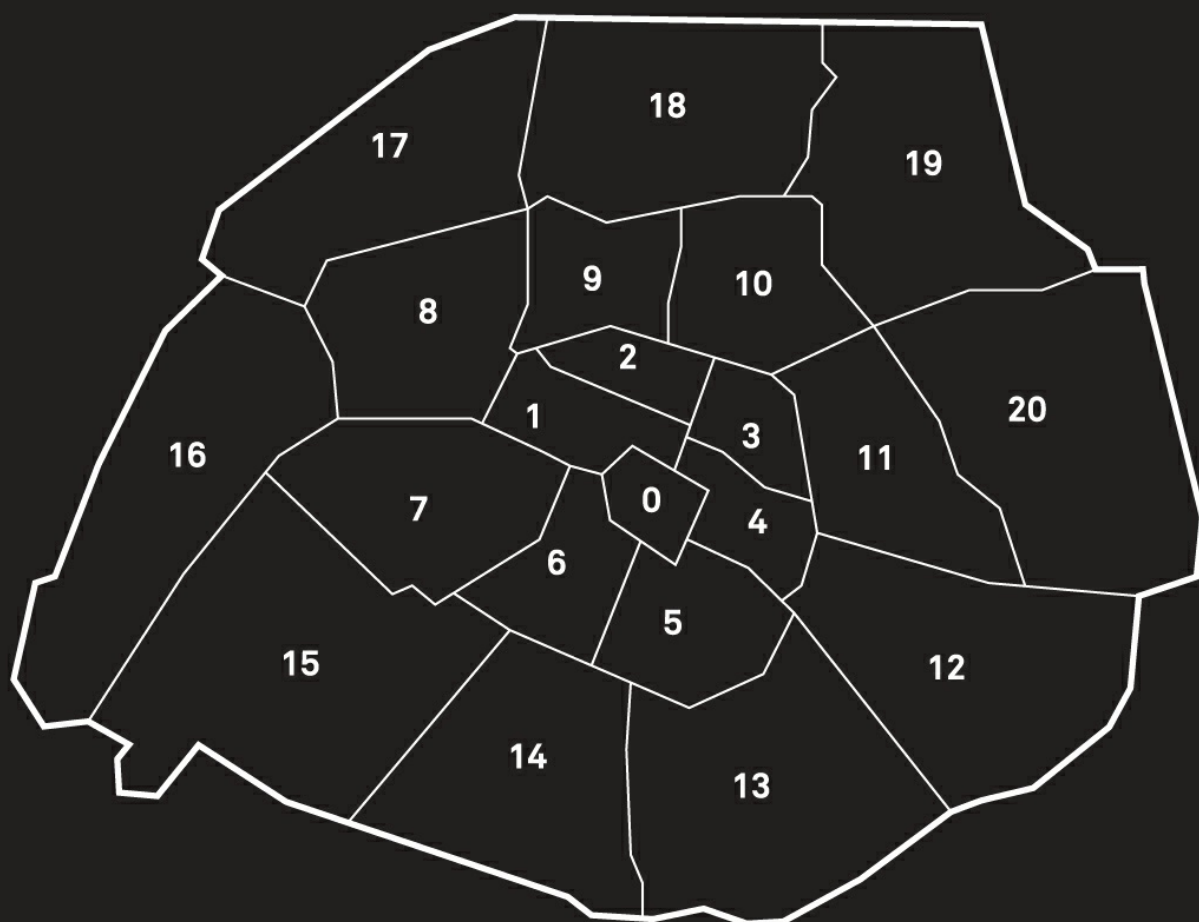
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## The Academy

The Academy (official name: Shiki Island) is a man-made island built at a point several hundred miles south-southeast of Tokyo Bay.

It is home to a single large city divided into twenty districts, with a total population of approximately one million (around half of which are students).

Touting itself as an institution for “educating true elites,” it has countless numbers of great achievers among its alumni, thanks in no small part to the “Games” it encourages students to wage against one another.



## Prologue

### Some Long-Ago Memory

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...I recall a memory that I can't fully remember any longer.

It's from back when I was in elementary school. There was this one house right by my place, and I'm pretty sure I was the only one who knew that a girl about my age lived there. I only knew because our neighborhood still had this paper newsletter, and I was responsible for distributing it to all the houses. That was the first time I met her.

To be honest with you, I can't remember anything specific about her looks... but at the very least, she was drop-dead pretty to me as a kid. I was desperate to say something, anything, to her as I passed the newsletter over. In time, she began to talk more and more with me. She'd even occasionally complain about her life to me, glumly muttering about not being able to get out of the house at all, even though she wasn't sick or anything.

That was about the time when I would take her out now and again. Something that I jokingly called "kidnapping" her. And, looking back, it was nothing but a couple of kids playfully resisting the rules. But still, to me, taking that kind of action meant something *special*. When she went off to the Academy, it gave me a sense of loss so profound that I could barely recover from it...and even now that I'm in high school, the memories of that time still occasionally flash through my mind.

So, yeah... I'm sure she must have been my first love.

# Chapter 1

## A Challenge from the Missing Girl

#

“Ah...nnnh...”

A sweet voice echoed across the mansion in the late afternoon, almost sounding as if its owner was trying to hold out against something.

“No, you can’t, Master. If you keep being so *rough*... Nh, ngggh...!”

The breathing, and the charmingly sweet voice, evoked a sort of animal passion in me. The now-familiar maid outfit rustled a bit every time the girl, Himeji, twisted her body, which made my heart race even faster.

“I know you don’t want me to...but can I go a little deeper? I think it’ll be all right if we just take it slow.”

“D-deeper...?” Himeji said, repeating my own words through panting breaths. Then her eyes filled with resolve, and she nodded at me, silvery hair dancing around her face. “All...right. If that’s what you want, Master, I will accept everything you have.”

“Thanks.”

Replying perfunctorily to the submissive Himeji, I changed position slightly. All at once, her body pressed tightly against mine through her clothes, the warmth of her body thrilling me as I resumed my careful, gentle motion. Certain sensations began to make themselves known within my body.

And then:

“Ah, ngh, wait, please, Master— *Ahhh...!*”

Suddenly, a much louder scream reached my ears as her slender body jerked up. Her clear blue eyes closed tightly for a moment, then slowly opened as the intense waves of emotion gradually calmed. Her whole body slumped, and she



remained silent for a while, trying to catch her breath—but then she opened her cherry-red lips and said...

“Well, that’s game over.”

...and pouted a bit as she tossed her game system away.

*“Phew...”*

We were on an excessively luxurious sofa in an excessively large living room. Himeji was sitting alongside me, and her silver hair shook as she let out a faint sigh.

“Didn’t I tell you, Master? You shouldn’t have rushed in with only a rough plan. I’m sure the right move there was to back off and take a different route.”

“Yeah, maybe. Hmm... I thought it’d work, too, as long as we were careful.”

I scratched my cheek with one finger, reflecting on Himeji’s quietly stated argument.

Hydrazia, the game Himeji and I were eagerly playing, was a brand-new title that had just come out the previous week. It’s a game firmly in the “die a lot and come back for more” genre, where hapless players must conquer dungeons filled with unfairly strong enemies and nefarious traps. The difficulty level’s got that perfect balance that makes you want to keep playing, and the game’s received high praise both in Japan and overseas. The one problem with games like these, though, is that they’re notorious time sinks. One dungeon raid takes only a few minutes at most, but then you keep trying over and over again, and before you realize it, it’s the next day.

Still, I’d decided to buy this game because of the particular moment of my life I currently found myself in. Today was May 17, the Tuesday after the May Interschool Competition, a major island-wide event. Most students would be back to regular school by now, but since the May Interschools were held during Event Week, a cross-Academy holiday, students who took part in the proceedings had been given the following week off instead.





It's only natural that they'd offer this perk to people like us, but we're still talking a whole week with nothing to do—and after competing (and excelling, if I may say so) in such a major event, my only real priority right now was to laze around as much as possible. So here I was, on the sofa with Himeji.

*...That said, I didn't expect Himeji to get so enthusiastic about this,* I thought as I shifted my gaze to the girl in the maid uniform next to me, staring at her screen and brooding to herself. It looked like she was studying the replay video of our previous run, but after a bit, she turned my way.

"Right here," she said calmly. "I think our approach through this cliff area is key. If we take the time to climb it, those enemies coming at us from behind will catch up. But if we use that trampoline, the cliff collapses from the impact of the landing, that giant eagle hauls us off on its back over to its nest, and the game's over. It looks like neither of those approaches is the right answer."

"Right, but is there anything else we can really try? ...Actually, wait a sec. Just now, wasn't there a little pause between when you were thrown into the eagle's nest and when the *game over* message appeared?"

"Was there? ...! You're right; there was. It's only for a second or so, but I think that's an intentional pause. Is the game still controllable for that period?"

"Yeah, probably. It's hidden by the eagle's body, but there was kind of a hole in the back of the nest, wasn't there? That's gotta connect to some other path... or maybe we could hide in that hole and wait for the eagle to go away."

"I see... Hee-hee! Quite observant of you, Master."

Himeji turned away from her screen and twisted her upper body a little to look at me as she offered her praise. The maid outfit pulled tight across her chest as her soft, sweet, feminine smell mercilessly tickled my nostrils.

"..."

One thing I've noticed is that when Himeji's occupied with a game, she gets so focused on controlling the action that she leaves herself completely defenseless. This is a pretty big sofa, but somewhere during our play session, she'd sidled up right next to me. She's also the type to lean one way or the other as she's controlling her in-game character, which means her upper arm

and thigh kept pressing against me. Those little yelps she lets out whenever she takes damage are pretty sexy, too... I dunno. It's just way too cute, in all sorts of different ways.

"...? What's the matter, Master?"

Himeji raised a curious eyebrow at me, noticing how dulled my reactions were now. Then, for some reason, she moved her body even closer, almost draping it over me as she looked right into my eyes. *I could really fall in love with her if I'm not careful, or just get sucked right into those clear blue eyes—*

"Uh... L-let's take a break! I think it's about time for one! ...Right?!"

I squeezed my eyes shut as I made the suggestion.

Shirayuki Himeji was an excellent cook.

I mean, I suppose it was only natural, in a sense. She was picked from an undoubtedly large pool of candidates to serve a Seven Star like me (whether that's all a lie or not), so I knew well in advance that she was skilled with household chores as well as cheating and Games. But even so, her talents were on a whole different level.

"These are so good..."

"I am honored by your praise, Master," she said as she placed two teacups on the low table in front of the sofa, a little smile on her face. Today's afternoon tea came with some bite-sized madeleines, their fresh-baked color and fragrant, buttery smell whetting my appetite like some kind of work of art. That sweetness spread across my mouth the moment I tried one, filling my whole body with a sense of euphoria. It went perfectly with the not-too-sweetened tea.

"Hee-hee! ...I'll have some as well, then," she half-whispered as she gently sat down next to me. The first few days after we met, she made a point of sitting diagonally across the table from me, rather than next to me...but now we were sharing a sofa. Seeing her open up that much made me feel a bit bashful, a bit happy...and it definitely got my heart racing.

After a while enjoying this moment—which felt like the embodiment of happiness—I reached for my screen, figuring it was time to start playing again.



Just then, the device in my pocket let out a brief rumble. I nodded at Himeji, who was already on standby, as I took it out and checked the message.

“Oh... A Game request?”

I found myself frowning at the screen as I read the sentence on it.

In order to explain what a Game request is, I'll first have to explain the unique rating system the Academy here runs on. Everybody attending a high school on this island is in possession of stars, very important items that represent your “rank” here. It's kind of like a visible caste system, and the higher your rank, the more authority you get.

The most traditional (and effective) way to earn stars is through these Games. The way this system works is that you can only challenge people ranked higher than you, and you both stake your stars and your pride against each other. Lose, and you'll give up a star; win, and you'll go up in rank, under the right conditions. In addition to your individual rank, there's also a “school ranking” that pits high schools against one another, so if you seize a star from another school's student in a Game, that directly contributes to improving your own school's status.

As the sole Seven Star student in the Academy, I was the perfect target for people from other wards. Beat me, and you'd instantly become a hero while your school shot up in the rankings. Receiving a Game request like this was thus no particular surprise; however...

“Weird... I thought I turned notifications off.”

I gave my screen a quizzical look. Thanks to the false story I was living under here, my name held sway from one end of the Academy to the other...which was fine and all, but if I accepted every single notification I got from strangers, my phone would be going off all day. That's why I turned almost all of them off, except for messages from friends and certain other exceptions. Yet my device was alerting me to something that had gotten past the filters.

“What do you think, Himeji?”

“Well...if the request isn't from someone like Rina or Ms. Akizuki, the first thing that comes to mind is that the challenger has more authority than you do.

But that shouldn't happen at all, normally. Perhaps the Game you're being challenged to is a little different from usual."

"Different?"

"Yes, Master. Your device has been configured to ignore most unnecessary notifications, but we can't have you accidentally missing important messages because of that. Therefore, we've set it up so messages that could potentially require your immediate attention are forwarded to you as is. When a Six Star player sends a Game request, for example, or you've been challenged to a Game in an unusual format. Um...could I look at that for a moment?"

"Hmm? Sure."

Himeji leaned over, looking at my device and showing me how to view the Game details. As we checked them out, we saw that the name of the game was simply DearScript, with the genre described as Gamebook, which didn't sound at all familiar to me.

"Gamebook...?" muttered Himeji when she saw this, brushing her silver hair back. "That is a new Game format for me as well. Um... Looking at the summary, it's not a standard 'player versus player' setup, but more of a 'gamemaster versus player' one, where the challenger sets up a situation for you and you're tasked with making it to the end. But in *that* format, no stars will change hands afterward, since the gamemaster's not on an even playing field with the player."

"No stars change hands...? That's a little concerning. The whole reason students from other wards would want to challenge me at all is so they can take a star from the island's top student. But here's someone challenging me to a special Game, independent of stars...? What's the point of that?"

"Hmm... Good question, Master. If someone wanted a chance to defeat you without risking any stars, this wouldn't be a bad way to get a lot of attention very quickly, at least. That, or perhaps Mr. Mikado Kurahashi—well, he's gone, but perhaps one of his associates is trying to gather some sort of data on you."

I fell silent at Himeji's conjecturing, which frankly sounded pretty out there to me.



Mikado Kurahashi was the former provost of the Twelfth Ward's Seijo School, as well as a member of the Board of Regents that ruled over the whole island. He had been trying hard to wrest stars from me ever since the Fourth Ward Challenge last month, ultimately interfering with the May Interschool Competition to get at me. He was found out and exiled from the island...but in those same May Interschools, we discovered that Toya Kirigaya, a Six Star student from the Seventh Ward's Shinra High School, was an associate of his (although he hadn't described it that way to me). This proved to us that Kurahashi wasn't a lone rogue figure but part of an organization—one so unnerved by my reign as a Seven Star that they wanted me out of the picture somehow.

We had taken down Kurahashi, but he was just a small piece of the puzzle. And yeah, I wouldn't put anything past them at this point.

“Well, let's take a look at the request anyway.”

Just thinking it over wouldn't get me anywhere, so I ran a finger along the terminal to project the DearScript screen. Once I did, the following text appeared in front of us:

*Special Game: DearScript*

*DearScript is a Game modeled after a traditional gamebook experience. Game participants will each receive an e-book app called DearScript on their devices. Each page of DearScript contains two elements—a text passage describing the current situation and an order that outlines what must be done to proceed. Fulfilling these orders will automatically advance you to the next page.*

*Victory Conditions: Reach the final page without dropping out partway. Players who achieve this will be granted a meeting with the gamemaster of DearScript.*

*Defeat Conditions: Players who find themselves in a situation in which one or more given orders are rendered impossible to complete will be kicked out of DearScript.*

*The order for page 0 is given below. Carrying out this order will be taken as agreement to participate in DearScript.*

““...?””

We both frowned at the text passage. In a way...I didn't really understand the overall rules of the game. I got the whole "text" and "orders" thing, but what was the point of it, really? I mean, I wouldn't pay any sort of penalty at all if I lost. It'd keep me from earning the reward for winning, but then, that reward doesn't exactly seem irresistible to me, either. What would meeting with the gamemaster do for me?

"Mm...?"

Himeji, who had been staring silently at the screen for a while, eventually shook her head a little.

"I do have some nagging questions about this...but it seems like a Game request you can safely ignore, Master. There's little to win, nothing to lose. It's probably nothing more than an attempt at publicity."

"Yeah, probably. I don't have any reason to take it. Let's just leave it be—hmm?"

Himeji tilted her head a bit as I suddenly ground to a halt.

"Hang on," I mumbled as I enlarged the projected screen in front of us. "I only noticed just now...but in addition to the Game details, there's one more message attached to this. See? Right here."

"Ah, yes, you're right... Do you want to read it? It might be someone trying to slip some hate mail to you in the form of a Game request."

"Nah, that's pretty far-fetched... Or is it?"

I was somewhat frightened by Himeji's suggestion. She wasn't joking, but she wasn't wholly serious, either—probably just worried about me—but either way, I decided to open the other attachment. It was a plain, unadorned text file, and I figured it was an addendum to DearScript or whatever. And I wasn't wrong about that, but...

““Huh...?””

The moment we read the message, Himeji and I let out simultaneous stunned gasps. It felt almost as if I'd been sucker punched. I brought my right hand to

my lips, trying to calm my nerves and having to consciously keep breathing, as I looked at the screen again.

*Hi, Hiroto! Boy, it's been years, huh?*

*Did you read the rules for DearScript, the Game I'm challenging you to? It's not the sort of straight-up combat Games you're usually playing, but I think it's gonna be pretty tricky to beat. Don't let your guard down, or you might find yourself in trouble!*

*So if you do make it to the last page, I'll let you meet me as a reward. After all, you've been looking for me this whole time, right? You came all the way to the Academy to see me, didn't you? ...That really makes me happy. Seriously, I'm over the moon!*

*But just because you came over here looking for me, it wouldn't be any fun if you tracked me down that easily, now would it? Maybe you'll get disillusioned and wind up not caring about me all of a sudden. And I sure don't want that! So try your best to look for me, Hiroto, because I really do want you to find me. I want you to beat DearScript and come see me.*

*That's a promise, okay?*

The message ended there. It wasn't an audio file, so I couldn't hear the person's voice or anything else like that. And because it was digital text, I couldn't see their handwriting, either. But the contents of the message clearly brought a person to mind.

"The person you're looking for, Master...?"

Himeji's voice was a mixture of confusion and agitation. But she was right.

About two months ago, I was scouted by the provost of the Eimei School and offered a stint here on the Academy. I immediately agreed, and I had good reason to: My childhood friend had come here many years ago (or at least I thought she did), and I wanted to find her. That was the whole reason I was staying here, living under all these huge lies after a couple of chance events let me beat a certain young lady at a Game. I even went across the ocean, all for a chance to see her again.

Still, my memories of her were now nearly ten years old. There were certain



fragments I could still recall vividly, but I didn't fully remember her name, or even what she looked like. I had nearly no way of finding her—really, my only chance was to become a Seven Star, granting me access to every piece of information the Academy had. But...

“...Now she's reaching out to me with a Game?” I whispered, my voice shaky.

I could sense my heart beating faster. That was the only real way to read this text, I thought—she knew I had come to the Academy, and all about my reasons for being here, which was why she'd reached out to me. If I wanted to meet her, she wrote, I'd have to overcome this Game first. I couldn't be completely sure the gamemaster of this DearScript game was the girl I was looking for, but only a scant few people knew that I had come to the Academy searching for someone, and those that knew wouldn't gain anything from trying to catfish me like this.

“If this is real...it's a good chance for me, right?”

My grip reflexively tightened around the device in my right hand.

“...”

Himeji, seeing my reaction up close, was about to say something with her usual monotone expression but instead fell into deep thought. She opened her mouth a bit to hesitantly say something, only to shake her head silently. Then she lifted her face up once more.

“It could be,” she said, her silver hair shifting with each movement. “I'm curious about what the order on page zero is...and either way, I'm no longer sure we should be ignoring this. But let's go visit that old vixen first, Master, just to eliminate any doubt about this being some elaborate prank.”

#

The next day, when Himeji and I visited the provost office in the Fourth Ward's Eimei School, we were greeted not by Natsume Ichinose, the young head of the school, but a girl much younger. She was a middle school student with dark hair, one eye black and the other crimson. Despite being inside a private school with a dress code, she wore a frilly gothic-Lolita dress without a single thread out of place. This was Tsumugi Shiina, and as always, she was lost in the world within her own mind.

“Oh! It’s you!”

She was stabbing at some kind of fruit-and-granola thing with a tiny spoon, but when Shiina saw me coming, she beamed, stood up off the sofa, and rushed over to me. She didn’t slow down at all before she slammed into me and hugged me around the waist, looking up with the most darling sparkling eyes.

“Wow, I haven’t seen you in a week! Did you come to hang with me, maybe?”

“Huh? No... Well, actually, maybe. I was kinda worried that you were all depressed and stuff.”

I felt a bit bashful under the completely trusting, loving stare of those oddly colored eyes, although I didn’t betray any of it. I mean, I really *had* been concerned about her. Shiina had, after all, thrown the May Interschools into complete chaos under her Chameleon persona, and as soon as the event was over, she had been taken into custody by the Board of Morality, which functions as the island’s police force.

She was released soon afterward, though, after it was found that she had been deceived by Kurahashi and was an involuntary accomplice to his crimes—but she was still the first person in Academy history to create a working fake student account, which made her a kind of ultimate problem child in most teachers’ minds. Her previous school was apparently reluctant to readmit her, and given her eagerness for the Academy and its Games, Shiina herself had been less than thrilled about the idea of returning to her parents over in mainland Japan. Then, just as everyone was in contact trying to work out some sort of compromise, the Eimei provost swooped in and agreed to accept her.

*Of course, the reasoning she gave was that Eimei’s about the only place where they could keep an eye on her, since she likes hanging out with me the most...*

That’s the provost for you. As strong, or as cunning, as ever, and never afraid to butt into a conversation.

So now Shiina was the responsibility of the Eimei School... That said, we’re talking about a girl who called herself an “elite shut-in” at one point. She didn’t hit it off too well with the provost, as expected...but with her total lack of adulting skills, there’s no telling what she’d do if we let her live by herself. Thus, she was now using a temporary dorm set up in a small room in the back of the

provost's office.

I stole a glance at the door leading to that room as I got our conversation back on track.

"I imagine you don't mind being right next to the provost's office or anything...but you had the Board of Morality interrogating you all last weekend, didn't you? Did that turn out okay?"

"Oh, yeah, that was no problem at all. It was kinda scary talking to strangers—not that I was scared. I mean, I was afraid of scaring them with my magical aura, so I had to keep my back turned to them when I answered their questions. But otherwise it was all good!"

"Wow. Um, great job, then. So you're going to be here for a while?"

"Yeah! They haven't really decided how to, um, deal with my situation quite yet, so I can't really go anywhere until then, they told me. So feel free to stop by and play with me whenever you want, Hiroto! I'd love to play another Game like ASTRAL again!"

"I could come visit you, sure, but I don't really think a redo of ASTRAL's gonna happen anytime soon. How many people do you think you got caught up in all that, huh?"

"Well, yeaah...but, you know, *you* play Games with people every day, don't you?"

"No. If I was at it *every* day, the stress would probably put me in the hospital."

"You don't? Ohhh... So what about today, then? What're you here to talk about?"

"Huh? ...Well, it's about a Game, but..."

"I *knew* it! Hee-hee-hee! You can't trick these magical eyes of mine, Hiroto. I wanna join you! I wanna join you!"

Shiina drilled her head into my chest, whining like a toddler begging for candy. She carried on like this for a little bit longer, only to erupt in a wide yawn. Before my eyes, I could see her eyelids grow heavier and heavier, and soon they were closed. Shiina went motionless as she still clung hard to me. It happened



in an instant, but by now I knew she wasn't just pretending to sleep.

"It was the same deal during ASTRAL. How'd she develop that knack for sleeping anywhere?"

"Heh-heh! Well, you can't blame her. She hasn't slept a wink since yesterday."

?!

I whirled around toward the voice behind me, internally taken aback. There, I saw the woman I'd come here to see—the provost, a wily smile on her face. Somehow, though, I didn't detect her usual ferocity.

"You're really loved, you know that, Shinohara? Though you hardly ever show up at all whenever *I'm* around. It makes me uncharacteristically jealous, you realize."

"Mm...nr, nrfff..."

"She acts *way* too young to be in junior high," the provost said, sounding exasperated even as she eagerly reached out and tousled Shiina's shiny hair. After a few moments of that, she let out a self-satisfied sigh and walked past me and Himeji into her office. She sat down on the sofa at the far end of the room, boldly crossing her legs.

"...Right. So what do you two want *this* time?"

After carting Shiina (already in a deep sleep) back to her room, I joined Himeji as we faced the provost across the table.

Natsume Ichinose was the current provost of the Eimei School—young, but still taking on the full responsibilities as the superintendent of the Fourth Ward. She was a dark-haired beauty who wore a business suit well—which sounds like a compliment, but her personality was vicious and sadistic. Her ultimate aim was to reign supreme over the Academy, and as a fake Seven Star, I was currently locked in a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" relationship with her.

I gave the provost a rundown of DearScript and asked her point-blank if this was a prank, but she replied with a teasing look in her eyes.

“Hee-hee... You two really are a pair of dummies, aren’t you? You actually think I’d pull a prank like this on you, Shinohara? Come on, that’s not even funny. I don’t have *that* much free time on my hands. I’ve been stuck on level 9 of Hydrasia for the past four hours.”

“That sounds pretty free to me,” I muttered, disgusted. I had always wondered when the provost actually did her job, if ever. “But anyway, you’re sure this wasn’t just a way for you to kill time or something, Provost?”

“Let me ask you this: Why do you think it’s me?”

“Um, well—”

“...You’re about the only candidate I can think of, Ms. Evil Vixen.”

Shirayuki Himeji cut me off, sounding more than a little miffed. She was sitting right next to me on the sofa, hands clasped and blue eyes staring right at the provost.

“As far as I know, there’s only a tiny number of people who know my master’s motivation for coming to this island. None of them, apart from you, are the type to play a prank like this.”

“Oh, really? You’re talking like you think *I’d* be capable of it.”





“That is exactly what I’m trying to say, Ms. Evil Vixen. Would you put your hand on your chest and swear otherwise?”

“Well, sure. It’s not as filled out as yours, but it feels nice enough. Or did *you* want to give it a feel?”

“I...I wasn’t *talking* about that,” Himeji quietly protested, cheeks blushing slightly.

The provost pushed down on her breasts a little with one hand and chuckled amusedly at Himeji’s reaction. “Heh-heh... Sorry, sorry, not trying to bully you. But *this* time, at least, I’m not lying at all, Shirayuki. All of this is news to me, from start to finish.”

“Is it...? Really?”

“Swear to God... But maybe you’d feel better if it *was* a prank, huh?”

“...! That’s...”

Himeji took a step forward, her voice shrill with agitation, but then stopped herself. “E-excuse me,” she said quietly, then returned to her seat with a downcast look. “Master, um...”

“Huh? Oh, right.”

That stare from her deep blue eyes brought me back to my senses. I turned toward the provost once again, straightening my posture a bit and deliberately clearing my throat.

“Ahem! Well, it’s clear that this special Game isn’t a prank on your part. But if that’s the case, there’s something pretty odd about it.”

I stopped talking and took my device out from my pocket. I looked down at it as my thumb worked away, opening and projecting the DearScript gamebook app. I had already told the provost about the rules and game setup, but apart from that, there was also this text under the *Orders* section of page 0.

*Order: Wage a Unique Star competition against Sarasa Saionji, the Six Star from Ohga.*

*Additional Information: From this point forward, three different “love*

*counseling” quests will be offered by DearScript. You and Sarasa Saionji will tackle these challenges and aim to achieve the victory conditions set for each quest. The player who completes two quests first will be the overall winner of the Unique Star competition and will be granted rights to the purple star lost by Tsugumi Shiina during ASTRAL.*

*Your DearScript will begin upon acceptance of this order.*

...A Unique Star competition.

When I’d first seen those words pop up, they’d seemed to come out of nowhere, but reading on, the intention was clear. Basically, we’d be fighting over who’d be awarded the Unique Star Shiina possessed. She had screwed up ASTRAL through a mix of cheating and natural talent, but since she had been acquitted of any wrongdoing, her Unique Star was still on the board, so to speak. It hadn’t been confiscated or invalidated by the authorities.

We’d be competing for it, I guess... But before that, I suppose I should explain the other person name-checked in that passage: Sarasa Saionji, the Empress and ever-victorious Six Star student from Ohga. She had been living on the outrageously untrue pretense that she was the daughter of Masamune Saionji, the most powerful person in the Academy—and now that her lie kind of got intertwined with mine, we have to work together to keep them going, even though we’re bitter rivals in public. That makes us coconspirators of sorts, and it’s the weirdest relationship I’ve ever been in.

In the latter half of ASTRAL, Saionji and I wound up in a duel with Shiina. We were playing Crossboard against each other, a Game within the Game, and for me, it was a sort of proxy battle against Mikado Kurahashi as well. It ended with Shiina’s defeat, and with that, she had lost her specially colored Unique Star... which is all well and good, but no winner had been crowned in that match yet, exactly. Shiina had been eliminated ahead of us, but neither me nor Saionji had satisfied the victory conditions for that Game. Thus, Shiina’s purple star was kept in escrow for now.

Usually, the Eimei and Ohga Schools would work out what to do with it between themselves...but these were Unique Stars, and only about a dozen were known to exist island-wide. It was a vital star for both of us—it’d get me

closer to becoming a true Seven Star, and it'd restore Saionji to her former glory as a Unique Star holder. Neither of us would be giving up our claim on it that easily, and apparently the provosts of both schools were still trying to flesh out some sort of agreement.

"So..."

After re-examining the situation in my mind, I quietly raised my face.

"I knew Eimei and Ohga were still arguing over what to do with the Unique Star," I mused, a finger to my lips. "But isn't it weird that someone on the outside knows about that? And we're being ordered to fight for that star...but that's not really something that should be based on my decision alone, is it? That's why I thought, you know, maybe you were involved, Provost."

Really, my gut feeling about all this was a mixture of doubt and distress. I mean, even if I wanted to join this DearScript thing, I'd need the permission of Eimei, Ohga, *and* Saionji herself. This was a serious issue involving the awarding of a Unique Star, and I really didn't think it'd go that easily.

"...Heh. This sure takes me back," said the provost out of nowhere, looking at the screen while half-listening to my words. Before I could react in any way, she folded her arms over her ample chest, taking a contemplative pose.

"DearScript—a unique Game where neither side wagers a star. Yes...that certainly *is* convenient."

"...Convenient?"

"Absolutely. Look at it like this, won't you? We need to decide whether you or the Empress is awarded the Unique Star, and the most natural way to do that is through a Game. That's the custom this whole island runs on. But, as I'm sure you know, Shinohara, it's absolutely impossible for Eimei to propose something like this. You're in a position where you're socially dead if you even lose once—pitting you against the Empress is literal suicide. There's just too much potential risk if you lost."

"Mmm... But, Ms. Evil Vixen, do you think Ohga would even *want* to stage a Game, much less Eimei?"

"Yeah, I doubt that, too. The Empress has just lost their Seven Star—if she

went down another rank *this* quickly, it'd be a huge blow to their reputation. It gives her a chance to regain the crown if she won, but in Ohga's eyes, Hiroto Shinohara really *is* a Seven Star—with three Uniques, no less. I don't think they'd try anything rash against a clearly superior foe like that."

"Ah, yes," nodded Himeji next to me, satisfied by Natsume's explanation. And while Saionji knew about my lies and didn't think I was even one iota superior to her, it was still clear that her side wanted to avoid a Game against me at all costs. Because of the complex interactions between our lies, both Saionji and I were doomed if either of us lost. The idea of us having a Game where one of us won and the other lost wasn't an option to begin with.

But...

"That's exactly *why* I said this proposal is so convenient for us. Having a regular Game would be suicidal, without a doubt, but with DearScript, being defeated doesn't cost any stars. It's fair, it's safe, and it'd be entertaining for the audience, too. Perfect in every way, pretty much."

"...Yeah, true," I muttered quietly in agreement. Since no stars would change hands between us, the whole "defeat = instant death" equation didn't apply... and that made a clash between me and Saionji seem a lot more realistic now. In a way, DearScript *was* pretty convenient for all sides involved.

Then, with a sudden "Just wait one moment," the provost got up off her seat. Her heels clacked as she returned to the desk on the other side of the room. Waking up her computer, she began typing something at high speed.

"I'm going to share what we know so far with the provost of Ohga. It's not a bad offer for them, either. I'm willing to bet they'll be on board—hmm?"

"...? What's wrong, Ms. Evil Vixen? That sounded like a very deliberate 'hmm?' there."

"You never go easy on me, do you, Shirayuki? ...Well, Ohga wasted no time sending a reply over. I guess the Empress is already taking action on this, too. They asked if they could have an online conference between you and her, with both provosts in attendance."

"...Huh? What do you mean, Saionji's already taking action?"



“I’m not sure yet, but I think I have a good idea of what’s up... Heh-heh! Now it’s starting to get interesting.”

A ferocious grin was on the provost’s face as she returned to the table, laptop in hand. She turned the screen around toward us. It was already running a video chat app, which showed two women visible in little windows. One was an elegant older lady, presumably the provost of Ohga, and the other a beautiful girl in a school uniform with luxuriant red hair and shining, strong-willed eyes of jade—Sarasa Saionji.

*“...Um? Are we on? Hello? Can you hear me, Shinohara?”*

There, on the screen, Saionji had her head tilted slightly as she reached out to me—or her device, I guess, to adjust the volume. I flashed my usual smile in response and spoke into the microphone.

*“...Hey, Saionji. Long time no see.”*

*“Oh, I can hear you. Hello to you, Shinohara...but do you think ‘Long time no see’ is an appropriate way to greet me? We were working together in ASTRAL just a few days ago.”*

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, when you put it like that. We were seeing each other daily at that event, so maybe that threw my senses off a little.”

*“Hmmm? Feeling lonely now that you’ve got nobody to pay attention to you?”*

“Nah, it’s more like a sense of relief that I don’t have to see you any longer.”

*“Well, I feel the exact same way... Hee-hee! But regardless.”*

Saionji placed her right hand on her hip—the classic Empress pose, brimming with confidence. Her lips seemed to hold just a hint of a smile as her ruby-red eyes looked at me.

*“So I guess you received a request for this DearScript game as well?”*

“Huh? ...Oh. This is about that, huh?”

A beat later, and it all dawned on me: Saionji hadn’t been named merely as my opponent in this Unique Star competition—she was an active participant as well. Within this gamebook format, we’d be scrambling against each other for the purple star. No wonder we were both taking action at the same time like

this.

Saionji smiled at me from the other side of the chat. *“This looks like a Game request from the person you’re looking for, doesn’t it? She even gave me a little greeting message, too. Hee-hee! Isn’t that nice she didn’t leave me out? Still, I’ve also been offered a rather tempting reward, so I’m not about to give up the Game that easily.”*

“Yeah, and I’m not gonna hand it over to you, either. So what’s the order on your page 0?”

*“To stage a Unique Star competition against Hiroto Shinohara, the Seven Star from Eimei. It’s a little unnerving, how this gamemaster seems to know what’s going on with us, but it certainly benefits both of us, don’t you think? If my Unique Star is kept in limbo like this for too long, people at Ohga will start to worry.”*

“I’ll bet. I’m sure a lot of folks at Eimei are interested as well. I really oughta make it clear soon that it’s *my* star.”

We were both trying to get each other riled up, but clearly Saionji and I were both eager to join in on this. When I’d first seen that command to stage a Unique Star competition, it hadn’t seemed at all real to me, but in the end, things got worked out pretty quickly between us.

*I don’t know how far the gamemaster planned this out, though...*

Either way, after coming this far, there was no reason at all to hesitate.

“Hah! Well, Saionji, let’s make it a clean competition, okay?”

*“Oh, I’m not so sure I can agree to that! I’m not the type to pull my punches. Especially against you.”*

The dauntless smiles remained on our faces the whole time as we glared at each other through the chat app. Then, as if swearing some kind of oath, we chose to accept the order on our devices at the exact same time.

And there you have it. That was how the Unique Star competition between Saionji and me officially began—and with it, the Game of DearScript, a special competition that would lead to my childhood friend.

#

The night after Saionji and I had our heated exchange, we gathered in my living room to check the next page that had been added to my DearScript app right after I agreed to the order on page 0. By *we*, I mean Himeji and one other person—Kagaya, the pretty but unkempt head of electronics at the Company, and a woman who constantly looked like she had just gotten out of bed. We were going to hold a strategy meeting as soon as we'd looked it over, so she was joining us from the beginning this time.

"Okay, ready for me to open it up?"

"Yes, Master. Go ahead."

At Himeji's nod, I nervously tapped the device with my finger. Then, with a little *fwip*, the DearScript app opened up the next page. Just like on the previous one, the first half of it was devoted to describing the current situation.

*Unique Star Competition – First Quest*

*Client: Yuuka Mano    Assigned to: Sarasa Saionji*

*Quest: "I want to confess my affections to Keiya Fujishiro, a Six Star from the Ohga School. To do that, I want to get a limited-edition plate from Café du Chocolat, which opens this week in the Third Ward."*

*Victory Conditions (Sarasa Saionji): Obtain the limited-edition plate at Café du Chocolat's grand opening event on May 23 and give it to the client.*

*Victory Conditions (Hiroto Shinohara): Prevent Sarasa Saionji from achieving her victory conditions.*

"...Ahh, I see. This is the format?"

Himeji looked up from the screen after gazing at it for a few moments.

"In DearScript, you're given a romance-related problem to assist with, and each player is given their own set of victory conditions. Whoever accomplishes theirs first wins the quest..."

"Yep, it sure looks that way. I guess the Empress is the main target of this quest, so Hiro's more like a blocker here? Eh-heh-heh! Those are the rules and all, but it sucks that you're playing the villain so soon, huh?"

“You’re right... I mean, why would you deliberately try to obstruct someone if this is about helping people with their relationships?”

I shrugged. Taken by itself, it felt to me like there was some malicious intent to this Game after all...but then again, the gamemaster of DearScript was making me play this crazy Game just to meet her, so maybe she was the type who sees creating these sorts of clashes as just adding spice to the proceedings.

Incidentally, it seemed like the quests shown by DearScript were based on the most recent relationship-advice requests posted on Meetia, an account on STOC. I looked into Meetia a little bit, and it’s a pretty famous account, almost like an urban legend sort of thing. The account owner barely replies to any of the posts, but when they do, they complete the request perfectly. I suppose whoever runs that account has some kind of connection with the DearScript gamemaster, and there was even a notice on my app stating that the clients had been informed of the Unique Star competition and agreed to be part of it.

“There’s a message from the client as well... Let’s take a look at it.”

I tapped on another section toward the bottom of the page. A new window opened up, showing a video file, which automatically began playing. It showed a girl I didn’t recognize wearing an Ohga School uniform. She wasn’t flashy looks-wise but at least cute enough that I was sure she was decently popular in her class.

The girl stared straight at the camera and began to speak softly.

*“Um... Is this on? I think I set it up like they told me to, but this is kind of a first for me, so... We’re good? Okay, great.”*

*“So... Ah-hem! My name is Yuuka Mano. I’m a second-year at the Ohga School, and I...I’m kind of in love with this guy. Keiya Fujishiro, another second-year... Do you know him? He’s a Six Star, which puts him pretty much in the upper class of Ohga. He’s got blond hair, a bunch of piercings...looks kind of rough, I guess? People call him the Final Weapon of Ohga.”*

*“So, like, I know I’m totally not a good match for him at all. I’m a Three Star, and I get the idea that Fujishiro isn’t really interested in having a girlfriend or whatever...but still, I at least wanna tell him how I feel. It’s kinda hard for me to drum up the courage, though.”*



*“So I looked around, and I found this thing someone posted called ‘The Magic of Café du Chocolat.’ And...like, I’m not talking about magic from games or fantasy novels or whatever, but, like, there’s this little chain of places called Café du Chocolat, and they’ve got this super high-end thing you can buy. It includes this special card that comes with a message on it...but it’s printed on this, like, metal plate, and if you bring that with you and tell the guy you like how you feel, he’s guaranteed to start dating you. At least that’s the story anyway. All the girls in class are going crazy about these message plates—like, supposedly, they go for nearly a hundred thousand yen if you wanna buy one secondhand.*

*“...So anyway! They’re opening up a Café du Chocolat here on the Academy, and during their grand-opening day, they’re running this thing where if you win a little contest, you’ll get this limited-edition message plate for free. So, like, I sent a message to Meetia about it...and I can’t believe I got a reply at the exact perfect timing... It really feels like fate, kinda, you know? I don’t believe in magic or whatever, but maybe this is the exact kind of push I need.*

*“So please...give me the courage to tell Fujishiro that I like him. ‘Cuz, like, I don’t have a hundred thousand yen, but I can definitely pay you back in some way later!”*

*“”“” ... ”””*

That was the end of the message.

Kagaya, arms folded over her usual tracksuit, sullenly nodded. “Hmm... She’s cute, too. You’re gonna be a total villain, Hiro.”

“Oh, lay off. And not necessarily, you know. My only job here is to make sure Saionji doesn’t receive that plate. I could always grab it and give it to Mano instead.”

“Yes,” said Himeji as she brushed her hair back, “fair enough. That’d be the most ideal resolution, I suppose.” She quietly raised her clear blue eyes. “This ‘Magic of Café du Chocolat’ thing is a pretty well-known story. It gets referenced a lot in magazines and so on. Apparently, there’s this very well-known cheesecake—it’s actually named the Legendary Cheesecake—and it’s sold only for limited periods at a time. They put it in a box with a silver plate with a message engraved on it: ‘May this day never be forgotten by either of

you,' kind of like it's wishing the customer good luck in love."

"Wow. It's that famous, huh? Um, so what about this Keiya Fujishiro guy?"

"He's famous in his own way, too. Among the second-years in the Ohga School, he's reputedly second only to the Empress in talent. People call him the 'Ace Behind the Curtain,' though, because he almost never shows up to any public events. He's part of the highest-achieving class for his year at Ohga, and he reached Five Star in just his first year at the school. His sixth star was awarded early this school year."

"Okay."

"The 'Final Weapon of Ohga' nickname stems from his coercive, lone-wolf demeanor, but he plays his Games with efficient, dazzling style. He's sharp-witted, with almost a sixth sense for guessing his opponents' moves, and he uses his athletic talents to silence foes in one fell swoop. He's smart, too, but in Games involving physical skills, he's among the best in the Academy."

"...Whoa. Scary."

I couldn't help but be honest. This was crazier than I had anticipated. We were focused on Mano's love issues this time, so I'd only be tangentially involved with him, but if I ever came up against him in a Game, I could just tell I was going to have a hard time.

Himeji nodded in agreement. "That's right," she said in her calm, clear voice. "He almost never shows up in team events like ASTRAL, in part because he's feared by both foes and allies alike. But in individual off-campus battles, he almost always puts up good results. The strong, solitary type, if you will. Apparently, he doesn't hang out much with other people, either, and he's always alone."

"Wow... Now I'm amazed this Mano girl wants to try netting him. I get that he's strong and acts cool, but it'd take a lot of courage to approach him. I mean, I'm sure she must see *something* in him..."

I shook my head. This conversation was starting to get derailed.

"Anyway, it's pretty clear what we need to do, at least. I'll just keep Saionji from getting that limited-edition thing at the grand opening next week. I don't

even need to be there per se, but there's no point in missing it, either."

"That's true, Master. Looking at the description, all Ms. Sarasa needs to do to complete the quest is give Mano the plate, so our safest bet is you procuring it for yourself first."

"Yeah. But what worries me is..."

I stopped talking for a moment as I scrolled down to the bottom of the page on my device. Our orders were printed there, along with some related information—which was fine and all, but when you took a closer look:

"Here are the rules for Rainbow Pâtisserie, the grand-opening event for Café du Chocolat... How did she get her hands on these? The café hasn't even released them yet on their official site."

That was the thing; page 1 of DearScript contained not only information about Yuuka Mano's request but also detailed rules for an exclusive event. I didn't give it much thought at first, but now that I'd gotten curious, I went on Café du Chocolat's website, where all it said was that the rules would be released on opening-day morning. DearScript was giving us info that hadn't even been released to the public yet.

Kagaya, staring intently at the tablet in her own hands, groaned. "I just poked around a bit, but I don't think even I could break into the Café du Chocolat server and extract the rules from it. The gamemaster having this kind of data is clearly illegal...but if she didn't steal it, does she maybe have high enough access rights to get it?"

"That or she's just involved with the event, I suppose. Maybe she's a test player, or maybe she was the one who made up the rules in the first place. Either way, this is no mere high schooler we're dealing with."

"..."

Their speculation silenced me. They were right... This was the same gamemaster who'd convinced me and Saionji to agree to this Unique Star competition with barely an afterthought—clearly she was no fool. Between that and the nature of this gamebook, doling out one order after the other, it was starting to feel like she was making us dance on the palm of her hand. But there

was no backing out of it now.

“...Well, if we know the rules, we can formulate a strategy. How about we get that meeting started? I get the feeling this order is gonna be pretty tricky.”

I glanced down at my device’s screen as I spoke, and my eyes settled on the first order written on the bottom of the page.

*Order: During the Rainbow Pâtisserie event, your identity as Hiroto Shinohara must not be revealed to anyone besides people involved with DearScript.*

#

It was now well into the night.

Today’s strategy meeting had ended on a high note. Unlike the 4WC and May Interschool Competition, DearScript had given us a pretty reasonable amount of time to work with. It was kind of a unique Game in that sense, and it also kept me from getting challenged to Games by other people in the meantime, allowing us to carefully tackle each quest as we received them.

*We know all the rules. Now we need to work out which Abilities I should choose, and how we’re gonna win this.*

I sat on the edge of my bed, yawning a bit as I pondered over this... The first part of this Unique Star competition involved a request to help Yuuka Mano out with her love life. It was an interesting challenge, to be sure, but it would also be a key moment within the Game, considering it was a best-of-three competition. Win, and I’d be just one step away from taking the whole thing—and since I was fighting Saionji here, I really wanted to score a victory.

*We haven’t really had a proper one-on-one Game since that very first one, have we—hmm?*

My unresolved thoughts were interrupted by a muffled knock on the door. Looking at the device in my hand, I saw it was already past midnight. Kagaya had long since gone home and was probably lying on her couch and watching videos or something by now, so there was only really one person this visitor could be.

“...Himeji? What’s up?”



“Ah...um, Master, do you mind if I come in?”

“No, of course not,” I replied immediately.

“Excuse me, then,” she politely whispered as she pushed the door open with a click and entered my room. She must have already bathed, because she was dressed not in her maid uniform, but a pair of thin pajamas with a cardigan over the top. It was rare to see Himeji in something this casual in the first place, but the pajamas in particular were pretty mind-blowing to me. The way they accentuated her chest left me totally defenseless.

“...? Master?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Himeji raised an eyebrow, seeing me suddenly freeze to the spot, but I waved both hands at her, laughing it off. She nodded, apparently believing me.

“All right. Um...so, Master...”

“Yes?”

“...Umm...can I sit next to you for a bit?”

“Huh?”

There was something furtive in her voice as she looked up at me, which caught me off guard, but I found a way to nod my consent.

“Thank you very much,” she said, bowing her head as she approached. She padded her way to the bed, bare feet against the floor, then spun around and settled down next to me.

“...I’m very sorry, Master, for visiting your room at this hour.”

“N-no, that’s fine...”

I couldn’t read what she was here for, and it was starting to make me feel flustered. What was it? Had something happened? I tried to think normally, but my heartbeat was too loud to concentrate. Whenever she adjusted her seating position, even a little, I caught a whiff of a sweet, shampoo-like scent, and all the exposed flesh compared to her maid uniform made it difficult to figure out where to look.

But Himeji, oblivious to my inner thoughts, brushed her silvery hair back.

“To tell the truth, Master, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

“There is?”

“Yes. It’s about this Game, DearScript. The gamemaster is likely your childhood friend, the person you moved from Japan to the Academy to search for. Someone very important to you.”

“...? Yeah, most likely.”

“And she’s a *woman*, too.”

“...That, umm, how should I put this...?”

For some reason, Himeji was quietly, carefully choosing her words, placing the strongest emphasis on that part. Shifting position slightly, she brought her face closer to mine, her clear blue eyes peering into my own.

“But...that’s all right... Or, no, it’s not all right, but I have enough good sense to say it is. Just tell me...one thing, please. I imagine your goal here was to reunite with this person. So if you win DearScript and achieve that goal...”

After saying that much, Himeji suddenly found herself at a loss for words. She looked anxious, like something was tormenting her. Her lips shook for a bit, but she never did finish that sentence.

“...No,” she said with a faint smile. “Actually, never mind.”

#

“Hmmm hm hmm. ♪”

The girl was happily humming to herself as she stared at her device.

Here was DearScript, a special Game for an important man in her life. Her offer had been accepted, and the first quest was already underway. The difficulty level of this order was pretty high, she thought, so she was sure he was worrying himself sick over it by now.

“Maybe that was a little mean of me...but that’s fine. I know Hiroto will find a way to beat it.”

There was a note of confidence in her whispered voice. Hiroto Shinohara, the

man she loved, would have no problem overcoming something like this. Besides, it had been so long since they last saw each other that he could at least show off a bit for her while he was at it.

“If I’m gonna do this, I can’t go easy on him. There’s no point in setting the bar too low. The bigger the obstacles, the better.”

Still in a good mood, she turned off her device. From here on out, there’d be no reason for her to take any more unnecessary steps. If she just waited, he’d come right to her.

So...

“...Try your hardest to find me, all right?”

Her face filled with an angelic smile that would make anyone fall in love with her.

## Chapter 2

### DearScript Begins

#

Monday, May 23.

The new Café du Chocolat, opening in the Academy's Third Ward, was already a big hit, with a record-breaking line having formed since early in the morning. The real rush, however, wouldn't be until after four in the afternoon, when most schools let out for the day. *#Iwenttocafeduchocolat* was easily the top hashtag of the day on STOC, with the girls who had already made their way in eagerly uploading photos from their visit. The Rainbow Pâtisserie event, commemorating the grand opening, wouldn't be until five p.m. This was a pseudo-Game that would also be used to promote the café (admittedly, that was probably the main point of it), which was also slated to be broadcast on Island Tube live with a short delay.

"Hmm..."

After reciting that brief recap to myself, I returned my thoughts to the present moment. The time was 4:37 PM, and I had just submitted my entry form for the event. Now I was waiting in one corner of the building with the other competitors—of which there were less than a hundred, all high school students. The line in front of the store had several hundred people in it, but I guess they were all just customers looking for sweet treats.

*But the more I look around, the more I realize it's all girls here...*

It was hard to ignore. Café du Chocolat was a pretty classy joint, and as you'd expect from a place like this, women made up at least 90 percent of the clientele. Standing there all alone, in such a female-oriented space, I stuck out no matter what I did...but even then, I still wasn't attracting as much attention as I normally did.

*“...You’re looking good so far, Master.”*

The familiar voice of Himeji jumped out from my earpiece. She was monitoring the situation outside the café.

*“I must hand it to you, Ms. Kagaya,” she calmly continued. “When it comes to crafting outfits that make Master look like a completely average high school teen, there’s nobody better.”*

*“Hee-hee! Right? You’d have to know Hiro pretty intimately to realize who he is right now. Ain’t I great? ...Wait, you did mean that as a compliment, right?”*

*“Of course. Naturally, I recognized him as soon as I saw him, though.”*

*“Hey! Quit acting like his lover! Hey, Hiro, don’t forget you’ve got me, too!”*

*“ ...”*

They were having a lot of fun over the radio, but I figured I’d let them enjoy themselves for now. Just as Himeji had said, Kagaya had given me a disguise. At that moment, I was currently wearing a pair of dark-rimmed glasses (non-prescription lenses) and a plain hoodie. She had also teased my bangs a little bit. All I really had to do was put my hands in my pockets and hunch down a little, and the “sullen male teen you’d see anywhere” look was complete.

The reason I was doing this, of course, was to carry out the order I’d been given—a rather tough one: *During the Rainbow Pâtisserie event, your identity as Hiroto Shinohara must not be revealed to anyone besides people involved with DearScript.* I could always have chosen not to participate in this Game in the first place, but that had seemed far too risky, so here we were.

*It’s not an easy handicap...but if I fail to complete even one of these orders, I’m out of DearScript right then and there. The gamemaster’s orders are absolute.*

As I thought to myself, I leaned against a wall with a large, fancy logo printed on it and hid my face under the hood... For the time being, at least, that order wasn’t looking like a problem. Now I just had to win the event and bring home that cheesecake.

*“At least there are some nice perks to this job, huh? I’ve always wanted to try*



*Café du Chocolat's Legendary Cheesecake...but I never thought it'd be Hiro bringing it back for me... Drool..."*

*"Hmph. Were you going to have some, too, Ms. Kagaya? Because the first bite is for my master, and the second bite's for me. If there's any left after that, I suppose we might share it with you."*

*Man, all this pressure...*

My cheek twitched a bit as the two of them happily chatted on. But then...

"Hmm...?"

Someone went to walk past me as I stood against the wall...then stopped in their tracks. With my hood down low, I could only see a pair of knee-high socks, but for some reason, this person wasn't moving from in front of me. I had a bad feeling about this. I slowly looked up—and I guess I should have known—but standing there was none other than Sarasa Saionji. Her luxurious red hair swayed in the air as her well-formed eyebrows arched downward and her ruby eyes stared right at me.

"You..."

*Uh... Sh-she spotted me? Really?*

"...? What's up, Sarasa?"

My heart was racing...but just as Sarasa opened her lips, another girl appeared from behind her, eyebrows raised. This was Momo Asuka, a first-year from Ohga who'd also participated in ASTRAL. Her eyes darted between me and Saionji, a quizzical look on her face.

"Um, is he a friend of yours? We really need to get our entries in before it's too late..."

"Oh... Right, yeah."

Saionji nodded briefly to the hesitant Asuka and turned her ruby eyes away. I internally breathed a sigh of relief...but that relief didn't last long because a sudden smile spread across Saionji's face.

"Sorry, Momo, can you go on ahead? I have some business to attend to."

“...? All right! But don’t be late, okay?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

Asuka ran off, cheerfully waving a hand. Saionji saw her go, and I secretly sighed under my hood. She waved at Asuka for a little bit longer, then turned back toward me, a bold smile on her face.

“All right. Mind accompanying me for a bit, *Shinohara*?”

I couldn’t afford to stand out too much, so I decided to go with her for now.

We were in a kind of break room next to the second-floor escalator, at the far end of the building the Café du Chocolat was in. There were benches, vending machines, and, if you turned the corner where the potted plant was, a bathroom. There were restrooms inside the café as well, though, so few people bothered coming all the way over here. It was the perfect place for a secret meeting like this.

“...So? Why are you disguising yourself, Shinohara?”

She accentuated her point by flicking my hood up with both hands, then crossing her arms and glaring at me like usual. I turned off my earpiece, since I didn’t need Kagaya eavesdropping on us, then shrugged back at Saionji.

“Why? Because it’s in my orders, of course. I’m out of the Game if anybody besides people involved with this DearScript stuff identifies me.”

“Ah. Yeah, I thought it must be something like that,” she declared with a victorious smile. I couldn’t help but frown, but since she was a fellow DearScript player, I wasn’t breaking the order. There was also little to no chance of Saionji tipping off someone else about me.

After all...

“...You know what the deal is, right, Saionji? If you break even one of the orders in a quest, you’re kicked out of DearScript right then and there, and the whole Unique Star competition goes down the toilet. We won’t even be able to complete two quests, so neither of us will win that purple star.”

“I know *that* much. You don’t have to remind me. It’d be just like before—your opponent loses, but *you* don’t win, either. We’d be right back to square

one, and not just that, either. Like I said yesterday, *someone* needs to be in possession of that purple star.”

“That’s certainly true, yeah. That star’s not easy to give up for either of us... but it’d be the biggest waste of all if *neither* of us had it, like how things are now.”

“Exactly. So...I know we’re coconspirators here, Shinohara, but let’s play this fair and square, all right? I want to get a Unique Star again, and you want to get closer to being a real Seven Star. And no matter who wins, no hard feelings, okay?”

“Sure, I’m fine with that.”

After confirming each other’s stances on the matter, Saionji and I locked eyes, competitive smirks on both of our faces. Our business was now settled, and with the event about to start, it was time to return to the waiting area.

But then...

“Hmm hm hmmm. ♪”

Suddenly, a woman approached us, humming a tune. She looked old enough to be in college, and she must have wanted something from the vending machines, because she had her device in one hand as she casually walked up to them. Saionji and I hadn’t expected anyone to be here right now, and we both froze up for a moment...not to mention the fact that my hood was off, so my disguise was incomplete. Me and Saionji being involved in a special Game was already public knowledge, so a meeting like this could be explained away well enough, but if I failed my order, I’d be sunk.

“...!”

The moment I had that thought, I reached out, grabbed Saionji’s wrist with all my strength, and hid behind the large potted plant in the break room, holding her in my arms. Covering her mouth with my free left hand, I pulled her close to me, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

“...?! Mm, mmh! Mmmmh!”

Being swept off her feet like this with no warning naturally made Saionji blush

from ear to ear, and her legs thrashed against me...but that ended in an instant. Realizing what my motivations were, she relaxed, leaning her body against mine. We stayed in this embrace for about a minute and a half, neither of us saying a word.

*“...Phaaah!”*

The woman at the vending machine didn't take any notice of us as she bought some kind of drink and walked off. Making sure the coast was clear, we gently let go of each other. But even afterward, I still felt like there was this warmth all over my body. I peeked at Saionji; she was hugging herself, panting a little—very provocative—and after I'd dragged her into the corner like that, her clothes were revealing some areas they usually didn't...

*“...S-Stop staring at me like that...you idiot!”*

Her shame must have reached its peak, so I averted my eyes as fast as possible.

#

It wasn't long after leaving Saionji that five o'clock rolled around.

*“All right, everyone, the time has come! Café du Chocolat has just opened their first Academy location, and it's time to celebrate with a special grand-opening event: Rainbow Pâtisserie!”*

We had all been gathered in a section of the café, and before us a young girl wearing the company uniform—a chic but cute apron, done up in black and pink—began the show, her gloved hands around the microphone.

This event took the form of a pseudo-Game, but since it was set in a café and baked goods were the only prizes on offer, it seemed pretty informal. I looked around, and once again, nine out of ten participants were girls, most of them joining in with their friend groups.

As I took in the crowd, the emcee smiled and continued.

*“First of all, I'd like to give a brief rundown of the rules! I'm sure some of you have already read them on our site, but this'll be a chance for you to review them, so listen carefully!”*

Her voice carried well as she tapped on a device at a nearby table. The next moment, a large projected screen appeared behind her, with the words *THE GAME* appearing on it in a fancy font.

Against this backdrop, she began to explain the rules.

*“The name of the Game is Rainbow Pâtisserie, and this special event is your big chance to win all sorts of yummy Café du Chocolat sweets! I know you all paid 1,000 yen in island currency for your entry fee, but you can earn much, much more than that back in prizes! And even if you completely blow it, we still have a consolation prize worth 1,500 yen for you, so just kick back and have fun!”*

*“The game itself is super simple! First, I’ll ask you to use your devices to access the Café du Chocolat menu. You’ll select items from this menu to form your first ‘hand,’ and as you’ll see, every item has preset ‘flavor’ and ‘price range’ stats. There are three flavors—strawberry, green tea, and blueberry—and there are also three price ranges: one star, or around 300 yen; two stars, around 600 yen; and three stars, around 900 yen. We offer a lot more flavors than just those three, of course, but for the purposes of this Game, we’re dividing the whole menu into just those three categories!”*

*“Now, these three flavors have their own strengths and weaknesses against each other! Strawberry beats green tea, green tea beats blueberry, and blueberry beats strawberry...basically a rock-paper-scissors-style setup. It’ll be easier to remember if you just think of the flavors as ‘red,’ ‘green,’ and ‘blue’ instead! And as for price ranges, obviously, the more stars a product has, the stronger it is.”*

*“So! First we’ll ask you to create your opening hand so that your total number of stars is ten. You can mix and match flavors and price ranges as much as you like, and there’s no upper limit to the number of cards in your hand, so feel free to strategize all you want.”*

*“Once everybody is set, it’s time to begin the Game! You’ll be going around and challenging another player to a rock-paper-scissors-style match. When a match is decided upon, both players will pick one card and reveal them at the same time. If the cards are of two different flavors, the stronger one wins!*

*Flavors take precedent over price ranges, so—for example—if you play a one-star strawberry against a three-star green tea, the strawberry card still wins!”*

*“However, if both flavors are the same, the winner will, naturally, be determined by the price range instead. It’s much easier to win with three-star cards than one-star ones, to be sure. Win a match against an opponent, and you can take the card they just played against you! But sticking to high-price items can be risky, too! If both players in a match play cards with the exact same flavor and price range—in other words, if it’s a draw—then they both have to give up those cards to the house! Basically, win and you gain a card; lose or tie, and you’ll lose the card you played!”*

*“But that’s not all! Rainbow Pâtisserie also features a three-win bonus. For every three matches you win, you’re free to pick one other product from the menu—another great way to build up your hand!”*

*“The Rainbow Pâtisserie Game will automatically come to an end ninety minutes after play begins...and whatever items you hold at that time, those are the prizes you win! You can trade your in-game items for actual products on the menu, based on the item’s flavor and price range. Also, I should point out that whenever you lose a card, you’re allowed to choose to retire from the game, so if it looks like you’re on the ropes, you can always cut your losses right there!”*

*“Now, one final thing! ...In Rainbow Pâtisserie, there’s also the concept of ‘partners.’ When the Game begins, you’ll see on your device a potential partner candidate from the pool of players, and if you satisfy certain conditions, you’ll be able to form a partnership with that player. Strictly speaking, you and the other player must both have exactly the same number of cards in each flavor—strawberry, green tea, and blueberry. Do that, and you’ll become an official pair!”*

*“That might sound pretty tricky to pull off, and it is, but forming a partnership is super beneficial! That’s because the two people in a partnership share their total number of wins with each other! When the partnership wins three times, both members will receive an extra item! That doubles your chances of getting the three-win bonus, giving you a real decisive advantage!”*

*“Oh, and by the way, I know a lot of you have your sights set on the Legendary*



*Cheesecake, one of Café du Chocolat's trademark treats, but that's the only item not included on the regular menu for this Game. However, if you manage to get ten bonus items—that is, if you win thirty matches—you'll be able to earn it from the special limited-edition menu. But you have to be in a partnership to get the cheesecake, and only the first pair to win thirty matches will win it! You'll have to think fast, or it'll be gone in a flash!"*

*"That just about rounds out the rules! Now I'm going to allot ten minutes for all of you to decide on your opening hands. You're also allowed to bring one Ability into this Game, so make sure you add it to your devices while you're deciding. Thank you very much for listening to all of that!"*

The emcee bowed, smiling broadly all the way to the end, and the surrounding girls gave her an appreciative round of applause. Then I watched as each of them took out their devices.

*...I knew it. It's the exact rule set that was given to me in DearScript.*

Until I'd been able to confirm the rules, there had been a doubt in the back of my mind that DearScript had just been making things up...but contrary to my concerns, the emcee's breakdown of the rules had been exactly the same as what I'd read earlier. Learning the rules in advance allowed us a lot more time to strategize, which was a blessing, but I still couldn't help but wonder how the gamemaster had known.

...But, hey, better to focus on the event for now. Basically, this Rainbow Pâtisserie thing for the Café du Chocolat launch was a form of rock-paper-scissors with restrictions on what you could play. You took advantage of the strawberry-green tea-blueberry relationships to win matches and take items from your competitors. You also got an item of your choice after every three wins, so as long as you kept winning, your hand could be expanded to infinity.

However, since this was rock-paper-scissors, you couldn't win forever. You were bound to lose at some point. If you kept on losing, you'd have fewer cards to play, making it even harder to survive—and since the cards in your hand were the actual prizes you'd win, players might start getting greedy or defensive of their hands. Despite its frilly, girly coat of paint, this Game might actually have a pretty deep psychological aspect to it.

What's more, you needed to win thirty matches to earn the limited-edition item. That's kind of a tough number. Actually, it's a *really* tough one. Since you have just a one-in-three chance of winning a rock-paper-scissors match, thirty wins would statistically require at least ninety matches to reach. It'd be impossible to play that many within the time limit, so you'd need to equip the right Ability to make up for that.

However...

*Honestly, that's the biggest problem this time around. Earning that cheesecake definitely requires a powerful Ability, but if I broke out a Unique Star skill or some kind of Company cheat like usual, my cover would get blown immediately.*

That was the thing: I had to remain undercover, and it's no exaggeration to say that the rule prohibited all my usual methods. No way could I bust out something like *†Jet-Black Wings†* or Predict Behavior, and any cheats or bluffing was off the table, too. I had to keep a low profile, stay as inconspicuous as possible, and *still* reach thirty wins before Saionji.

It was an absurd task. And I was pretty sure there was only one way to do it.

*I gotta pair up with someone at least as strong as Saionji, then act as support for them. That'll let me keep winning without me being the one winning. It's the only way.*

I thrust my hands into my pockets as I mentally went over my plan... It was really the only conclusion I could've come to—if you're not allowed to stand out at all, just have your friends do it for you.

In fact, we had already carefully handpicked my partner candidate. Combing through STOC, we'd put together a list of people guaranteed to attend this event, then chosen our favorite out of that list. Partners in Rainbow Pâtisserie were picked at random, of course, so we'd need the Company to intervene on that, no matter what it took. If I got partnered with some rando instead, I was doomed to lose right from the start.

With all that in mind, the candidate we picked was a well-documented powerhouse. She'd put up a dominant performance in ASTRAL during the May Interschool Competition, and as Himeji informed me, she “singlehandedly won

a similar event to this” in the past. If I had any chance to beat Saionji under these restricted conditions, she was the way I’d do it.

“But is Kururugi really gonna show up?” I mused to myself, looking around.

“...Hm?”

A puzzled-sounding voice reached me from over my shoulder, and I turned around to find an all-too-familiar girl. Her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she looked dignified in the uniform of Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute from the Sixteenth Ward. It was Senri Kururugi, Hell’s Priestess herself.

“Sorry, did you say my name?”

*Sh-she heard me!*

This sudden encounter made my heart leap...but I didn’t betray any agitation as I pulled my hood down and shook my head.

“No. Maybe you’re just hearing things. I didn’t say anything, at least.”

“Oh? Sorry, then. My mistake.”

The suspicion instantly disappeared from Kururugi’s face. She seemed quite different from when I’d gone up against her in ASTRAL, which threw me a bit. Then she smiled at me.

“But I didn’t think guys like you enjoyed baked goods like this. Café du Chocolat really is amazing. I used to go there a lot when I was on the mainland, but I never dreamed they’d open a location on the Academy... If you don’t mind, would you tell me what items on the menu you like?”

“Uhhh... Sorry to disappoint you, but this is actually the first time I’ve been to a place like this. I don’t really know how to answer that question.”

“Wow! Well, sorry to hear that. But it also makes me happy. Café du Chocolat is truly irresistible... By the way, if this is your first time, I’d recommend the fluffy pancakes. They’re melt-in-your-mouth delicious. Just thinking about that texture fills me with joy...”

Kururugi put both hands on her cheeks and gave me a simpering smile to emphasize her point. Clearly this was a girl who always had room for dessert—and for me, knowing her strictly from ASTRAL, it was honestly a shock to see. Is

this *really* Senri Kururugi? The girl who's as good as the Empress in team events? Hell's Priestess, who if you see her on the battlefield, you better drop everything and run? *That* girl?

“ ... ”

I silently stared at Kururugi with more than a trace of anxiety as she floated around in her own little world. Then I looked around some more, attempting to distract myself—and almost at the same time, a blond-haired man sitting at a table at the far end of the café came into view. His Ohga uniform was all crumpled and bent out of shape, his ears bristled with rings and studs, and the sneer on his face made him look like the classic delinquent. The sheer intimidation made it hard for anyone to come near, creating this sort of empty void around him.

I couldn't say I'd ever seen him before...but I had heard about someone who looked like that.

*“...That would be Keiya Fujishiro,”* said the clear voice in my earpiece. *“The person Ms. Mano wants to confess her love to. He shouldn't know anything about this quest... Perhaps he has a sweet tooth?”*

I thought over this a bit. Keiya Fujishiro, the “Ace Behind the Curtain” for the Ohga School, looked terribly out of place in a fancy café like this, much like I did. However, if he was here, he must be joining in the event, too. I doubted he would be helping Saionji's side...but clearly, I had more than a handful of tough foes to deal with.

*Ugh...*

I silently cursed my bad luck. The way ahead was looking bleak already, but I quickly built my opening hand and set my Ability before I ran out of time.

#

At 5:30 PM, all of the participants took their starting positions. After we stood by for a few minutes as final adjustments were made, the announcement finally echoed through the building that the Game was underway.

Café du Chocolat was on the first floor of a brand-new building, with more businesses leasing the upper floors, but none of the other spaces were occupied

just yet. For that reason, the café's owner had sought special permission from the other tenants to set up this entire building for the purposes of the Game. A total of ninety-two people had joined the event, which is a lot, but I guess the rumors that the Empress was joining in had spread fast, so the number of people watching the Island Tube feed was well over ten thousand.

"Phew..."

With the Game in progress, I opened up my device again. On the screen was my current hand, along with a rough map of the building. I was on the far left side of the fourth floor, where it looked like a beauty salon was going to open up soon. Luckily, no other players were nearby.

Watching my surroundings carefully, I tapped my earpiece.

"Hello, Himeji. Can you hear me?"

*"Yes, Master, I can hear you. It looks like there's a program restricting communications between inside and outside the building, but it's nothing the Company can't bypass."*

"That's good... They're shutting out the normal channels, huh?"

*"It appears that way. Island Tube is broadcasting this live, so they can't have outsiders influencing the events of the Game... All phone apps, message apps, and social networks are restricted."*

"I see," I replied, nodding at Himeji's velvety voice. That much was a given, I suppose. As long as I could stay in touch with the Company, I didn't mind one bit.

*"Anyway, there's something important I need to tell you, Master. Just now, when the event started, the system randomly selected partner candidates for everyone. As arranged earlier, your partner will be Ms. Senri Kururugi."*

"Roger that. Thanks."

*"No, we only did what had to be done... Ms. Kururugi is currently a Five Star, one rank above you. Her hand is currently not too dissimilar to yours, Master, so I would recommend partnering up with her as soon as possible."*

"Yeah...or I guess, I have to, or else."

Opening the door of the beauty salon, I walked down the fourth-floor hallway as I whispered to Himeji. Finding their partner candidate and forming a partnership with them were presumably the first two goals for most of the Rainbow Pâtisserie players. The victories of a pair would be pooled, letting them obtain that three-win bonus at twice the speed. It cut the amount of work required for thirty wins by half, so if you wanted to try for the Legendary Cheesecake, it was all but required.

That meant my first plan of action was set in stone.

*I need to form a partnership with Senri Kururugi, Hell's Priestess, who people say to run from at all costs on the battlefield... Then I'll have more than a decent chance of fending off Saionji.*

I climbed the stairs as I considered my options. In a one-on-one Game, I still thought Saionji had a decisive edge over me. But Rainbow Pâtisserie was a team event—the kind of thing Kururugi excelled at. I wouldn't need to duel Saionji directly, and that meant I had a good chance of winning. But...

*"That was a bit of a surprise, wasn't it? Ms. Kururugi is usually so intimidating."*

*Oof... Yeah, she is.*

I scowled a bit at Himeji's quiet voice. She was right; when I'd exchanged a few words with Senri Kururugi before the Game, she hadn't felt at all like the girl I knew. She still had some of that same imposing presence as before, but her facial expressions and mannerisms seemed like those of any normal girl. I couldn't sense any of the *aura* she needed to take on Saionji.

*I mean, really, she's my only hope here...*

The thought began to give me serious concern...but now I was up the stairs and on the fifth floor. I passed by a few players along the way, but most of them must have been trying to find their partner first, because no one showed any signs of wanting a match. I was doing the same, following Himeji's guide and searching for Kururugi.

Or I was trying to, when suddenly...

"Everyone on this floor, stay where you are!"



...?!

A sharp, deep voice rumbled all the way through me, down to the pit of my stomach, stopping me in my tracks. I knew that voice...and a moment later, I felt a familiar, all-powerful presence. I gingerly turned my head toward the voice...only to find a girl in a ponytail and a Tsuyuri school uniform. She had flashed a cheery, youthful smile to me the last time we met, but now Hell's Priestess had her bamboo practice sword strapped to her hip (where she'd pulled it out from, I don't know) as she stalked the hallways, striking fear into the hearts of everyone she glared at.

"Launching the Ability One-Shot Kill, revised version—Sweet Buster. I now challenge *all* of you to a match!"

*Uh... Wait, what? What's going on?! Sweet Buster?!*

Kururugi's declaration cut through the floor like a knife, and every other player (including me) reacted in shock. Well, I mean...that only made sense, considering she was treating a peaceful event like this with the intensity of all-out war. But that wasn't all... She was challenging everybody on the floor to a match? Would they even allow that?

*"...It's possible. At least, with Ms. Kururugi's Ability it is."*

I brought my right hand to my ear at the sound of Himeji's voice. They must have already finished crunching all the data on their end. Her clear voice continued, not hesitating for a moment.

*"This Sweet Buster is likely a modified version of One-Shot Kill, adjusted to work better for this Game. It allows her to challenge everyone within her sight to a rock-paper-scissors match at the same time... A sort of multitarget ranged Ability, if you will. It's like a teacher standing at their desk playing a game with the whole class at once."*

*Oh... Right.*

Phrasing it that way made sense to me. That, and I could now tell just how powerful this was. I mean, for one thing, taking on so many players at the same time would save a ton of time, but it also minimized the number of cards you would lose after a defeat. Losing in this Game meant giving up the menu item

you just played, so even if Kururugi lost to multiple people with this trick, she'd still only be down that one card. If they kept the rules consistent, I suppose she'd get to keep all the cards she won doing this, too...but we could let the café handle the bookkeeping. Either way, this was clearly a superior Ability.

*She came here with this intense focus on winning... No, but that's not all.*

My thoughts raced as I watched the proceedings before me with bated breath. If this was normal rock-paper-scissors, Kururugi's chances of winning would still be one in three, no matter how many opponents she played against at once. She was not liable to win *that* many more cards using Sweet Buster... but this game also had the "price range" factor built into it. Even if two cards tied in flavor type, whichever one had more stars would win.

That led to an important question: Here at the start of the game, being faced with the absurd situation of Hell's Priestess taking you on from the get-go, how many players would be shaken enough to use their high-price items against her? I was sure some opponents would use Abilities to guarantee a win for themselves, but was anyone *else* that serious about winning the Game? This development was almost like bringing a machine gun to a knife fight. Wouldn't it be better to play a one-star menu item to minimize the damage?

*If everyone's thinking along those lines...and Kururugi plays a three-star item... that boosts her chance of winning to two out of three, right? Rock-paper-scissors or not.*

I had just reached that conclusion when all of Sweet Buster's data processing finally finished. There were nine players visible to Kururugi in all—I wasn't counted, since I was her partner candidate—and once the results were tabulated, it resulted in six wins, three losses for her, following the probabilities exactly. The losses cost her one card, but she'd won six in return, plus two more thanks to the three-win bonus...so seven cards in total.

"Heh! When it comes to sweets, no one can beat me!"

Kururugi removed her hand from the bamboo sword at her side and sat down on a nearby bench, presumably waiting out the cooldown time for her Ability. This was set for each Ability brought into Rainbow Pâtisserie, so once you activated it, you couldn't use it again for a little while. With an Ability as

powerful as Kururugi's, I'm sure the cooldown time would be on the longer side.

The players blindsided by this sudden attack were left dazed for a bit, but they soon regained control of their senses and went their separate ways. Meanwhile, I quietly looked up at the ceiling, hands in the pockets of my hoodie. That attack hadn't damaged me at all—as her potential partner, I wasn't even affected by it—but still...

*How the hell did Kururugi gain seven cards before she even formed a partnership with me...?!*

That was the thing. Don't get me wrong—I was glad Hell's Priestess was using her fierce bloodlust and top-class Ability to exercise her full potential, but I wish she'd considered the best timing for it. In this Game, after all, players had to have the same number of cards in each flavor in order to form a partnership. Now, after that devastating blow, Kururugi's hand was vastly different from mine.

I scratched my head, wondering what my next move was, as I approached her on the bench.

“Um...Kururugi? Got a moment?”

“Hmm? ...Oh, you're the café newbie from earlier.”

She looked up at me, her voice notably softened despite her sharp, threatening gaze. “What's wrong?” she asked, running a hand through her flowing hair. “If you want a match against me, I'm game anytime, but...”

“No, not that, sadly. I mean, I can't, even. I'm actually your partner candidate. Our hands don't match up yet, but we still can't duel each other.”

“Ohhh. You are? Well, no wonder you didn't get caught up in that just now.”

Kururugi nodded as she folded her arms over her chest. She didn't seem openly hostile, at least, so I figured I'd press on.

“So, um, if I could make a suggestion... Could you maybe throw out a few of the items you just won? Because we can't form a pair like this.”

“...Mm?”

Kururugi's displeasure at my suggestion was quite obvious. She ran her fingertips along the bamboo sword resting on her lap, her ponytail quietly bobbing in the air as she fired back at me.

"You should have brought up something *that* important earlier. I could never just throw away good desserts."

"I *tried* to tell you, but you busted out that game-breaking skill before I could."

"Oh? Well, I'm not just playing around, you know. Hmm... A partnership, huh?" She appeared torn on the issue for a moment or two, eyes slightly turned away from me. "Honestly, the thought of playing with someone besides my usual teammates didn't even occur to me. That's why I fine-tuned this Ability, after all—so I could win by myself. I'm not just reusing some old skill for this Game, the way everyone else is. I tweaked it specially for today."

"...I know. You're probably the only person who'd go that far, I think."

"I'm sure you're right. I'm a dessert buff, remember. But if you're claiming that you're worth my time, young man, you need to get in line with me first, all right? ...So what kind of Ability do you have?"

"Control Choices, just a general-purpose Ability. It restricts the flavor choices available to a single target, preventing them from picking one of the three—strawberry, green tea, or blueberry."

"...Oh? Taking one flavor off the table? Combine that with a three-star item, and you're guaranteed a win... That works well with Sweet Buster, yeah. Not a bad Ability to have if I'm gunning for that cheesecake."

Kururugi's eyebrows twitched a few times; I clearly had her interest. Then, after a few more moments of thought, she turned her piercing eyes up to me.

"Let's do this, then. It'll take about twenty-five more minutes until I'm able to use my Sweet Buster skill again. How about we make that your time limit? I won't play anyone until then, and you can use that time to try to meet the partnership conditions. If you can build the same hand as mine before the twenty-five minutes are up, we'll automatically pair up, of course. But if you can't, it's not going to be a good use of my remaining time to wait any longer

for you. Not to sound too harsh, young man, but if it comes to it, I'll shut you out right then and there... So, what do you say?"

She wasn't mincing her words at all as she showed me the items in her hand. Looking at them, I smiled slightly and nodded to her.

"All right. You're on."

#

It was 5:47 PM, a bit past fifteen minutes into the event.

*"The number one player right now...although I don't know if that's the right way of putting it in this Game...but anyway, the person making the smoothest progress so far is Rina. She's already paired up with her partner to record eight wins."*

Idly listening to Himeji's soothing voice, I went down to the restaurant on the third floor, at a spot the Island Tube cameras weren't covering, as I pondered my next move.

Honestly, I hadn't expected something like this to trip me up. It was logical to think that the first thing any participant in Rainbow Pâtisserie would want to do was form a partnership, and I figured everything would go smoothly enough until then. But Senri Kururugi turned out to be even stronger than I'd imagined, and we now had this odd situation where she could win perfectly well without pairing up.

However...

*It's not all bad, either... Clearly, her Ability is the most efficient approach to this Game. And my own Ability's a good match for hers, too. As long as we can form a partnership, she can pretty much take care of the rest.*

I remained firm on that point. Sweet Buster wasn't the most original of Abilities, but in a game like Rainbow Pâtisserie, where resource management and the number of wins mattered a lot more than each individual match, I really couldn't think of a more effective Ability to have.

*Team up with her, and I can win... So the only problem is, how am I gonna make that happen?*

Thinking along those lines, I looked down at the device I was holding. It displayed my hand, which hadn't changed at all yet, and a notepad window with Kururugi's hand jotted down in it. Comparing them, I saw that she had six more cards than me overall—one more strawberry, three more green teas, and two more blueberries. It was up to me to figure out how to catch up to her.

“...Well, there's no way I'll be able to get them playing normally. If I wanted to add six cards to my hand without any tricks, that would mean winning five times in a row with no real strategy. If I could do that, I wouldn't need a partner, either.”

*“Very true. And without access to your usual cheating and bluffing, that's not going to be too realistic.”*

“Right. So we shouldn't think about that too much...”

But just as I was about to kick off this strategy meeting:

“Ahhhhh!”

From outside the restaurant I was holed up in, I suddenly heard a scream. I reflexively lifted my head, looking through the window to see what was going on. There, in the hallway, was Momo Asuka, the Ohga first-year I'd seen not long ago. She was crouched down in a corner of the hallway, shaking.

“I-I'm sorry!” she said in a quivering voice. “P-please forgive me! I—I taste terrible, I promise!”

This uninterrupted stream of words was incoherent at best; I had no idea what was going on with her. Still, it didn't feel right to leave her in such a distressed state, so I pushed the door open and left the restaurant.

“...Huuuh?”

The next moment, a man who'd had his back to me slowly turned around, noticing my presence. The blond-haired guy who had Asuka cowering in the corner was Keiya Fujishiro—the Six Star from Ohga who'd had such an overwhelming presence in the Game's waiting room earlier.

“Tch... What's your problem? This ain't some sideshow.”

*Scaaaaaaaaaary...!!*



For a moment, his low, threatening voice and glaring eyes intimidated me. But as freaked out as I was on the inside, I wasn't the type to show it on my face. Acting calm as usual, I put my hands in my pockets and stood a distance away from Fujishiro, facing him.

Keiya Fujishiro was a second-year, just like me, yet his size alone made it difficult to call him a "boy." His height was easily at or above six feet, and his hair was a mix of black and dyed blond, making him look even more ominous. His ears were loaded with piercings, and while he had an Ohga School uniform on, the flashy red shirt he wore under his blazer made it hard to notice at first. To be as frank as possible, he looked like your stereotypical teen delinquent.

"Hnh...?"

In front of us, Asuka, finally noticing the change in her situation, stopped shaking. She turned around, her tear-stained eyes sizing me up. My hood was down low enough that she couldn't have known who I was, but she must have realized I was on her side. She ran up to me, keeping a prudent distance away from Fujishiro, and hid behind my back.

"H-h-help me, please!" she shouted, clinging tightly to my hoodie. "I really would've preferred it if Sarasa were here to rescue me, but even a rando like you will do right now! I'll put up with it!"

"...You really didn't need to go that far, but fine. What happened to frighten you so much?"

"I—I—I saw him! I saw Fujishiro take a bunch of cards from the girl who was here... He was shaking her down! Bringing violence into a fun little Game like this... It's just awful! It's scary! And I don't think it's right!"

"..."

"Eeeeeeeek! Don't try and stare at me... Wait! No! I-I'm sorry! Forgive me!!"

Asuka had taken advantage of her position behind me to lob all kinds of hate at Fujishiro, but one drilling glare from him was enough to make her cower again. I didn't know what had happened before I showed up, but the hands clinging to my sleeves really *were* shaking, so I suppose her terror was real.

Not that it was why I was helping her out, though.

“Um... Fujishiro, right?” I said casually, pulling the edge of my hood down. “Could you explain what’s going on here for me? If you don’t wanna, I’ll go away, but if there’s some sort of conflict, it might be easier to resolve it with a third party intervening.”

Fujishiro greeted this with a suspicious leer. He stayed silent for a while longer, but then he wearily shook his head.

“It’s nothing,” he said, his voice low. “Nothing’s goin’ on. I just came ‘cause I wanted to talk to my partner candidate here, but she wound up getting challenged to a match by another player. I figured it’d be bad for us if she got dragged into that, so I took the challenge for her. And *now* look, huh? I didn’t even get to talk to her yet.”

“Y-your partner candidate? You and I are a pair, Fujishiro?”

“I *told* you we were, man. Don’t you even look at your device?”

“S-sorry! I kind of lost interest in all that once I saw I wasn’t partnered with Sarasa, so... Oh! B-but...!”

Asuka’s head slumped for a moment, but the next thing I knew, she was looking right at us, bracing herself for the worst. Boldly—or as boldly as she could still hidden behind me—she asked Fujishiro a question.

“What do you mean, it’d be bad for us if someone played me? I’ve got at least five cards of every flavor. Losing isn’t any big deal to me.”

“Yeah, assuming your opponent doesn’t try anything funny. But *that* girl just now used an Ability called Winning Streak. It’s an annoying skill that latches on to you and woulda kept the rock-paper-scissors games going until she lost, draining you of all your resources. No matter how big your hand was, you coulda lost it all just now.”

“Winning Streak...? B-but if that’s all it was...”

“It wasn’t. I dunno if you realize it or not, but you’ve got the absolute *worst* poker face. Anyone with a pair of eyes could figure out what you’re playing, easy.”

“Wh-whaaaa?! Is that true?! I had no idea!”

“Well, now you do... I got better hearing than most people, so when I was downstairs, I heard her say that she was gonna bleed you dry. That’s why I stepped in. Unlike you, I can hide my emotions some, and I knew what her strategy was, too. With those weapons, I was pretty much guaranteed to beat her, y’know?”

Fujishiro shook his head slightly. One hand came up to rustle his hair, as his vicious glare drilled into me and Asuka.

“...And I wanted to explain all that to you, but I’m not too good at talkin’ usually, so...sorry about that.”

“...I’m not sure if not being good at talking was the only reason...but all right.”

Clearly his terrifying looks were the main culprit, but I was too scared to say that to his face.

Asuka, still hiding behind my back, gingerly poked her face out and looked at Fujishiro. “S-so,” she began hesitantly, “you were trying to help me, Fujishiro?”

“Not really, no... But it’d be a pain in the ass if my partner candidate dropped out on me.”

“Woow...! Y-you’re a god! A total god! That’s so cool of you, Fujishiro!”

Her emotions did an instant 180 as she ran up to Fujishiro at full speed. She set her gleaming eyes, full of respect and admiration, on the man. Fujishiro turned his back in disgust...but, yeah, I figured the crisis was over, at least. I hadn’t expected to encounter him here, but there was no point staying with them, so—

*...Well, hang on.*

As I had that thought, I brought my right hand to my lips. I could feel an idea coming. Was there really no benefit to staying with them? Was I sure about that? I mean, yeah, sticking with these two people wasn’t going to help my hand any. However...

*Think about it. Asuka just said that Fujishiro took multiple cards from that girl, like he was shaking her down for them. That must have been his Ability. If he’s got some kind of seizing-type Ability that lets him take multiple items after*

*winning... And it's not just Fujishiro, either. I've got a real good idea of what Asuka's Ability is, too. And with a combination like that, then just maybe...*

"...Yo. You listenin' to me?"

"Huh? Oh... Sorry. Just spaced out a bit."

I looked up at Fujishiro, who had interrupted my train of thought. He rolled his ill-natured eyes at me. "*I said*, sorry to bother you. We gotta get goin'."

"Yeah, thanks a lot, random hoodie guy! You were a big help!"

Fujishiro gave a very unexpected apology, and Asuka followed behind him waving wildly at me. I pulled my hood down and quietly shook my head, smiling a little in a way I knew they'd notice.

"No, you don't need to thank me. But before you go, I wanted to ask you something. Do you mind?"

"" ...?"

I grinned at them. Fujishiro and Asuka clearly weren't sure what to make of that.

#

"...Hmm?"

I had less than five minutes before the time limit set by Kururugi was up, and I'd just stormed my way back up the stairs to her location in the fifth-floor hallway. Her eyes were closed—I don't know if she was napping or meditating or something—but she lifted her head when she spotted me. She flashed a wary look at first but quickly softened her demeanor.

"Oh, you're back, young man? Glad to see you're a stickler for punctuality."

"Yeah, thanks. But I still haven't got the right hand to partner with you."

"No? Honesty may be a virtue, but now's no time for a chat with me, is it? Get me started talking about desserts, and I can go on for at *least* two hours."

"I'm actually a little curious about that...but maybe some other time. I've got other things to worry about right now."

I sneaked a glance behind me. I was sure Kururugi was observant enough to

notice them before now, but two other players were standing there—Keiya Fujishiro and Momo Asuka. The former was glaring at Kururugi, completely still, while the latter was hiding once again, this time behind Fujishiro.

“...Who’re they?”

“A couple of players I met just now on another floor. They’re both famous enough that you might know them, but, well, where they come from doesn’t matter. So listen, Kururugi...would you mind playing a match against Fujishiro there for me? We can forget that rule about you not playing other people.”

“A match...? Hmm... Well, if I’m part of Rainbow Pâtisserie, I have no reason to turn one down...but what do *you* think, over there?”

“We’re on the same page. Let’s just keep the amount of time I’m wasting on this to a minimum, okay?”

“Yes, that makes sense to me, too,” Kururugi said, turning her sharp gaze on Fujishiro. “...Well then, let’s begin.”

Kururugi got up off the bench, then removed her device from her side, as if drawing a sword. Bringing it up to eye level, she sized up Fujishiro, who also had his device in hand. And with that, the match was set.

Next was the part when they’d select which Ability to use...but Kururugi’s Sweet Buster was still in the middle of its cooldown period, so she couldn’t choose it. The only option available to her was to pick an item from her deck—that was all.

Not so for Keiya Fujishiro.

“Launching the general-purpose Ability Legal Collection. If I win this match, I’m taking *three* items from your hand, not just one.”

Fujishiro’s voice was low and deep, giving him just as much of a dominant presence as Kururugi. Just as I’d thought, his Ability was the “seize” type. Normally, when you beat someone in a rock-paper-scissors match here, you’d earn just one card from it—but with Legal Collection, you could take two more cards on top of that. It was a simple Ability, but a powerful one, and its cooldown time was just twelve minutes. Unlike Kururugi’s Sweet Buster, Fujishiro’s was already available to him again.

And they weren't done there.

"That's not all, either! I'll add my Ability Variable Control to his! Just three cards is barely anything, Fujishiro! Let's make it *six*! We'll take a whopping six cards at once!!"

"...Tch. Do you *have* to scream everything you say, man?"

"You want me to talk softer?! Okay! I'll work on that!!!"

Asuka's overly chirpy response made Fujishiro bring a hand to his forehead. He looked a bit worn out...but with his Legal Collection and Asuka's Variable Control, we'd just seen the birth of a malicious weapon that could swipe six items in a single attack.

By the way, I realized that Asuka was likely sporting a Variable Control-style Ability when I noticed something weird was up with her hand. Just as Fujishiro had pointed out, she always wore her emotions on her sleeve, which would seemingly make it tough for her to win any matches here...but she had five cards or more of every flavor, at least fifteen in total. That was even more than Kururugi had after her opening stunt. So how could this obvious contradiction be explained? The only way I could think of was her using Variable Control to up the star count on every card in her opening hand.

"Mm..."

But in the end, this was still rock-paper-scissors; even with things set up to our advantage like this, neither side really had a decisive advantage or disadvantage just yet. Both Fujishiro and Kururugi had pretty big hands, and now we'd see these two top players wage a fierce psychological battle...or at least that's what would normally happen.

"Launching Control Choices. Kururugi, you are no longer able to select a blueberry-type item for this match."

Stepping between their glares, I smiled a bit under my hood as I declared my move. Kururugi looked back at me, frowning slightly.

"Hmm...? You mean on *me*? Not the bleached blond over there?"

"That's right. I'm putting that restriction on you, Kururugi. You can't play any



blueberry cards, which leaves you with strawberry or green tea. And since I know you *shouldn't* have any three-star strawberry items in your hand right now, Fujishiro can just select one of those and you'll have no way of beating him."

"...Huh. And just when I'd started thinking of you as my ally."

"Oh, I still am...once this match goes the way I planned it, that is."

My lips curled upward as Kururugi made herself even more intimidating. Then, comfortable enough to reveal my plan by now, I kept talking.

"Legal Collection and Variable Control... If Fujishiro wins with those two Abilities in effect, you'll have to give up six items. And six items just happens to be the difference between your hand and mine, right? This way, we'll be carrying identical hands within the time limit—which will make us partners."

"Wha...?!"

That was the thing: I'd hemmed and hawed over what to do, but frankly, trying to gather six cards in such a short amount of time was nearly impossible. Doing the *opposite*, however, wasn't anywhere near as difficult. If I spread word to other players about what items Kururugi was holding, having her lose six matches in a row seemed reasonably doable to me. And if her opponents added an Ability to their attack, we could whittle down her card collection even faster. That was why the Fujishiro-Asuka pair had caught my attention. If they combined their Abilities, we could pare Kururugi's hand down to the size of mine in one shot. Plus, with Asuka building up a big hand so quickly, Fujishiro was gonna need a whole lot of cards to pair up with her. It was a win-win for everyone. Well...everyone *except* for Kururugi.

*Earning the Legendary Cheesecake is all about the number of wins, not your number of cards, so it's not like Kururugi is losing that much. Still, I guess she kind of loses her cool when desserts get involved, so this might piss her off enough that she decides to ditch me, maybe...*

I kept a calm smile on my face, but inside, I was watching every move she made, praying to myself. Kururugi silently kept her head down for a while, but then—

“Heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

?!

The tense atmosphere, as palpable as if someone had been shot, was shattered as she began to laugh loudly. I was taken aback as well, and Kururugi gave me a sidelong glance, then nodded as if she was enjoying herself.

“Ahh... Yes, you’re right. It doesn’t look to me like your hand has changed at all from before, but if I lose this match, we will indeed have the same items within the time limit. I have nothing to complain about.”

“Y-yeah... Um, are you mad about that, or...?”

“Why would I be? I set my conditions, and you fulfilled them. I should be praising you! Being angry wouldn’t be right of me at all. Besides...I thought at first that I could breeze through this by myself, but it looks like the Empress of Ohga is stronger than I thought. I’m not sure I can launch a comeback against her without your help, young man.”

Senri Kururugi kept the smile on her face as she worked her device. Once her defeat against Fujishiro had been confirmed, she offered up six cards, leaving her with the exact same hand as mine. The next instant, our devices beeped out a little melody to indicate that we were now partners.

“Let’s go, young man,” said Hell’s Priestess, a faint smile on her face. “No mercy from here on out.”

#

We were now about forty minutes into the event.

Sarasa Saionji, the Empress of Ohga, had had a smooth run so far as the top performer in Rainbow Pâtisserie. According to Himeji, Saionji was apparently using a Cancel Interference–style Ability, giving her a 27-0 record so far. That sounded pretty weird to me. Canceling your opponent’s extra skills wouldn’t guarantee twenty-seven wins in a row like that, would it?

And another thing... We were restricted from accessing Island Tube in here, along with all other social media—but for some reason, we could still see the comments posted on the livestream. It was running on a five-minute delay, so those comments were naturally lagging behind a fair bit, but it was still an

endless high-speed stream of text. Saionji was analyzing all of it in real time, apparently, to gain a full grasp of every player's hand, Abilities, and current location. It was an almost breathtakingly frontal attack, one running off her astounding natural talents. She truly was several levels above the pack.

This time, though—thanks to desserts being the topic on hand, I suppose—there was an even bigger menace than Saionji among the players.

“Don't move! Everybody who's within my field of vision is now challenged to a match against me!”

The moment Saionji recorded her twenty-eighth victory, Senri Kururugi's ponytail spun as her voice whipped through the air. They called her Hell's Priestess for a reason—over thirty players, Saionji included, were now facing down the bamboo sword in Kururugi's hand.

This whole proceeding worked much the same as when she first broke it out... with one difference.

“Sorry to intrude. Launching Control Choices—everyone in a match against her can no longer select a green tea item... It'd be best to just give up and treat this like one of those unfortunate accidents, okay?”

I stood next to Kururugi as I made this bold pronouncement, hood pulled low over my head.

Really, it was a surefire strategy. Not that it'd be a guaranteed win for *every* match, of course. It wouldn't mean very much, but you could still tie against Kururugi if you played the exact same item as her, and it was possible to thwart her with the right Ability, too. But that was just quibbling. Against such massive, drastic moves, everything else was simply plowed right over.

Once the dust settled...out of the thirty-six opponents ensnared in our net, two played a three-star blueberry to tie with Kururugi (in a vain attempt to keep her win count down, I guess), one used Emergency Withdraw to escape the match entirely, and one other—the Empress—invoked Cancel Interference to block my ability and beat Kururugi with a one-star green tea item. That meant thirty-two wins, one loss, and two ties—enough victories to earn ten bonus cards in one go.

And so...

“...Hee-hee! It’s exhilarating how one-sided that was.”

Despite having twenty-nine wins and being just one away from that all-important cheesecake, Saionji had been caught flat-footed at the very end. Coming from way behind, it was me and Kururugi who reached the thirty-win mark first.

#

“Ahhh, the famous Café du Chocolat cheesecake...!”

A little time had passed since the end of Rainbow Pâtisserie. Even after securing the limited-edition cheesecake, Kururugi continued her rampage unabated, while I exhausted myself trying to keep up with her. Now, though, we were down at the first-floor register, where I had been presented with a fancy-looking cheesecake box.

*“Eh-heh-heh! Great work, Hiro! I’ll get some tea ready while I wait for you to bring that home!”*

*“No, Ms. Kagaya. You’d blow up the kitchen if you stepped inside. Allow me to prepare the tea.”*

I could tell through my earpiece that Kagaya and Himeji were bubbling with excitement. I wasn’t sure what the big deal was all about with this Legendary Cheesecake, but I guessed it must really taste that good.

“Young man... Young man!”

Feeling a pat on my shoulder, I turned to look beside me. Kururugi was there, beaming proudly, carrying both her schoolbag and a cheesecake box of her own.

“I owe you for this, too!” she exclaimed with all the innocence of a child. “Thanks so much for today!”

“Huh? What’re you talking about, Kururugi? You could’ve won without me.”

“Oh, no way. Without your Ability, my second Sweet Buster blast wouldn’t have earned me as many wins...and if I hadn’t reached the target, the Empress would’ve gotten there instead.”

“Yeah, maybe...”

“No ‘maybe’! It’s the truth. You’re like my dessert guardian angel, swooping in at my time of greatest need!”

“Thanks,” I muttered, smiling a bit as Kururugi kept heaping on the praise. Here she was, carrying a cheesecake box like her life depended on it, when not too long ago she’d been the rampaging Hell’s Priestess... The two sides to her personality were just way too different, but I suppose they were both part of who she was at heart. In a way, learning about that made the whole day worth it.

“...Congratulations. Looks like you win this round, Shinohara.”

Just then, a red-haired girl came down the stairs, sounding a little miffed. It was, of course, Saionji, who stared at me with her arms crossed.

“But *you* didn’t win a single match yourself, did you? Ugh. This does *not* sit well with me, I’ll have you know.”

“Wow, the invincible Empress is making excuses? That’s not like you, Saionji.”

“I’m not making excuses, though, am I? I just admitted defeat to you,” she said as she turned her back to me. If I had to guess, DearScript probably gave her an order along the lines of “never lose a single match” or something. That meant she’d had to put thoroughness ahead of efficiency, which had given Kururugi the window of opportunity she’d needed to pull ahead. When I thought about it like that, I suppose it made sense she was willing to accept the results well enough.

“...? Wait.”

As I thought things over, Kururugi suddenly gave me a strange look.

“Did I hear her say ‘Shinohara’?” she furtively asked. “Young man, are you Hiroto Shinohara?”

“Hmm? Mm...”

I returned her gaze and gave a little nod. The event was over and I didn’t need to hide my identity any longer, so I went ahead and flipped my hood back, removing my glasses.

“Sorry I hid that from you, Kururugi. Yes, as you figured out, I’m Hiroto Shinohara. I needed to go incognito for this event because it’s part of the rules of the Game I have going against Saionji.”

“Oh my... I honestly had no idea. I suppose Seven Stars are required to become masters of disguise, too, are they?”

“...Well, um, I don’t think it’s a requirement or anything, no...”

It pretty much *was* a must-have skill for Saionji and me by this point, but I think we were special exceptions to the rule.

Either way, we were all about ready to head out when another pair came down the stairs after Saionji. Fujishiro was there, all cool with his head down and one hand in his pocket, and Momo Asuka was clinging to him from behind. They—or she, really—were too loud for anyone to miss.

“I’m sorry! I apologize! I-it’s because I was too weak...!”

“...No. I keep telling you, you did fine—”

“I don’t need your mercy! You praising me just makes me feel even *more* useless!”

“It’s not mercy! How many times do I have to tell you? It’s just a matter of compatibility—”

“I’ll gladly commit seppuku to make up for this!!”

“*Listen* to me.”

Asuka was sobbing and carrying on, while Fujishiro just sighed and looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there. They were so loud that the whole café was giving them looks now...but then Saionji stepped forward, her flowing, gorgeous red hair snapping everyone’s eyes upon her instead.

“...What’s going on, Momo? You look pretty upset.”

“S-Sarasa! Sarasa, listen to me, I—”

“Hold it... Hey, you ain’t gonna tell her, are you?”

“Oh, just keep quiet for a second, Fujishiro!”

Being admonished by Fujishiro would normally turn anyone into a quivering

heap, but in the moment, Asuka just pushed him aside as she marched up to Saionji. She heatedly explained that today was the birthday of Fujishiro's younger sister, who had wheedled him into buying a Legendary Cheesecake for the occasion. Fujishiro had been flustered at first when he found the café full of women, and he hadn't known about the event today, so he'd entered having done zero prep work for it. Even so, he'd figured that he might as well do his best to win.

"...!! Amazing! You're the most amazing big brother ever, Fujishiro! But I was just so weak... I wasn't able to get a cheesecake for your sister!!"

"...Shut your mouth right now."

"*Whuh?!'*"

Asuka hadn't been shy about revealing all of this to the entire café...until Fujishiro grabbed her shoulder from behind and gave her the scariest look he could. He still looked pretty awkward about it, though—this whole experience must've embarrassed him a lot.

Saionji, who I thought I remembered being in the same class as him at Ohga, seemed just as dumbfounded. "Wow... That's a surprise. I didn't realize you had *that* side to you, too. Why don't you show off your softer side a little more? It'll make people like you."

"Leave me alone, Empress. I'm not in this to win friends. Maybe *you're* this island-wide celebrity, but I'm different. I'm *feared*—not just among the other wards, but by the people at Ohga. Every single one of 'em."

"Hee-hee! You think so? Because *I'm* not so sure myself."

"Huh...?"

There was a chiding tone to Saionji's voice as she dropped a hint about the client for our first quest, Yuuka Mano. This was lost on Fujishiro, of course, but Saionji wasn't about to give him any more clues. Turning around, she fixed her ruby-red eyes upon me, even as I heard Himeji whisper through the earpiece. "*I don't mind either way.*"

So...



“Hey, Fujishiro.”

“Huh? ...Oh. The hoodie guy? I *thought* your voice sounded familiar, but I didn’t think the strongest person in the Academy would be playing undercover. No wonder you didn’t have any problems negotiating with me.”

“Well, I didn’t have any reason to be scared... But anyway, I wanted to ask: Is all of that true? It’s not just her spouting a bunch of nonsense?”

“...*Tch*. Yeah, it’s true. What, you wanna pick on me, too?”

“Why would I do that? I don’t gain anything at all from antagonizing you. No, I just thought I could give you this.”

“...Huh?”

“*Eh? ...Whaaaaaaaaat?!“*

I turned off the screaming in my right ear as I handed out the box in my hands. Fujishiro gave me a quizzical...or more like a hostile look. Next, I took out the small silver plate from my pocket and showed it to him. It had *May this day never be forgotten by either of you* written on it in an ornate design.

“To tell the truth, I wasn’t here to get my hands on the cheesecake, but this silver plate that comes with it. As you know, me and Saionji are in the middle of a really important Game, and this plate is part of it.”

“...So what? What does *your* crap have to do with me? I’m not into takin’ charity from someone I barely even know.”

“I understand why you feel like that, but I’m not meaning for this to be charity. You *did* help me out in the Game, remember. Without you, I doubt I would’ve beaten Saionji, so I owe you this much. And also, I’m giving this to your sister, not to you. I don’t care about what *you’re* into.”

“...! Are you serious, man?”

“You think I’d lie about this for some reason?”

I cut off the conversation there, all but thrusting the box into Fujishiro’s hands. Turning around, I could see Saionji smile, as if to say “attaboy” or whatever, but I wasn’t about to reward that with a reaction.

Just when I thought I might have to give up if he kept being stubborn—

“...All right. I owe you one.”

Hearing him say those words behind me, I figured Fujishiro might not be so slow on the uptake after all.

Soon after, he was marching out of the café with the box, Asuka alongside him. It seemed like the day’s events were over, and I saw Saionji stretch herself out, shaking off the accumulated fatigue.

“Ahhh, today was *rough*. I lost the event, Shinohara ended up stealing the show... It almost makes me want to take my stress out on this food.”

“Well, why not? You had twenty-nine victories, so I’m sure you’re gonna have a dining room table full of desserts coming your way. It’s pretty much all-you-can-eat for you except for that cheesecake, huh?”

“You always have to have the last word, huh, Shinohara? Thinking you’re *sooo* much better than me just because you got that plate...”

Saionji sullenly stared at me, hands folded over her chest.

Kururugi must’ve been listening to our conversation, because just then she raised her head, a look of sheer bliss on her face as she held her box close.

“...Hm? What was that? You were after the plate, Ms. Saionji? Not the cake?”

“...? Yeah, pretty much. I mean, I wouldn’t have minded a taste, but it’s the plate that I needed. It’s kind of a request I got...sort of thing.”

“Hmm. Well, do you want mine?”

“Huh? ...Huuuh?!”

“Don’t be so surprised... I *love* desserts. That’s why I wanted to get the Café du Chocolat cheesecake at all costs, but I don’t care one bit about that silver plate. There’re stories about how it helps you with love and stuff, right? That means nothing to me at the moment. I’m curious about *why you* need it, Ms. Saionji, but I wouldn’t hesitate to help with that, of course.”

“Ah...um, wait a minute. I’m really glad you’re willing to give me that, but I think you might have the wrong idea about something here. You see, I’m not

the one who wants to use it—”

“Don’t worry, Ms. Saionji! I promise that I won’t tell anyone about this...and I definitely won’t pry any further, either. This’ll be our little secret.”

I was half-expecting Kururugi to give her a wink as she removed the plate fastened to her box and pushed it into Saionji’s hands. With a few satisfied nods, she said, “See you on the battlefield next time!” and gave an aloof sort of smile, and then her ponytail swished through the air as she briskly walked away.

““ ...””

Saionji and I, left behind, stood there silently as we looked at the plate in her hands. Finally, I spoke up, wanting to confirm something.

“...So, um, what does this mean for the quest, Saionji?”

“Good question. My victory conditions are to obtain a plate and give it to the client, so strictly speaking, whoever won the event doesn’t actually matter. And if the plate’s here in my hands, that means I won...doesn’t it?”

“Guess so...”

I leaned back against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. I *really* hadn’t thought it’d turn out like this... It was one thing for Kururugi to have no interest in the plate...but did she really have to give it to Saionji? Still, Saionji seemed more disappointed than elated about it.

“It’s kind of hard to accept, though. A win’s a win, but this pretty much means I could’ve won without even trying at all. And I’m *sure* Kururugi’s got the wrong idea about me now...”

“Ahh, it’ll work itself out. If you ask me, she’s not the type to gossip about her friends all over STOC... I mean, really, it’s harder for *me* to accept this.”

“Perhaps, yes... Well, Mano doesn’t have it yet. You could still try to block me from giving it to her. Wanna try taking it from me? I mean, it’s within arm’s reach.”

“An angry mob would kill me if I physically attacked the Empress in public.”

I’m sure Saionji knew that already, but I still turned her down, shrugging and sighing a little. Our first quest in the Unique Star competition—helping Yuuka

Mano confess to the guy she liked—had ended with a win in the Rainbow Pâtisserie event for me (or, really, Kururugi). And yet, certain unexpected events afterward meant that Saionji was going to satisfy her victory conditions. I'd really wanted to score the first win in this best-of-three Game, but my hands were tied here. I'd just have to move on and do my best in the next quest.

And speaking of moving on...

"...Good thing I have all those extra cards."

Searching for something to fill the hole that had been left behind giving away the cheesecake, I began combing the shelves for baked goods to placate Himeji and Kagaya.

#

The next Saturday afternoon, a few days after Rainbow Pâtisserie, Saionji and I were visiting a café in the Third Ward to hear from Yuuka Mano, our client.

To be exact, Mano had only invited Saionji, the "target" of this quest. I wasn't part of the invite, being the "villain" and all, so I was just sitting at a nearby table, listening in on their conversation. It wasn't the greatest look for me, but it's not like we could sit together, either. Today, after all, was the pep rally for Mano's big confession.

"I think, like, you saw it at the event earlier," Mano began, drinking some orange juice as she sat across from Saionji, "but Fujishiro is actually, like, *really* kind. People avoid him because he looks super scary at first, but, like, he works really hard, he's serious about stuff, he cares a ton for his sister...and, like, he's not violating the school dress code or anything, either. Ohga's got different rules depending on your rank, so once you're up there with, like, you or Fujishiro, you could pretty much come to school naked and nobody would bat an eye. Right, Saionji?"

"Right. Not that I would ever do that, though..."

"Ha-ha! Yeah, really. So getting back to Fujishiro... I actually went to the same middle school as him. This was back on mainland Japan, and, like, pretty rural Japan, too, so I don't think anyone else in Ohga was there. So back then, you know...Fujishiro wasn't like *that* at all. He was just...normal, really. Though he did still have a bit of a mean look..."

“He was? So that bad-boy persona only really started in high school?”

“Pretty much. But...do you know *why* he did that?”

Mano chose this moment to lower her voice. I sure didn’t know, being relatively new to the Academy, but Saionji didn’t seem to have any idea, either.

“...There was a reason for it?”

“Oh, yeah. Um...I think it was, like, last June? There was this period when some rough dudes from the Fifth Ward started hanging around near Ohga. They didn’t try fighting with anyone or whatever, but they’d show up on the roads people take to school, yelling at guys, trying to start trouble... The girls in the younger grades were all scared of them, so they asked the student council to stage patrols and stuff, but, like, it just kinda dragged on with no resolution.”

“Hmm... Now you mention it, I do remember something like that.”

“Ha-ha! I guess not even delinquents wanna come near someone like *you*, huh, Saionji?”

“Not quite. I’ve got my own problem people to deal with...”

An inscrutable look flashed across Saionji’s face. I didn’t need to think too hard about it to know she was talking about Kugasaki and his Self-Styled Holy Knights. Being monitored by a gang like that around the clock, there wouldn’t be a free moment for any street punk to mess with her.

“So,” Mano continued, whether she was aware of that or not. “I think you probably see where I’m going with this, but Fujishiro was the guy who stood up against them. Like, he started dressing as a delinquent, just to keep the other wards in check. He dyed his hair blond, got all those piercings...and, like, he always had that deep voice and mean look, too; plus, he’s pretty built. But just *looking* the part worked, like, super well. Just having him walk around town kept the other gang at bay...and then they completely disappeared.”

“Wow... So that’s what happened? He really is amazing.”

“Yeah! Totally amazing! But now Fujishiro’s been pegged as, like, the ultimate delinquent, and the girls of Ohga are basically like, ‘Yeah, whatever,’ when it comes to him. But I think just having him around keeps the weirdos away from

Ohga. He's not like that at all personality-wise, but...like, I just think he's lonely, being the only guy like that where he is. I kinda wanna be with him."

"..."

"So...thanks a whole bunch, Saionji! This is, like, *such* a shot of courage for me. Even if he turns me down, I'm ready to try again, like, right away!"

Topping off that declaration with a bright smile, Mano tapped her device to the reader on the edge of the table to pay and stood up. Giving Saionji one final polite bow, she bashfully walked away. In her hands, held tightly like her life depended on it, was what I assumed to be that silver plate from Café du Chocolat.

Once Mano was gone, Saionji sat down on a nearby sofa. She seemed pretty content with how she had handled that, or satisfied with herself anyway. Her red hair rustled a bit as she looked around the café, and then she turned toward my table and spoke up.

"...I hope it works out with Mano."

"Yeah... I kinda do, too."

"Hee-hee! Do you *really* think that? After working so hard to block me?"

"Those were the conditions I was given, that's all. You know that. Whether *this* works or not doesn't have anything to do with the Game, so of course I'm rooting for her."

"Ohhh?"

Her tone made it sound like she was teasing me, and she let out a quiet chuckle. Saionji's ruby eyes quietly settled on me as she folded her arms over her lower chest.

"By the way...Mano's gone, you know. Why don't you come over to this table already? It looks weird, us talking across tables like this."

"Yeah, yeah."

At Saionji's request, I stood up, paid for the iced coffee I was drinking, and sat across from her. Normally, it wasn't good for us to be seen together, no matter what our positions were, but fortunately, we were in the middle of a Unique

Star competition, and that was a good enough excuse for anyone who saw us.

Still, I didn't want to be stuck here for *too* long...

"...Oh! Hey, Shinohara, look at this one moment. It's a new DearScript page... I guess the next quest has already been released."

"Huh?"

I hurriedly picked out my device. Checking the screen projection, there was indeed a new DearScript notification—and given the timing, it must be to inform us about the second quest.

*The client for the first quest was Mano from Ohga, and the person it was assigned to and the guy Mano was interested in are both from Ohga as well. In that case, will it be Eimei's turn next or something?*

I let my imagination wander as I tapped the notification, holding back my nerves. I couldn't afford to give up another round, so the next set of rules was extremely important to me.

Then, as if responding to my impatience, the quest outline came up.

*Unique Star Competition – Second Quest*

*Client: Nanase Asamiya    Assigned to: Hiroto Shinohara*

*Quest: "I want to get as close emotionally to Shinji Enomoto as possible."*

*Victory Conditions (Hiroto Shinohara): Go on a date with a member of the opposite sex to serve as a "dating guide" for the client.*

*Victory Conditions (Sarasa Saionji): Prevent Hiroto Shinohara from achieving his victory conditions.*

There, inside this mostly empty café, the best response my befuddled brain could come up with was:

"...What's up with *this*?"





**K the Sweet-Loving Teen** 5/23 9:33 PM

Today I tried the “Legendary Cheesecake” from Café du Chocolat... but I don’t know what to say. After all the desserts I’ve raved about on this account, I just can’t find the words to express what this cheesecake means to me. In a word, it’s “happiness” (1/?)

💬 79 replies   ➡️ 1220 reposts   ★ 2799 likes



**K the Sweet-Loving Teen**

The moment it landed on my tongue...the sweet aroma hidden away inside spread across my mouth, offering the most exquisite texture. The balance between mellowness and fluffiness is one key to any cheesecake...but Café du Chocolat’s take on that is simply miraculous. That’s because... (2/?)



**Yuuka**

I saw you won the Chocolat event, K! Congratulations! Reading your review makes me wanna try it, too!



**Runaruna @K-fan**

You’ve truly done it again... The Empress put up a killer showing, too, but you were just overwhelming, K. I love how you reviewed the cheesecake before even mentioning how you won the event. You’re so awesome!



**Little Devil of Eimei** ♥

You rock, K! ♥ But the hoodie guy I saw with you on IslandTube reminded me a lot of Noa’s crush, Hiroto... Can I DM you for the deets??



**K the Sweet-Loving Teen** 5/22 3:20 PM

Tomorrow marks the opening of the first Café du Chocolat location in the Academy. They’ll release the rules of the event in the morning, so I’m going to bed now to prepare. Whether you’re participating or not, you’re going to love this place, I guarantee it

➡️ 220 reposts   ★ 361 likes



**K the Sweet-Loving Teen** 3/2 6:20 PM

Huuuuge news! I heard a rumor that Café du Chocolat is opening a place in the Academy this May. I’m too excited to sleep already

➡️ 118 reposts   ★ 208 likes

## Chapter 3

### The Ruthlessly Tactical Double Date

#

After watching Mano go off to try her luck with Fujishiro, I looked over the details of the next quest with Saionji. That night, I was looking at my DearScript orders one more time.

On the screen was Nanase Asamiya herself—playing with her bright blond hair to ward off the nerves, occasionally stealing a glance at the camera. She was a Six Star from Class 3-A of Eimei in her third year of high school. She had done some modeling work in the past, which was obvious from the amount of work she'd put into perfecting her look. She was also a great athlete, with incredible perception skills and genius-level coordination...which is to say, she seemed surprisingly physical.

Her message went like this:

*“Um...so, yeah, I’m Nanase Asamiya, the client. Thanks for taking me.*

*“But let me get one thing straight first—people treat this as some kind of love advice thing, but my situation is a bit different. I mean, I’m not in love with Shinji at all... In fact, I totally hate him. I’d rather be alone any day of the week than have him as my boyfriend.*

*“But putting that aside for a second...everyone has someone like that in their life, right? A member of the opposite sex they’re with all the time but who never sees them like ‘that’...as a woman. That’s kind of...you know, I think the general opinion would be that it’s weird, right? I don’t care how Shinji feels at all—like, I’m completely not interested—but if the way he acts means I’m not attractive at all...well, that’d kind of suck.*

*“I mean, Shinji’s, like, incredibly popular with girls. They’ve kind of dwindled lately, but he’s had a ton of would-be girlfriends ask him to go out with them. I*

*guess he turns them down every time...but maybe he'll take the next offer he sees, you know? What if someone way cuter than me asks him out on a date? Or maybe they'll be smart and well-mannered like him, not some girl who keeps arguing with him day in, day out? I've started to think about that lately, and... you know, it's gotten me down, in kind of a weird way.*

*"So...since I got a reply from Meetia and all, I thought I might as well ask for a little help.*

*"Here's what I want, basically. I'd like you to show me and Shinji exactly what a 'normal date' is like, you know? Or more like, act one out for us...and, you know, once he sees that, even someone as oblivious as Shinji ought to start thinking about me a little more, don't you think? There'd be more of, like, a good mood between us...*

*"B-but it's not like I want us to be like that or anything! No way! Though I'm not doing this just to have a laugh at his expense, either. So...please help!"*

*"...I see."*

I'd watched the message a number of times by now, but it was still such a huge shock that all I could do was sit there scowling with my arms crossed. In the video, Asamiya definitely seemed to be talking about the same thing I'd been asked to do for the second quest—it wasn't some unrelated thing at all. But still...

"She wants to see a sample date, huh...?"

I couldn't help but say the words out loud. No matter how many times I read the details of the quest, it was nothing at all like what I'd anticipated.

The first quest in the Unique Star competition had been built around Rainbow Pâtisserie—a kind of pseudo-Game—so I figured we'd have some other Game to tackle in the second quest, too. But now that it was revealed, it was a *date*, of all things? Saionji had also been stunned into silence, and I could understand why.

"This *is* a little unexpected, though," said Himeji, her silver hair swaying gently as she placed a teacup in front of me.

"If I may," she whispered, still in her maid outfit. She sat next to me, her clear

blue eyes looking into mine. “Ms. Asamiya has been wholly unable to hide her attachment to Mr. Enomoto for as long as I’ve known them...but I do think, at least, that she’s been trying to keep it a secret. It’s certainly a surprise to see her so honest with her feelings.”

“Yeah...or, really, I think she’s *still* meaning to hide them. She denied it multiple times in the video.”

“Oh? ...Oh. You’re right, yes.”

Himeji’s eyes widened for a moment, but then she nodded. The evidence was clear.

But anyway, back to the matter at hand—the second quest of the Unique Star competition revolved around helping Nanase Asamiya with her love life. For me, the victory conditions were, “Go on a date with a member of the opposite sex to serve as a ‘dating guide’ for the client.” Do that, and I win the quest; fail, and Saionji wins it all.

“However,” said a questioning Himeji as her silver hair fell around her shoulders, “showing her a sample date is a rather abstract way to describe the victory conditions, don’t you think? For example, Master, you and I live alone, so you might be able to stretch the meaning of that enough to call it a ‘home date,’ right?”

“A... A home date...?”

“Stop acting so embarrassed, Master. If a man asks a woman to put on a maid outfit during a home date, that takes on a certain warped meaning... Regardless, what I’m trying to say is that the gamemaster has a lot of leeway in determining whether you beat this quest or not. Having such ambiguous rules shouldn’t normally be allowed.”

The term *home date* had a sort of sweet echo to it that almost made my brain shut down, but Himeji remained expressionless, her finger in the air as she spoke. And she had a good point. I had no idea how you were supposed to judge how “successful” a date was.

But the solution to that was actually all written up in the DearScript rules.

“Well, it looks like I’m being provided with a checklist of things to do this time.

It's a list of six things Asamiya described as her 'ideal date,' and if I can check them all off, the date's a success. But I only get one shot at this date—and it's next Sunday, June 5."

"I see... So you don't have total freedom in this date. If you're given *some* guidance, I suppose it's more like a Game than I first thought."

"Yeah. So here's the list."

I tapped the device on the table to open up the DearScript app again. Scrolling down to the bottom of the second quest page, I saw a list of six items required for a successful date. They were:

*General — Hold hands.*

*Movie Theater — Spontaneously look into each other's eyes during a romantic scene.*

*Café — One partner has the other say "ahh," then feeds them the strawberry from a parfait.*

*Shopping — The girl tries on something at a store, and the man compliments her.*

*Amusement Park — Watch the parade sitting shoulder to shoulder.*

*Ferris Wheel — Secretly embrace inside the car.*

"" ... ""

The text on the screen blew us away, so much so that all Himeji and I could do was exchange a silent glance. I mean...yeah, I suppose these are pretty standard things to see at some point in a date. Taken individually, there was nothing strange or out of place with any of them. But having them listed in order like a business proposal created this completely unnecessary pressure that pretty much floored me.

"So this is Ms. Asamiya's idea of an ideal date...? Maybe this is rude of me, but it's surprisingly idyllic and cute. Like a young girl's idea of what a date is."

"That's a good way of putting it."

There was something pure and innocent to it. One might even call it naive.

*But a Ferris wheel...? I better brace myself for that one.*

I shook my head, feeling an aversion to something that didn't have anything at all to do with dating... For what I suppose are extremely common reasons, out of all the standard theme park attractions, the Ferris wheel was my least favorite. But if it was explicitly listed as part of the quest, then there was no avoiding it.

"Well, ignoring the details for the moment...I'm gonna need to tick every one of these boxes to win the second quest of the Unique Star competition. And just like before, I've been given an order that I need to complete."

I looked down at my device again. My eyes settled on a passage right beneath the quest description and victory conditions.

*Order: In addition to Hiroto Shinohara, Nanase Asamiya must also complete an identical checklist. This checklist is independent of Hiroto Shinohara's; checking a box on one list will not fill it on the other. Her dating partner will be Shinji Enomoto, who must not be made aware of these orders or the quest surrounding them.*

"...She has a checklist, too?" Himeji said half-unconsciously, her clear eyes looking at the screen. She brooded over this for a while but eventually looked up, her silver hair rustling a bit as she quietly looked back at me.

"So...the way this works is Ms. Asamiya will be on a date with Mr. Enomoto at the same time as you, Master? And *she* needs to complete all the items on this checklist as well...? And we're not allowed to get *any* help from Mr. Enomoto at all?"

"...Seems so, yeah."

"That's...a tall order."

Himeji shook her head, her voice soft. But that sort of reaction was only to be expected; despite being childhood friends for over ten years, Shinji Enomoto and Nanase Asamiya constantly went at it like cats and dogs. They were both totally compatible and totally *in*-compatible with each other, capable of working in perfect sync, then arguing for the next three hours straight over nothing. Asamiya was too self-conscious to accept how she really felt about

Enomoto—everybody knew that by now. The real problem was Enomoto. Someone as obstinate *and* oblivious as him probably really *didn't* know Asamiya liked him that way. Maybe if we explicitly spelled out everything for him, he wouldn't mind cooperating with us—he'd probably see it as his duty as student council president. But we were blocked from doing that, even.

“...I suppose the double-date approach would be the most natural way of going about this,” Himeji said, looking me in the eye as she raised her head. “If you're both tackling the same checklist, it'd be most efficient to do it together. That, and depending on how things work out, the Company could force some of those conditions to happen, if need be. We have to complete both lists, so there's no reason to split up.”

“Yeah... Those two pretty much *have* to be there, or it wouldn't really be a sample date at all. A double date's the most realistic option. If Asamiya or Enomoto are busy that day, we're pretty much sunk...but I doubt that'll be a problem, huh?”

“Likely not, no. Given how smoothly this whole competition with Rina has gone so far, it makes sense to assume that things are being arranged behind our backs. Of course, Mr. Enomoto is known to be so perceptive that he's called the 'All-Seeing,' so we'll need to be very careful he doesn't find out about the quest when we invite him... Looking at it this way, the order to keep him in the dark seems quite a bit tougher than the victory conditions. At least it should be very easy to check all the boxes on *your* list.”

“Oh...? You think?”

“Yes, Master. Unlike Ms. Asamiya, you're not bound by any rule to keep *your* date in the dark about the quest, so you can just reveal all this to someone you trust, and the rest will work itself out. Rina will almost certainly try to interfere with you, but if your partner for the date knows the checklist as well, it won't be that hard to cover all the bases. If you choose someone close to you, Master, then everything should go smoothly.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right. Someone close to me, huh...? Oh?”

Just as I'd begun to ponder over who to take, my device began rhythmically vibrating on the table, as if it had been waiting for that very moment. It was an



incoming call—or, actually, an incoming video chat. The caller displayed in the window was Noa Akizuki.

“...Is she psychic or something?”

“Maybe.”

Himeji was pouting a little (or so it seemed to me), and I gave her a tight smile as I decided to answer Akizuki’s call. Closing the DearScript app, I projected a fairly large screen and tapped Accept Connection. As soon as I did, a familiar girl’s face filled the screen.

This was Noa Akizuki, a third-year Six Star in the Eimei School nicknamed the Little Devil. She looked small and innocent, and her chestnut-brown, fluffy twin ponytails made her look younger than her years, but her chest had a certain volume that was the exact opposite of all that. The ways she showed off her charms, got close to people, and attracted their attention were all first-class. She was sly that way, knowing full well just how cute she was.

*“Eh-heh-heh! ♡”*

Now she was waving both hands at me, a sweet smile on her face.

*“Hello, Hiroto! Long time no see! ♪ Have you been okay, not seeing me for so long?”*

“Didn’t we talk yesterday afternoon at school?”

*“Right, it’s been a whole day! I called you because I thought you might be feeling lonely by now! ♡ You don’t mind chatting with me a little, do you?”*

“Chatting, huh...?”

I suppose I could interpret this as her having no real business apart from killing some time with me. It wasn’t particularly rare for Akizuki to call me like this, but right now her sense of timing was almost miraculous.

*Noa Akizuki... A Six Star at Eimei who’ll definitely agree to this if I explain everything. She’s dealt with Saionji before, too. Yep—she’s perfect.*

I put my right hand to my mouth as I thought it over, then decided to bring it up right then and there.

“Hey, Akizuki?”

“Yeaah, Hiroto?”

“Listen, um...if I asked you to *pretend* to go on a date with me, would that make you angry?”

“Huuuh? What? I’d never get angry at you, Hiroto! ♪ Not over something like a date...and...huh? A...a date...?! Huuuh?!!!”

She had been her usual cute and cunning self at first, but after a little while looking confused, it seemed like Akizuki had finally realized what I was asking for, and she let out a wild shriek. Akizuki put her face closer to the screen, leaning in on her chair.

“Wh-wh-wh-what do you mean, Hiroto?! What do you mean, a date?!!”

“I mean exactly that. Not a real one, though. We’d just be pretending... I’m actually in the middle of a Game with the Empress from Ohga, and as part of that, I’m looking for someone to act as my girlfriend.”

“You want me...to be your girlfriend...?”

Akizuki’s eyes seemed enchanted by the idea, as a light shade of red suffused her cheeks. She stared into space for a moment, murmuring the words. Then she brought both hands to her cheeks, squirming in her seat.

“Eh-heh-heh! Just imagining it makes me feel like I’m floating... ♡”

“Floating...? Should I take that as a yes?”

“Of course! ♪ I’ll pretend to be your girlfriend or do anything else you want me to do! ...Um...”

Suddenly, I noticed that Akizuki was starting to act a bit weird. I glowered a bit at my device, putting my face closer to it. On the other side, I saw that Akizuki had shed her usual sly demeanor. Now she really was squealing with awkward embarrassment. Her face was dark red as she looked back at me.

“...I, I, I don’t know if I can do this, actually!”

Her eyes were shut tight as she forced the words out.

“I’m sorry, Hiroto! Imagining being your girlfriend and us holding hands and

*hugging and kissing and stuff... It just makes me so happy I feel like I'll stop breathing! I mean, you're really, really special to me, so if I start to picture this as a date, I'll probably freeze up so bad I won't be able to speak at all... Eh-heh-heh! I guess I can dish it out, but I can't take it, huh? ♡*

*"Aww..."*

*"So, yeah, sorry! This date talk might be coming a little too soon for me. But I really do wanna help you, Hiroto, so if there's anything else I can do, don't be too shy to ask!"*

She put her hands together in apology. Even her bowing her head a little like this was so cunningly cute of her. *"I'll ask you out on a real date sometime, okay? ♡"* she said, giving a devilish little wink before ending the call.

"...So much for that," I muttered as I turned off the projected screen. With how much she usually flirts with me, I was sure she'd be up for this, but I guess even pretending to be my girlfriend was asking for too much.

"Which, yeah, I get it if she finds it a little embarrassing...but if Akizuki won't do it..."

"..."

"...Um, Himeji?"

I had been considering who to ask next, my right hand at the corner of my lips, when I realized that Himeji had been rather silent. I raised my head and cautiously turned toward her. Himeji was wearing her usual blank expression, although her lips were pouting a bit. Those clear blue eyes seemed to be driving into me like daggers.

Then...

"...You're so mean, Master."

She turned her body, maid uniform and all, toward me.

"I will admit that Ms. Akizuki is a very cute girl, and that she'd be quite suitable for a date-related quest. But don't you think you're forgetting something? What need is there to reach out to any other girl when you have an obedient maid who does anything you ask her for right here?"

“...! B-but, that’s...”

“Am I not good enough?”

Himeji leaned up off her seat toward me. A bit of fire lurked beneath the forlornness in her tone.

I’d known from the start, too, of course. Akizuki just happened to call me at exactly the perfect time, but of course I saw Shirayuki Himeji as my first candidate for this pseudo-date. She was my maid, roommate, and classmate, the leader of the Company, and all-around an incredibly admirable young woman. I knew she’d never turn me down...but something unconscious within me was dodging the idea. Why? ...Well, because it’d be so awkward, of course. Asking the constantly pushy Akizuki out on a date was one thing, but Himeji? It took a completely different mindset for something like that.

“Because I think I am the most suitable candidate for the job.”

Even as I sat there frozen, her clear eyes looked right into me as she continued speaking.

“I know every aspect of your situation, Master, from start to finish. I am always on your side, no matter what. Performing a date with you would be child’s play.”

“Y-yeah, but...I mean, we’re gonna have to hug and hold hands and stuff...”

“That won’t be a problem, either, Master. I don’t mind you touching me at all, and since it’s the device deciding whether we’ve completed an item or not, as long as we can trick it into checking the box for us, we’ll be fine. For example, we could do it like this...”

“Huh?! Wh-whoa, wait...!”

My voice clearly indicated that I was about to lose my mind, but Himeji ignored it, lightly pacing toward me. Before I knew it, her white-gloved hands were around me—they weren’t directly touching, but it really did *look* like she was hugging me. Maybe it’d be good enough to trick our devices’ programming, but unfortunately, it led to a mountain of other problems. Her perfectly formed face, pretty enough to make me gasp for air, was now right next to me, and her light breath directly caressed my eardrums. I could even see the nape of her

neck now, as pale as a sheet—

“...Um, excuse me, Master,” she said, then immediately squirmed around a bit, her face bright red. “This might be...a little too much, actually.”

#

A few days had passed since the details of the second quest had been divulged to us. Our double date—sorry, our pseudo—double date—was coming up next Sunday, and preparations were now well underway.

One big part of this operation was to get Enomoto to agree to it, so the first person we reached out to was Asamiya. I explained everything to her—DearScript, the Unique Star competition with Saionji, and the fact that I’d accepted her request—and I also added Akizuki to the group. After our video call, she had been curious about how things were going, and Asamiya was fine with it, too (“Noa-chi is no problem.”), so I got in contact with her and told her everything.

Having Akizuki along for the ride did offer us one useful advantage. Really, her presence allowed us to establish this double date as an actual get-together, so Enomoto wouldn’t find it unnatural and suspect something was up. If we arranged some kind of wacky outing with me, him, Himeji, and Asamiya out of nowhere, he might guess our plans just from that...but add Akizuki to the mix, and now it was just the team from the May Interschool Competition having a fun little reunion. *Much* more natural. (Akizuki was actually going to cancel last-minute and support Asamiya undercover instead.)

Speaking of support, our discussions with the Company were mostly complete as well. Their job this time would mostly involve enemy recon—i.e., keeping an eye on Saionji’s moves. Her job was to ensure our date failed, so she was bound to try messing it up from the get-go. How we overcame this would be key to beating the second quest.

*This is starting to feel completely unlike prepping for a date...*

I sighed, reflecting on how bizarre a situation this was...but regardless, the date came all too quickly for us.

Come Sunday, June 5, I was standing by myself at the bus roundabout by the station near the Eimei School’s main entrance.

“Maybe I got here too early,” I said softly to myself. I had told everyone to meet here at nine AM, but the time now was only 8:40. I was sure Saionji would be up just as early (and monitoring me from some hiding place, no doubt), but even so, I couldn’t deny that I might have been a little too eager.

Himeji, my date for today, would be arriving a little late. By the time I went down to the living room this morning, she had already been in her maid outfit cooking breakfast for me. But just before I left, she’d told me, “You go ahead, Master” and “I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise, so I’ll show up after I change.” Now my expectations were so high, I was starting to worry about my heart rate.

Just then...

*“Hellooo! ♡ Can you hear me okay, Hiroto?”*

Kagaya was usually the voice I heard from my earpiece, but now I had a different, much sweeter one echoing in my ear. It belonged to Noa Akizuki, and while she would mainly be offering support to Asamiya, she could also switch channels to communicate with me.

I tapped my earpiece. “Yeah, I can hear you... You’re here pretty early, aren’t you?”

*“Eh-heh-heh! Well, yeah! 🎵 I’m a ‘romance producer’ today, and that’s a really, really important job! I was so excited for it I couldn’t sleep at all... And guess. What. Else!”*

“What?”

*“This also give me the chance to have your ear all to myself. 🎵 ...Ready? Hffffff!*  
♡”

“...! Stop that, Akizuki, or I’m cutting you off.”

*“Awww, just a little bit more! Just a little bit, okay? I’ve been researching a lot about binaural cues and ASMR and stuff, so I wanted to see how you’d react to it... ♡”*

“That’s what you’re devoting your energy to?”

*“Eh-heh-heh! Sorry, sorry. I’ll keep the sexy breathing to a minimum, okay? ♡”*

I listened silently to her half-joking whispers, sighing softly so she wouldn't hear me. Having that eternally sly, cunning voice broadcast straight into my ear made it sound twice as sexy. My blood was pumping even without her doing all that heavy breathing.

*Better keep her muted unless I need her*, I thought as I checked my watch...or tried to, when:

"Sorry to make you wait, Master."

Hearing that clear, familiar voice made me reflexively turn her way. It was the same sort of thing she said to me every single day, so I wasn't really prepared for what I was about to see. That might have been a fatal mistake.

"...!"

In an instant, it felt like all the sound had been sucked away from the world. I was transfixed by the girl standing before me, and everything else in sight began to distort like a blurry photo. This floating, breezy, completely unreal sensation made my legs feel unsteady.

"...? Um, Master?"

It was Himeji. But not the same Himeji I knew. We lived with each other every day, so if I got *this* much of a shock just from seeing her face, I would have lost my sanity long ago. No, the problem was her outfit. She had on a pure white dress that went down to her knees, paired with a light blue cardigan. A casual handbag hung down in front of her body, making her look even more like a girl from a proper upper-class family. So *this* was what she normally wears?

"Oh... Oh, ohhh..."

The shock was intense enough to make me forget how to speak. It was just way too cute, no matter how you sliced it. I mean, her normal maid outfit, her Eimei uniform, her occasional flirtation with pajamas I saw around the house... They were all quite charming as well. But even if this was a fake date, going this far to dress up for a day out was just so cute I could barely take my eyes off her.

"Ummm...is there something wrong with how I look? I haven't worn an outfit like this in a while, so I wasn't sure what to go with... Does it look weird?"

I was just standing there, not offering any feedback, which was now making Himeji anxious. There was a bit of a gloomy cast to her expression, which finally snapped me out of my stupor. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to keep it cool, suppressing the heat that seemed to be boiling my brain on the inside, as I looked straight back at her clear eyes.

“No, um... You’re just so cute, I’m in trouble.”

We stood there bashfully for a few minutes.

“Um... Master?”

Himeji next to me had her eyes on the ground, but then she shook her head and quietly looked back up. Her silver hair swayed for a moment...and I have to say, being called “Master” when she was dressed like a prim, proper young lady instead of in her usual maid outfit gave me an intense fear that I was doing something forbidden. It almost seemed criminal.

“So, um, I have a proposal. We have a little bit of time, so what do you think about tackling one of the items on our checklist right now? Maybe it’s not what the client meant, but as far as I can tell, Ms. Asamiya doesn’t have to be nearby for us to check them off the list.”

“Ah, yeah, that’s true.”

I nodded back at her refreshing voice. She was right. Seeing Himeji in normal clothes had caused my mind to short out, but this was a Unique Star competition, not a real date. To complete Asamiya’s request, we had to complete *two* successful dates today—in other words, tick off every box on both my and Asamiya’s checklists.

“But with most of them, we need to be in a certain spot to complete them, right? The only one not location dependent is the first one—holding hands.”

“That’s right. It’s not quite as awkward as the other ones, either...and whether it’s fake or not, it’s something we’ll have to do as part of the date. Plus, we can do it anytime, so Rina shouldn’t have a way to block us. So, Master...if you don’t mind, could we hold hands?”

“...!”



The whole time she was whispering to me, she was gazing up at me from her position to my side. Her left hand moved away from her handbag, drifting just a bit closer toward me—a hesitant gesture, almost as if she was waiting for me to take it. Right now, she wasn't wearing her white maid's gloves but was revealing her smooth, bare fingers.

"Ah, sure, all right. So...um, here goes."

"Okay."

I focused strictly on my limbs to keep the butterflies at bay as I reached out with my right hand. It slowly approached Himeji's left, finally reaching its destination after a moment.

"...!"

Then a soft, chilly sensation shot across not just my hand, but my whole body. All we were doing was holding hands—our fingers weren't even linked like I often saw couples do—but it was still more...ticklish than I'd thought it would be. *Total euphoria* might be a better word for it, actually. If this was what couples got to experience every day, no wonder they were generally happy with life.

But then I noticed something.

"...Huh? That's weird."

"...? What's the matter, Master?"

"Um, this..."

We kept holding hands as I opened DearScript and showed the screen to Himeji. The checklist for the second quest of the Unique Star checklist was there, and it was the same as when we'd gone over it during our strategy meeting...but the fact that it was *exactly* the same was strange. Himeji and I were holding hands, so it was odd that the first item on my list hadn't been checked off. The little box was empty.

Himeji grew a little puzzled. "That *is* odd. Based on what I read in the details, Master, 'holding hands' involves you joining hands with your partner for at least five seconds. I think we've held them for two minutes now..."

“Yeah, we’re definitely doing this right. But if there’s still no check mark, I wonder what... Hmm?”

I normally put my right hand to my lips to think, but right now that hand was occupied, so I shut both eyes instead. The next moment, the device vibrated, cutting off my words. I looked at the screen with a deep sense of foreboding, and as expected, it was a notification from DearScript. In the newest available page, outlining the details behind the second quest, there was now a new passage that wasn’t there before. It read:

*New Objective Unlocked!*

*Additional Order: Perform all checklist items with a female student from another ward. Any applicable candidate will suffice for this requirement. If your partner does not satisfy this condition, no actions will be marked off your checklist.*

“Wha...?!”

My eyes burst open. They wouldn’t accept my partner for the date unless she was a student from another ward? In which case, continuing this pseudo-date with Himeji would do nothing to fill my checklist?

Yeah, I’ll admit, the victory conditions *had* seemed a bit too loose compared to the first quest. The order concerning Asamiya was one thing, but as long as I had a willing partner, I wouldn’t have had much trouble with my own checklist. We’d been talking about that ever since our strategy meeting, but having this restriction added the day of was just too much.

“Hmm...”

Himeji had seen the update as well, and she looked just as concerned as she thought this over. She raised her head, as if she’d suddenly thought of something, then looked around and called out to a female student who had just walked out of the station.

“Um, excuse me! Do you have a moment?”

“Hm? ...Uh, a-are you talking to me? Yeah, sure, but...”

“Thank you very much. Forgive my rudeness, but I looked at your profile on

my device. You attend the Ohmi School over in the Tenth Ward, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m not an Eimei student—I’m just meeting a friend here. But...isn’t that, um, Shinohara? The strongest person in the Academy? Am I wrong?”

“No, you are not. This is Mr. Hiroto Shinohara, the only Seven Star in the Academy, just as you surmised. Would you like to shake hands with him, perhaps?”

“Huh? Oh, um, sure, yeah. If I had to say one way or the other, the answer’s more yes, I guess...?”

“You heard her, Master,” Himeji said, twisting her upper body around to look back at me. It was clear what her scheme was, so I mentally switched gears and put my “strongest in the Academy” mask on, extending my right hand without hesitating.

“Ah, thank you... Um, you were really cool during ASTRAL. I think Eimei and Ohmi were only fighting together for a short while, but that was, uh, really exciting to watch.”

“Glad to hear. If you happen to know anyone on their team, tell them I said thanks for helping out.”

“Um, okay.”

The girl nodded briskly, perhaps a bit nervous at having a (fake) Seven Star in front of her. Breaking off the handshake after a good amount of time, I saw her walk away in my peripheral vision as I looked back at my DearScript app—and *this* time, the *hold hands* item on my list had a check mark by it.

“...It worked? So this isn’t a joke or a mistake after all. It’s really *not* gonna accept a dating partner unless she’s from another ward.”

“It looks that way, yes. Um, Master...do you really think we can finish this quest?”

Himeji looked a little nervous as she turned her eyes toward me.

“If dating me doesn’t fill out the checklist, that pretty much torpedoed the strategy we prepared for today. We could complete the ‘hold hands’ objective

by forcing it, like we did just now, but that might not be too possible with the other ones...”

“Hmm, yeah... It’d be one thing if I’d planned to have a partner from another ward, but this is too much of a challenge. I really don’t think we can make it through this... However!”

My right hand went to my lips as I quietly thought this over. Clearly, we were facing a crisis. That was undeniable, but knowing this gamemaster of ours, she must have predicted from the start that I’d pick Himeji as my date. She had then issued this extra order on the day we went out, at the worst possible moment—which suggested to me that maybe she *hadn’t* deliberately closed every door for us yet. After all, if she made this impossible from the very start, it wouldn’t function as a Game.

*But I really don’t see us finding a substitute with this little notice. If only there was a girl from another ward who’d just happen to play along with this pseudo-date for me today... Hmm?*

My thoughts racing, I raised my head slightly, suddenly realizing something. There *was* someone like that, wasn’t there? A girl from another ward, who would be in my vicinity for the entire day. Unlike my victory conditions, the orders given to me weren’t revealed to my competitor, so she’d have no way of knowing that I was limited in my choice of dating partners. She’d probably go all-out to block my date with Himeji, just as planned.

*I’m sure she was watching that exchange just now, too...but oh well. At this point, we’ll just have to take this as far as it goes, I guess.*

This was going to be like walking a tightrope, no doubt about it, but I *did* see a chance at victory ahead. So, with a shake of my head, I decided to hold another strategy meeting with Himeji.

#

“...Hmph. So Akizuki can’t make it, then?” Enomoto said with a sigh.

We were in the lobby of a movie theater attached to a large shopping mall in the Academy’s First Ward. Enomoto was standing in the ticket line, phone in hand.

Shinji Enomoto was the president of Eimei's student council, and a man fresh in my memory after we had competed together in ASTRAL during the May Interschool Competition. He was a Six Star nicknamed the All-Seeing, and his memory and intuition skills were among the best the island had to offer. He also had an irritatingly no-nonsense personality and a stubborn streak a mile long, and his default facial expression made him look like he'd just sucked on a lemon.

"Y-yeah, sounds like it," replied Nanase Asamiya, another integral part of today. Her loose black off-the-shoulder sweater revealed a worryingly large amount of her upper body, and her denim shorts accentuated her long, slender legs. Her short hair featured curly tips, and she had done her nails for today (both fashion pointers taught to her by Akizuki). It was a bold fashion statement, one that highlighted all the natural tools that made her excel as a model.

"Like," she continued, her right hand playing with her bright blond hair, "it sounds like Noa-chi got a bad stomachache out of nowhere, so, um, she can't make it."

"...? Well, sure, I received a message, too, so I know that much... Something wrong, Nanase? You seem to be avoiding looking at me."

"N-no, I'm not, Shinji! You wanna say we're lying or something, don't you?!"

"I never said that. What point is there in lying about this? I'm just saying that if one of us can't make it, why don't we postpone this for some other day?"

"N-no, we can't do that! I can go out with Noa-chi anytime...and, like, if we cancel today, I know Noa-chi's gonna beat herself up over it. Why can't you be a little more considerate, you moron?"

"Aha. I'll throw that last question right back at you, but otherwise, I agree. I thought that Akizuki could keep you out of trouble if she were here...but oh well."

"H-hey! I haven't stooped low enough that I need *you* to act like my mom around me! *You* wouldn't have even gotten out of bed today if I didn't call you!"

"Don't be stupid. I set the alarm so I'd make it here in time. I was only late

because of all that nonsense you were giving me on the phone just before I put my clothes on. All ‘*Oooh, don’t wear your uniform, oooh, don’t wear sweats out in public...*’ I had to spend that much more time selecting my wardrobe thanks to you.”

“Well, you can’t wear your school uniform when you’re going out on a da—on a day out with us, okay?”

Asamiya’s shoulders were slumped—she already looked exasperated with him. And, yeah, I bet Enomoto *would* do that unless someone told him not to. I could totally picture him wearing his uniform on his days off...and since he didn’t think today was a date at all, he’d have no reason to dress up.

*“Eh-heh-heh! He looks pretty decent, at least! ♪ And he can be perceptive like that, too, so maybe he had an outfit picked out but just wanted to paint it as Miya forcing him into it! ♡”*

*Whoa, that...actually sounds pretty plausible. That’d really irritate me if I had to deal with it, though...*

I internally snickered a little at Akizuki’s commentary in my ear. But now we were finally through the line and at the ticket machine. There was no need for all four of us to buy separate tickets, so I stepped up to the touch panel.

*Four student tickets...and the seats? Let’s go with...*

The interface allowed us to choose our seats. We were here to watch a film just about ending its run, so the theater would be pretty empty. Normally, our seat assignment wouldn’t really matter...but while this wasn’t a date, this *also* wasn’t just us screwing around. If I half-assed any aspect of today, it could quickly lead to my defeat.

*I better take another look at the “movie theater” objective.* On the checklist that embodied Asamiya’s idea of an ideal date, the second item read *Spontaneously look into each other’s eyes during a romantic scene*. Reading further, the exact conditions were for both dating partners to keep eye contact going for at least three seconds during a kissing scene.

With that in mind, our seating arrangement was all but set in stone. Instead of the four of us sitting in a row, we’d take a two-by-two formation, with me and

Himeji up front and Asamiya next to Enomoto in the row behind us. That way, Asamiya was free to act without worrying about us watching her—and I was guaranteed to have an open seat next to me, which would be helpful.

So I quickly made our purchases. “Right,” I said, turning around to face the other three. “Let’s get some popcorn and drinks before it starts.”

We made it into the theater around ten minutes later. I climbed the stairs, ticket stub in hand, heading toward the back of the room. As predicted, there were few other patrons—in fact, we almost had the place to ourselves. Scanning the whole theater, I could count the rest of the audience on one hand.

“...I think these are our seats, Master,” Himeji said, spinning around toward me. She had been watching the lit-up signs at our feet as we walked.

“Right.” I sat down next to her, putting the coffee I’d bought in the drink holder and my medium popcorn (caramel flavor) on the little table between the two of us. Asamiya and Enomoto, meanwhile, were one row behind us, and I could hear them start to bicker the moment they sat down.

Movie theaters, by the way, come in one of two types—the kind where patrons share the armrests between seats, and the kind where everyone gets their own set of two. This one was the former, so if I plopped my arm down on the armrest, I’d be rubbing up against Himeji’s left arm...which is exactly what happened.

“...! Ah, um, sorry.”

“No, Master, it’s fine... In fact, we can stay like this if you want. It’ll help the performance seem more like a real date.”

She added a little smile to the end of that, staring into my eyes and keeping her arm where it was. It was a pretty bold move by her standards, but we were meant to provide a “sample date” for our companions, so it’d be too much of a blatant lie if we didn’t do at least *this* much. I could sense our companions’ eyes on us from behind now and then, so I couldn’t jerk my arm back that readily.

*It’s just a performance... Just a performance...!*

I was frozen with anxiety inside, but kept it cool on the outside as I looked at the screen.

Then, shortly before the film was set to begin, I saw a lone girl enter the theater. She marched up the stairway, not pausing to look around, and despite all the empty seats, tromped right over to where we were sitting. It wasn't the familiar Ohga uniform, but a cute little pink-and-white outfit—almost as if she was about to embark on her own date, actually. It made my heart skip a beat, despite myself.

It was, of course, Sarasa Saionji, who stood there with her hand on her hip.

“Hmph... Don't *you* have it nice, Shinohara. Using the Unique Star competition as a pretext to go on a date with *my* Yuki. You sure have DearScript to thank for that, don't you? She's *way* out of your league, you know.”

“...Well, hello to you, too, Saionji. What are you so angry about?”

“You were holding Yuki's hand and smiling and stuff! It's *your* fault.”

“Wow, projecting much? ...But why are you dressed in such a cute outfit anyway? Isn't this supposed to be a stealth mission for you?”

“Cute...? W-well, I *had* to, okay?! I don't want to stand out this much, but that was the order I was given. Now I'm attracting even more attention than normal! This is *such* a pain to deal with.”

Saionji sat down next to me on my left side, her cheeks still red and puffed in a dissatisfied pout. I guess DearScript was throwing her for a loop, too.

Still, apart from her outfit, having Saionji show up at this point was exactly what I'd predicted, which I was glad for. She must have been tailing us since this morning, but her first chance to interfere with us *directly* would be in this theater. No way she'd pass up this opportunity, to be sure.

*Phew... Well, time for the first checklist item.*

I turned toward the screen again and let out a small breath.

The movie began shortly afterward, with no further comment from Saionji.

Regarding the “make eye contact with each other during a romantic scene” checklist item, according to Kagaya's research, the only kissing scene in this film was just before the end credits. That meant I had only one chance to earn that check mark, but otherwise, I was free to fully enjoy the film until then.



This movie was a plot-oriented, emotionally driven drama that had received universally great reviews. It was based on a novel that won some kind of prestigious prize last year, and it easily took the number one spot in the box office during its opening week. There wasn't anything particularly new about the story, but what made it stand out was the delicate yet thorough approach it took to depicting the characters' emotions. The protagonist is in love with a woman suffering from a terminal illness, and he throws away everything he has to fulfill her final wish. This wish is something that'd normally never be possible, but the hero doggedly pursues it nonetheless, and at the end, he finally manages to get her to smile again.

*Wow, this is such a great story...*

It really was excellent. I couldn't cry, since I had my image as the strongest student in the Academy to hold up, but it almost seemed like a waste not to shed a few tears. Unlike some convenient fantasy world, there was no way the heroine would suddenly be cured, no matter what her lover did, and seeing the hero struggle so hard to help her, despite knowing all that, took me by the heart and didn't let go until the end.

"Mmh..."

I glanced across at Himeji, who also looked to be fully engrossed in the film. I had a feeling she'd been nibbling away at popcorn for much of the first part, but for the past half hour or so, at least, those light blue eyes of hers hadn't moved away from the screen for a second. I imagine the same was true for the two behind me; all I could hear from them was the shifting of their seats every now and then.

But, sadly, it couldn't last.

*"Sorry to interrupt the entertainment, Hiro, but that scene's about to come up."*

The sound of Kagaya's voice in my ear made me straighten up...but, really, I didn't think I'd have much of a problem with this item on the checklist. Everything was working out just as I'd wanted it to so far, and once the moment arrived, I could do it without even saying a word. My main concern was for Asamiya. We had rehearsed this a few times, but now that the big moment was

here, I couldn't offer her any help. It would all depend on the effort she had put in—along with Akizuki's skills as well.

“...”

Even as I thought about this, the movie was reaching its final climax. The heroine, who'd never really displayed any emotion so far, began to pour her heart out to the hero, telling him how he'd saved her. *“If you weren't there for me, I never would've found any value in my life. My world was a transparent blur, but you painted it full of color. For the first time since I was born...I actually don't want to die.”*

“...!”

It was the first, and last, truly romantic scene in the whole film—a tender embrace, with all the emotion from the rest of the plot thrust into it. The cross-media ad blitz described it as an “incredibly moving masterpiece of film!” and the ending was ephemeral and heartbreaking enough to easily back that up.

*...Wait, no, no, I can't get distracted by this!*

I was bawling internally as I watched the film, but remembering my quest momentarily, I turned to my right and tugged at Himeji's arm. Noticing this, she turned toward me with her watery eyes, quietly looking into mine—but just before our eyes met—

“No!”

I heard a whisper, kept as hushed as possible, and at the same time, someone physically pulled me away from Himeji. I turned to my left, and there in the dim light, I could see those ruby eyes pointed straight at me. Then, trying to keep as quiet as possible, Sarasa Saionji pulled my face toward hers.

“Got you. Okay? Just look at *me*, all right? Not Yuki over there...!”

We were at point-blank range, close enough that I could feel her breath on me. She must've been watching the film, too, because her eyes were as tear filled as Himeji's—but as forceful as she was being, my heart couldn't have been beating much faster. Whenever I tried to move, even a little, she'd pull me by the sleeves toward her. Saionji was now the only thing in my sight...and our eyes were locked on to each other the whole time.

The moment I became aware of that, I felt a vibration from the device in my pocket.

*“Niiice! That just completed the movie-theater objective, Hiro!”*

*...Good.*

Hearing Kagaya’s cheerful voice, I let out a mental sigh of relief.

So this was it—the alternate plan I’d come up with. Nothing I did with Himeji would complete the checklist, but I couldn’t rely on random strangers all day, like I had with the “hold hands” objective; there was no way I’d just happen to run into a girl attending high school in another ward everywhere I went today.

*This* time, though, that actually *had* been the case, kind of. Saionji, ordered to interfere with my date and prevent me from winning, was guaranteed to hang around Himeji and me all day, trying to make sure we screwed everything up. In other words, we already had the bare minimum we needed to complete my orders, and I hadn’t even needed to rely on chance.

*So, basically...I’m luring Saionji into messing with me and Himeji’s pseudo-date and having her help complete the checklist for me.*

I shook my head slowly, picturing how the rest of the day would go.

“Huh...? Wait, did you just check off one of the items on your list?”

Saionji must’ve found out about that right when it happened—presumably she had Asuka or someone serving as her information relay. Her ruby eyes opened wide in shock. She just sat there silently for a bit, but then she must have remembered that our faces were mere millimeters apart, because she sank back into her seat, red from ear to ear.

“Oh, come *onnn*... Did I peel you off Yuki too late? But...”

She started griping to herself, arms folded beneath her chest. I took a side-glance at her as I breathed out a sigh, trying to calm my heart, which was pounding hard for all number of reasons. It was a pretty good way to start the day, I guess. If Saionji figured out what I was up to, we were doomed, so I needed to proceed on tiptoe the whole time...but seeing how this had gone, it no longer seemed completely impossible.

*Ah, wait, but what about Asamiya...?!*

Recalling the other checklist, I subtly looked back at the results on my screen. But surprisingly enough (although maybe she'd yell at me if I put it like that), the *movie theater* box was checked on Asamiya's list, too. I guess she'd managed to drum up enough courage after all.

*Guess there's no way to tell how it went down, though...*

*"...Eh-heh-heh! Wanna know how she did it, Hiroto? ♡"*

The moment I had that thought, Akizuki had whispered her question to me, like she was reading my mind.

*"I tell you," she continued, sounding tremendously happy with herself, "I wish you could have seen it, Hiroto! ♡ They were both focused on the screen, but the moment that kiss scene came on, there was this kind of bittersweet atmosphere between them, and then Miya just happened to look at the president, and then he just happened to look back! Then, you know, they could've looked away right then, but they both tensed up, like 'no, this doesn't mean anything at all...' and they wound up just looking at each other for a long time. Then they started going all red, and... Eh-heh-heh! ♡ Guess I didn't need to give them a push after all, huh? ♪"*

*Wow...*

I marveled at how innocent it all sounded, like two lovers early on in their relationship. Glancing behind me, I saw Enomoto looking the way he usually did—arms folded and pouting—while I could almost see the steam coming off Asamiya's bright red face. Listening to Akizuki's critique just now must've been really embarrassing for her.

*Then...*

*"...Hmph. Well, I'm gonna make you mess it up next time."*

Having already gone through the "depression" and "bargaining" stages of her grief, Saionji next to me quietly stood up. She didn't bother hiding her displeasure, and even stuck her tongue out at me as she turned away. Then she walked away without looking back once.

“...”

Seeing her leave like that, I couldn't help but compare Saionji to Asamiya and Enomoto behind us, who were red in the face with embarrassment but still, in their own way, having the “ideal date.” It made me sigh out loud.

*They couldn't be more different from us... All we're doing is performing this big swindle and calling it a date.*

#

We decided to have lunch at this buffet in the shopping mall that specialized in desserts. That was Asamiya's pick, of course; apparently, the strawberry parfait they offered exclusively for the lunch rush was exquisite, and she'd been meaning to try it out for a while.

Our task at this place was to do the “say ahhh” thing with our partners or have them do it to us. It was straight and to the point, but looking at the details, we couldn't just feed the other person anything—it had to be a piece of strawberry from the top of that lunch-hour parfait.

*They're sure ramping up the difficulty from the movie-theater...*

I was enjoying a stack of thick, fluffy pancakes with syrup, while Himeji and the others talked about the film and what they thought about it. Over in the theater, just looking at someone had done the trick, but here it was *spoon-feeding*? Yeah, it's a classic dating trope, I suppose, but the psychological hurdle you needed to overcome to do it was way higher than the last one. *And* it had to be with a girl from another ward? Come on.

*...But if I can freestyle it like I did in the movie theater, it shouldn't be impossible, at least.*

I tapped my earpiece as I considered my options. According to Kagaya, two girls from Ohga, Saionji included, had just entered the café. Saionji's presence was expected, but the person joining her was Suzuran Kazami, a second-year student and member of Libra, the largest student organization in the Academy. I couldn't see either of them from my seat, but they were no doubt spying on us from somewhere.

The question was, how were they going to try to prevent us from completing

the “say ahhh” task? I mean, it wasn’t like they had many choices. They could physically block us, like Saionji had tried at the movie theater—restraining me and preventing me from doing what I needed to do. A simple, straightforward approach, but I thought that would be a bit hard to do in a restaurant. Holding my arms behind my back in a public place with lots of witnesses wasn’t the kind of all-or-nothing plan Saionji would come up with.

No, plan B here would be to *electronically* block us. In other words, hacking. They could make our ordering device act up so the parfait went to the wrong table, or prevent us from sending orders in the first place—just a few different possibilities. But messing with the café’s hardware would be illegal, of course, and while I was a dyed-in-the-wool cheater, Saionji—who’d earned her Seven Star status the old-fashioned way—was extremely unlikely to pick that route.

That suggested a plan C—and if Kazami was with her, *she* had to be involved with it.

*...Well, if I know that, I can take measures against them.*

With my mind made up, I took a breath and shook my head a little.

Just then, Asamiya, sitting diagonally from me, put her hands on the table and stood up. She had a cheerful smile on her face as she looked around at us all.

“Okay! That was a perfectly sized lunch... How about we go for that parfait to wrap it up?!”

“Sounds good.” Himeji, already enjoying a post-meal hot tea, was the first to voice her agreement. “In fact,” she added, placing her cup on the saucer, “it’d be a waste if we didn’t, given how I’ve been saving space for it. Would you care to join us, Master? Mr. Enomoto?”

“I’m a little tempted when you put it like that...but no, thanks. I’m stuffed. Those pancakes filled me up far too much. How about you, Shinohara?”

“Same here, Enomoto. Those pancakes were *really* good.”

“Yeah, I can hardly believe they’re real, even. Now I want to come here all the time. But what happened to your manners, Shinohara? Didn’t you mean to say *Mr. Enomoto*? I’m a year ahead of you, remember.”

“No, I know... Anyway, Himeji, I think me and Enomoto are gonna pass, so you can just order two of ’em.”

“Hey!”

“Very well, Master. Perhaps I could give you a bite?”

“D-don’t just ignore me...”

Enomoto folded his arms, looking irked from across the table. We’d had conversations like this a million times before, but despite it all, Enomoto had been complaining about my form of address a lot less often lately...or maybe he’d given up on correcting me, but whatever. I wasn’t about to show deference to him—I had a rep as the best in the Academy to uphold—so he was just gonna have to accept it, sooner or later.

Regardless, the two strawberry parfaits Himeji ordered came to our table a few minutes later. She’d ordered them both in extra-large, so they were about the size of the girls’ faces, with layers of sponge cake, mousse, and crunchy bits topped with vanilla ice cream, whipped cream, and a generous amount of chocolate sauce. Around this mountain of flavor was a ring of vivid red strawberries that had been sliced in half. This was a marquee item for the café, and even looking at it was a feast for the eyes.

“...Here goes,” Asamiya said, eyes sparkling as she gripped her spoon and took the first bite. “Mmph! ...Oooh! Wow, this is so sweet... I’m so happy...”

“Hmph. Chew or talk, Nanase, one of the two. Talking with your mouth full is terrible manners.”

“Uh-uh, too bad, Shinji. It already melted, so there was nothing left in my mouth.”

“...I really deserve praise for having the willpower not to reach out and slap you for that.”

Enomoto turned his back to her, offended at this razzing he had been given. Asamiya was too busy tucking into her parfait to care much, but by the time she made it to the strawberries, her pace was clearly flagging. She looked down at her glass, then at Enomoto, then quickly away before they accidentally made eye contact again.

“Ooh...”

*“You can do this, Miya! ♪ You’re all the way in now. Show him a little sex appeal! ♡”*

“I—I can’t...! That’s too much to ask for at once!”

“...You can’t? What’re you talking about, Nanase?”

“...!”

Asamiya’s loud reply to the voice in her head made Enomoto next to her raise an eyebrow. Her eyes widened, turning left and right in search of an excuse... but then she nodded to herself, steeling her resolve.

“Sh-Shinji! Um...d-don’t you want a taste of this?!”

She looked down, blushing and not even facing Enomoto as she said it. I guess offering to feed him a spoonful was too insurmountable an obstacle for Asamiya, so she’d gone with this roundabout approach as a compromise. Atop the spoon held weakly in her hand was some ice cream with a piece of strawberry plopped on top.

Enomoto, presented with this, thought for a bit, but then gave her a nod and quietly leaned over. His face approached Asamiya, whose body tensed up as she shut her eyes tightly...

“...Mmm, this *is* good.”

“Hwuh?”

...as he used his own spoon to take a bite of her parfait.

“W-wait... Uh, why’d you...?”

“...? What, Nanase? You said I could have some.”

“I—I did! I did, but, like, not like that... I—I mean, it’s not fair! I didn’t have any of the strawberry part yet!” Asamiya flailed.

“Oh, that’s what you mean? Well, then...” Enomoto just nodded with understanding and scooped up another spoonful of parfait and presented it to her.

“You try it, too, then. Open your mouth.”



“...?! Wait, you mean, you’ll feed it to me? B-but that’s your own spoon! It’s like an indirect kiss!”

“...? Will you quit mumbling like that? Speak up so I can hear you.”

“N-never mind! I didn’t even say anything!”

Asamiya rapidly shook her head, flinging her cute blond coif back and forth. She took a deep breath, hands on her chest...and then, her mind made up, she closed her eyes tight, opened her mouth, and let Enomoto feed her with his spoon.

“Ah...mmmph.”

“...Well? Good, isn’t it? You can enjoy the rest of it by yourself.”



Enomoto removed the spoon from Asamiya's mouth, a satisfied look on his face. Lunch was over, as far as he was concerned, so he took out his device and started reading an e-book or something. Asamiya, for her part, sat there for a moment before swallowing the parfait.

"...I'm not sure I actually tasted any of that."

It was a breathless sort of murmur, but her expression was totally that of a cute young lady in love—so much so that even *my* heart probably started to race. Still, it meant that Asamiya had another check mark on her list—and now it was up to me to earn mine.

*Hmm, it should be about time...*

I looked at Himeji, who was quietly working on her own parfait, as I nodded at myself. She still hadn't touched any of the strawberry pieces—or more accurately, she was saving them for me. We had a plan to carry out, after all.

"Um...Master?" Himeji said softly, in response to the signal I'd given her underneath the table. She shook her silver hair a little, hands clasped above her knees as her clear eyes peered into mine.

"Um... I was wondering... Seeing those two, I want to experience that, too—someone feeding me. I won't get the opportunity very often, I imagine."

"...! N-no, probably not."

"Indeed... So would you mind, Master, if I received a spoonful from you?"

Himeji handed me a spoon with the utmost elegance. Then, her hands close to mine, she leaned over just a little and opened her mouth. It reminded me of a child acting all spoiled or begging their mom for something, and it was so far removed from Himeji's normal demeanor that it made my pulse shoot up, even though I knew it was just an act. It was, to sum up, amazingly cute.

"Uh, yeah... I mean, no, of course I don't mind."

With my iron willpower, I maintained enough control over my fine motor skills to lift the spoon up. Scooping a bit of ice cream with a strawberry on top, I moved it toward Himeji's small mouth, when—

*"Meowwww!!"*

Just before the spoon reached Himeji, there was a familiar-sounding shout as a girl ran up to us, a camera dangling from her neck. She wore a boyish cap, with brown hair peeking out from under it, and an armband that read *Ace Reporter* near her shoulder. This was Suzuran Kazami—a Three Star from Ohga, member of Libra, and someone I’d worked closely with on the front lines during the May Interschool Competition.

She stood before us, struggling to catch her breath, then flashed a cheerful smile.

“Yes, a meow-meow to you two elites of the Eimei School! What a coincidence—a *total* coincidence to run into you like this! What brings the two of you here?”

“A coincidence, huh...? Nothing really, we’re just having a little day out between friends. How about you?”

“I’m on work duty, I am! We’re covering the lunchtime-exclusive gelato parfait available here in the First Ward! And I think we’re about to begin shooting here in the café... Oh, right! If you don’t mind, Shinohara, do you think you could lend us a bit of a hand?! You wouldn’t be working for free, either! The big-name Seven Star and his maid, plus the Six Star pride and joy of Eimei... If you all show up together in the story, it’ll gather huge amounts of interest! We’d have the media in a *frenzy*! So what do you think?!”

“A story? Hmm... Well, I’m fine either way.”

“Me too. As long as it doesn’t affect today’s plans, it’s okay by me.”

The reactions from the two third-years led Kazami to turn her gleaming eyes toward me. Her facial expression told me that she wasn’t weaving a total lie, but I was sure there was *some* reason behind the convenient timing of this request.

Really, I had no doubt in my mind that Kazami was working with Saionji. She had been ordered to interfere with my actions, and they were going with plan C after all—not a physical or electronic block, but a psychological one. As long as Kazami was flashing her camera around, I couldn’t do anything too out of character as the Academy’s strongest player. If footage of me feeding a parfait to Himeji spread across the island, my reputation would take a massive hit. At

the same time, I couldn't flat-out refuse Kazami's offer, either. Libra was the most powerful media outlet on the island, and considering the lies I had to keep up, getting on Libra's bad side could be potentially lethal.

At first glance, I appeared to be cornered. It was an exquisite, perfect strategy, the kind you'd expect from the (almost) undefeated Empress.

*Sadly for her, I saw this coming, too.*

I grinned a bit as I shifted in my seat, facing Kazami. "All right. We have plans later, so we can't stay here for *too* long, but just for a little bit should be fine."

"Oh, really?! Aw, I'm so glad! You're really helping me out here! So maybe if you could stay just a bit longer—like, until the time limit to order that parfait runs out?"

"Sure thing. But before that..."

"...Huh?"

I adjusted my grip on the spoon in my hand, changing its direction and thrusting it in front of Kazami's face. Her eyes shot open in surprise as I kept speaking calmly.

"You can't really shoot a story introducing this parfait unless you try it yourself, right? So go ahead. Oh, and this is Himeji's spoon, so don't worry about *that*."

"Huh? B-but...are you sure? I'm on duty..."

"Of course I'm sure. This is also a part of your job, right?"

"Y-yeah, good point. Okay, um...thank you."

I wasn't giving an inch here, and I guess that was enough for Kazami to admit defeat, because after blinking once, she opened her mouth and chomped down on the spoon in front of her. She silently chewed for a little while...and then her face melted into a warm smile.

"That's *sooo* good... Wow! It's like the sweetness is gently spreading all across my mouth!"

"Yeah? Well, I'm glad you got a chance to try it for yourself."

I acted casual as I sensed my device vibrating in my pocket... Mission accomplished. Asamiya and I had both checked the *café* box on our lists.

“...Oh. I see.”

Our list was now half-complete, counting the first, the *hold hands*, objective, and when I showed it to Himeji, she nodded her approval, her silver hair swaying a bit. Then she looked straight at me and took the spoon away from my hand.

“So your date with Ms. Sarasa is complete, and so is your date with Ms. Kazami, then, Master?”

“Um, I wouldn’t phrase it like that, exactly...”

Himeji pouted adorably as she went back to excavating her way to the bottom of the parfait.

#

After finishing our dessert and helping out Kazami, we moved on to a bit of shopping at the mall.

It seemed fair to say that things were going smoothly enough so far. The extra order this morning had thrown me, but we’d successfully changed tack, and now we were three items deep into the list. Asamiya, too, had the *movie theater* and *café* items on her list checked off. For now, I couldn’t have asked for a more ideal state of affairs.

But that was when things began to veer off course.

“...Master, what do you think of this? I’m sure it’d look great on you.”

“Um, yeah...”

I quietly thought to myself as I moved in front of the mirror, carrying the shirt Himeji had found for me.

The requirement for our next checklist item was *the girl tries on something at a store, and the man compliments her*. That wasn’t nearly as emotionally trying as the *café* task had been, but if I needed Saionji—not Himeji—to try something on for me, the difficulty suddenly shot up to the stratosphere. If that was what I’d be forced to do, I was better off speaking up to whatever random girls were

using the dressing room and giving them awkward, unsolicited compliments. *That* was a lot more realistic of a solution, at least.

*More to the point, I don't see Saionji or her friends anywhere...*

Unlike at the theater and café, there was no sign of Saionji, even with Kagaya's consummate spy work. That was a clear change from the norm. She needed to block me at every turn to win this second quest, but now it looked like she'd abandoned that and simply disappeared. I mean, it wasn't like I didn't understand why she might do something like this. Some items on the checklist were a lot easier to block than others; there was a decent chance she'd elected to skip out on this one entirely and head over to our next stop, the amusement park, instead.

*In which case, that's fine by me...*

So, with a few nagging concerns still in my mind, I came back to reality. As I lifted my head, I was greeted with the sight of Nanase Asamiya holding her own personal fashion show.

"Hee-hee! What do you think, Shinji? Pretty good, huh?"

She had opened the dressing-room curtain and turned a proud smile on Enomoto, who was standing near me. Her choice of outfit was a camisole that revealed a lot of her shoulders and lower abdomen. It had a stylish black design, with straps tied to the waist. Asamiya had put a denim jacket over it, but the outfit still emphasized her chest a lot and left her navel exposed—a pretty aggressive approach, I felt it safe to say. But she *was* a former model, after all, so it didn't look wrong on her one bit, and even the store clerk nearby looked stunned.

"Th-that looks very stylish on you, ma'am. I'm not sure I've seen anyone else wear it so well before."

"Hee-hee! Aww... But what do *you* think, Shinji? You can be honest and call it cute, you know."

With the clerk backing her up, Asamiya approached Enomoto. She really *did* look cute, like she'd just walked out of the pages of a magazine. Even Enomoto, I thought, had to openly compliment her on that...but when I looked at him, I

realized he still had a sour expression on his face.

“‘Be honest,’ huh? All right, then—it doesn’t suit you at all. It’s too flirty and reveals far too much skin. It looks the same on you as it would for anyone else, I’d imagine.”

“Wha... Are you serious? You’re just hellbent on not saying anything nice to me, aren’t you—?”

“You wish. Look, Nanase... I’ve got a top and bottom here picked out. Go change into them right now.”

“Huh? You...picked this out, Shinji? ...For *me*?”

“...? Yes, I did. So?”

“...! A-all right. I’ll change into it right now. But this is gonna look too plain on me... You’re so *stupid*, Shinji.”

Asamiya quietly complained, trying to hide her embarrassment, as she pulled the curtain shut and started changing. We waited for her, averting our eyes as we heard the sound of fabric slipping off and on, and then she slid the curtain open again.

“Um...does this work?”

She popped just her face out at first, then timidly revealed the rest. It was *much* plainer than the camisole she’d had on before—a bit more on the “elegant” or “prim” side, to be sure. But did it look wrong on her? Absolutely not. In fact, Asamiya’s head-turning looks struck a perfect, delicate balance with this demurer outfit. It suited her almost miraculously well.

“...These plain clothes look so *good* on me. It’s annoying.”

Asamiya didn’t seem to mind, either. She’d been all but ready to deny it at first, but I guess being an ex-model made it hard for her to say that something didn’t look good on her.

Enomoto let out a huff of satisfaction seeing her reaction. “Didn’t I tell you, Nanase? I chose that myself, you know. Of course it suits you.”

“Like I believe *that*. You wear your school uniform even on weekends, Shinji. You’ve got zero fashion sense whatsoever.”



“I’m not going to try to defend myself, but *you’re* a different story, Nanase... How often do you look at a mirror?”

“How often? Like, how many times? Well, when I wake up in the morning, when I brush my teeth, when I get changed, when I put on my makeup... I mean, it’s too many to even count, really.”

“But we’re still talking less than an hour, I assume. You’re only looking at yourself, Nanase, for less than an hour per day, total. Meanwhile, for the past ten years or so, *I’ve* been looking at you for hours at a time, every single day. I don’t think there’s any debate about who knows more about your looks.”

“...That... That’s so gross! You’re such a stalker, Shinji!”

Asamiya slammed the curtain back shut. She sounded pretty angry, but just before she’d closed that curtain, I saw her turning around and crouching down, trying and failing to hide how much she was blushing. Again, so incredibly innocent.

Either way, that was definitely a compliment from Enomoto about her looks just now, so that took care of that item on her checklist. But I still didn’t see Saionji or her cronies anywhere, so I couldn’t really make any moves at all. Actually, now that I thought about it...

“Hey, Himeji, is this store usually *this* empty on a weekend?” I asked in hushed tones after looking around.

It was a weekend afternoon, no doubt the peak time for a clothing store, and there were virtually no other customers in the place. Maybe a group of guys would show up every now and then, but there were almost no women, and definitely no girls from other high schools.

“...No.” Himeji shook her head of silvery hair, perhaps having the same premonition I did. “This isn’t normal at all. Even on a weekday, it would normally be busier than this. Being this dead on a weekend is unheard of, so it makes sense to assume that something’s up.”

“...”

I brought my right hand to my lips as Himeji voiced her trepidation, then went over things in my head. At the movie theater and café, Saionji had taken

physical steps to interfere with me and Himeji's pretend date. She was successful both times, in a way, but despite that, we'd still managed to complete our objectives. By now, I was sure she'd realized what my game was—or at least, she probably realized at the theater that she had been used by me. That was why she sent Kazami my way instead of stepping in herself. She wanted to figure out what kind of orders I had...or how loose the judging was for who counted as my “dating partner.”

*So...if she's figured out my orders and lured everyone away from the store...*

Then, no, Saionji hadn't given up on the “shopping” task at all. In fact, she would probably never bother approaching me again, in the hopes that would make it impossible for me to complete my checklist. She was probably keeping the customers away from here somehow, too. I didn't know how, but a Six Star would have *that* much authority, at least.

*She's completely turned the tables on me... Oh man, just how cunning is she?!*

I gritted my teeth as I internally cursed myself. But with no other option available to me here, I left the mall, the *shopping* item on my list still unchecked.

#

The Academy has several sites categorized as “amusement parks.” The one we had come to, called Union Park, was on the far west side of the First Ward. It's well known as one of the island's best leisure sites and gets profiled in magazines and travel sites all the time. Its Ferris wheel, which gives you a view of the entire island, is particularly famous.

And, of course (although I don't know enough about parks to know how obvious this actually is), like any decent theme park, there's a parade-like event every Sunday. It was slated to begin at six in the evening, so we hadn't been able to spend *too* long at the mall.

“Wow, it's so pretty...”

That was how we found ourselves being treated to a lively parade right before our eyes. The objective here was to *watch the parade sitting shoulder to shoulder*. It turned out that this simply meant two people sitting next to each other, and despite their frequent bickering, Asamiya and Enomoto were

constant companions, so they had no problem checking that box. As for myself, well, I didn't even need to think about it. I was surrounded by a crowd of parade onlookers packed closely together, and at some point or another, my device buzzed its tick of approval.

The only real concern was that, even as the parade neared its end, there was no sign of interference from Saionji at all. There really wasn't any more doubting it... She must have surmised what my orders were, and now she wasn't going to risk coming within ten feet of me.

"...What do you want to do, Master?" Himeji whispered in my ear amid the crowd, her face looking slightly tense. "If we're here at the park, we can still potentially check the 'Ferris wheel' box...but even if we do, is there some way to cross the 'shopping' task off the list?"

"Hmm..."

I sighed quietly, trying not to attract Asamiya's and Enomoto's attention. Himeji had good reason to be concerned. We couldn't win the second quest until we checked all the boxes, and the day of this date had been specified in the orders, so there wouldn't be any retries. We had to cover all our bases today, but it was already almost seven. Even if we completed the *Ferris wheel* task, the shopping mall would be closed by the time we got back there.

Frankly, we seemed done for. However...

"...Sure there is."

I slowly shook my head, attempting to banish Himeji's concern.

"I'm pretty sure we can work something out...or, at least, I've set it up so we can."

"Huh...? You have? You're not just saying that to make me feel better?"

"Nope. I might be a liar, but I'd never lie to *you*, Himeji. I'll work something out with the 'shopping' thing...but the *real* tough nut to crack is the Ferris wheel. We need to 'secretly embrace inside the car,' right? We can think about how to do that later, but first, Saionji has to join us in the car, or we won't get anywhere with it. At worst, we could ask someone in line with us, but that's not really befitting a Seven Star."

“True. I’d prefer not to see my master reduced to that.”

“Yeah, and I don’t wanna do it, either. But I think we can guide Saionji’s hand a little here. She pretty much always makes the optimal decision in any given moment, so we just need to make her think that boarding the Ferris wheel with us is her best move.”

Just as the parade was reaching its climactic finish, I turned toward Himeji next to me once more. I looked into her eyes, reflecting all the glitz and glamor of the parade lights, and kept my voice low.

“So listen, Himeji... Would you mind putting on a little act for me?”

After the parade ended, we strolled around, taking in the amusement park like any normal guests. It was getting late, though, so we stuck just to the main attractions. Himeji kept a straight face but latched on to my arm the whole time on the high-speed roller coaster as it zoomed along the ground. I, on the other hand, was all frozen up in the free-fall ride, shutting my eyes tight. The haunted house made Asamiya panic and cling to Enomoto, which forced him to all but drag her to the exit. It may not have been the most elegant approach, but the *hold hands* checkbox was now filled in for them, too.

Then, with about an hour to go before the park closed, Himeji and I decided to round things out with the Ferris wheel—Union Park’s biggest showpiece. Its size spoke for itself, but it was also famous as a site for lovers. The rumor was that if you got together here, you’d stay together forever.

Enomoto and Asamiya were taking a break on a bench a little behind us. Asamiya had been the one to ask to sit down, the haunted house having exhausted her to her limits—but that, too, was part of our scheme. If all four of us stood in line for the Ferris wheel, we’d naturally be inclined to take one car together, which would ruin any romantic mood. Thus, I had worked with Asamiya to make sure we were split up at this crucial moment.

Anyway, Himeji and I were just about to get in line when:

“...Wait one minute.”

With an audible *whoosh*, a girl blocked our way. Between her luxuriant, burning red hair and her intrepid, strong-willed ruby eyes, it could be none

other than the Empress, Sarasa Saionji. She had her hand on her hip, as usual, as she eyed us both.

“*What* do you two think you’re doing?”

“...? That’s an odd question to ask, Ms. Sarasa. My master and I are on a date, as you can plainly see. We’re holding hands because we’re madly in love.”

“I-I’m not talking about that. I mean... Shinohara, why don’t you look the *least* bit panicked right now? I *know* you can’t complete your checklist if you keep up this pretend date with Himeji. Why are you just enjoying yourself like everything’s normal?”

She didn’t even try to hide the suspicion in her voice. It wasn’t showing on her face, but I could detect a twinge of both doubt and impatience, too. I could understand why, though; up until now, Saionji had been acting on the assumption that my orders demanded I “date” a girl from another ward, but in fact, she had no real evidence telling her whether that was actually correct. Maybe she really *had* been a second too late at the theater, and maybe I *had* completed the objective at the café while her eyes weren’t on me.

To her mind, there was still a chance that Himeji really *was* my officially sanctioned dating partner. And if that wasn’t the case, then my total lack of concern was just weird. If we were this close to the end and I still had two items left to check off, that pretty much meant I was screwed—but here we were, Himeji and I, chilling in the amusement park, totally unconcerned about anything else. That faint possibility had to be tormenting Saionji right now. If Himeji *was* my date, we’d tick off the *Ferris wheel* task in a flash, then we could work out something with the *shopping* one and come away winners.

“...You wanna know why I’m not panicking?”

Having gone over all that in my mind, I gave her a subtle smirk.

“Because there’s no *need* to, of course. I don’t know how you’re reading this, but from my viewpoint, this day’s looking pretty winnable to me.”

“Hm...? Yeah, I was sure you’d dodge the question when asked point-blank like that. You don’t want me to know the truth...but that doesn’t really matter anyway. Whether your dating partner is Himeji or not, I just have to take the

right measures to win, is all.”

“...Oh? And what do you mean by that?”

“How do you think? I’ll come in the *same car* as you both. Then I’ll just hold on to Himeji the whole time while the wheel’s doing its lap around. I won’t let you lay a finger on either of us, and then you won’t be able to check that box. I’d already thought about taking Himeji and running away somewhere, but then I wouldn’t have been able to keep tabs on you.”

“...”

“Hee-hee! Guess this *was* the optimal strategy, huh? And don’t try to stop me, either. I *am* getting in your car.”

She brushed her luxurious, long hair back with her right hand, seemingly enjoying every moment of this. Meanwhile, my mind was elsewhere...

*Good... Good! She took the bait!*

I did a little mental fist pump. It was a do-or-die bet, but Saionji really had taken the best option available to her. She had acted to remove the one losing path left in her sights. Now this game was all mine.

When I’d told Himeji my surefire plan, she’d said, “I wouldn’t really recommend it... But, yes, you really *could* win with that.”

This was how I was going to end the second quest—and with that conviction in mind, all three of us boarded the Ferris wheel.

““““ ...””””

Our car quietly lifted up into the sky, none of us saying a word.

I was seated on one bench, while Saionji was on the other holding Himeji on her lap. She was keeping a pretty hard grip on her, actually. Nobody else was watching—I even had my earpiece shut off—so Saionji didn’t have to worry about acting like an Empress or a rich girl or anything.

“Um...Rina? This really is a little embarrassing for me...”

“I know. It is for me, too. But we have to do it this way, or else there’s no reason for me to be on here.”

“B-but... Well, no, maybe you’re right.”

Himeji had protested and squirmed a bit at first, but she’d given up after a little while and was now sitting still on Saionji’s lap. It was an iron-wall defense—Himeji was being held from behind and Saionji was underneath her, so I was being physically blocked from getting close to either one of them. There’d be no embracing anyone for me like this.

“...Hee-hee!”

But just then, Himeji, still stuck in Saionji’s arms, let out a little laugh.

“Now that I think about it, Rina, you always did like hugging people, didn’t you? I feel like you did this to me a lot when we were little.”

“...? Wow, she did?” I asked.

“Yes, she certainly did. Oh, but not in any indecent way, of course.”

“Of course it wasn’t! If it *was*...that’d be, like, a scandal, okay?”

Himeji’s joke was met with a blush and a shake of the head from Saionji.

“Hmm...” Saionji looked up a bit, tracing her memories back as she spoke. “You know, you’re not wrong. Back when you were new to the Saionji house, Yuki, you wouldn’t really come near me too much, but once we got friendly, you started begging me for attention a lot...which made me happy. You used to hug me a lot, too.”

“Ohhh...? Himeji, begging for attention?”

“...! Th-that’s so mean, Rina. You’re bringing up a story like that after how many years?”

“What? *You’re* the one who started reminiscing, Yuki. Besides, this is six or seven years ago we’re talking about, right? I came here from Japan, I met Sarasa, I met you...and it was just a bit after that.”

Saionji seemed to enjoy talking about this, perhaps because she was usually the one being embarrassed about her past. “Sarasa” here wasn’t referring to Saionji herself, but the *real* daughter of the Saionjis that she was currently pretending to be. She was Saionji’s best friend and Himeji’s former employer who had brought them together, changing their fates forever.

On a different note...

“Actually...you just mentioned it, Saionji, but you used to live in Japan, right?”

“...? Well, of course. The real Sarasa is one thing, but it’s pretty rare for kids to be born and raised on the Academy. Most students take the test to get admitted to a middle or high school here...although the *real* talents can get picked up well before then.”

“Huh. So what about you?”

“I came here right after I started elementary school. I think I officially made the move during second grade, maybe?”

Saionji let out a snicker, acting as smug as possible about it. I found it a little irritating, but there was no doubting her natural talent, so I couldn’t fire back.

“After all,” she continued, taking my silence as a cue to brag some more, “I had finished up my high school education by the time I was five years old. I was helping with university research and stuff after that. And I wouldn’t call it boring or anything, but thanks to that, I was confined indoors pretty much all the time. I can count all the times, really, when I played like a normal child.”

“That’s like on a different dimension. I can’t even contemplate how amazing it is. How about you, Himeji?”

“Me, Master? I came to the island at around the same time as Rina. Not on a scholarship like her, of course—it was just decided through our families that I’d be serving the Saionjis. Before then, I was studying the art of maidship at home.”

“...Maidship?”

“Yes—the skills and abilities needed to be an effective maid. Much like Rina, I don’t recall going out to play very much, but I think that was just due to my personality. I was always a rather shy girl, so unless someone escorted me, I never really thought about going out myself.”

“...?”

Listening to them talk about their pasts, something I’d never had a chance to really hear about before now, made me silently raise an eyebrow. It wasn’t that



their stories made me suspicious at all...but something about them *did* stick in my mind, somehow. “Confined”... “Escorted”... What was it? What did I find weird about that...?

“...But that doesn’t matter.”

I had been turning that thought over and over in my mind, when an exasperated-sounding Saionji stopped me in my tracks. Keeping Himeji tightly in her arms, she shook her luscious hair a bit as her dimly shining ruby eyes glared at me.

“Look, Shinohara, can we cut to the chase already? Because I don’t see us getting this far and you just saying ‘Okay, I give up.’ Our car’s almost at the top of the wheel, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t drag this on any longer, okay?”

“Hmm...? Ah, right. Then if you insist, that’s exactly what I’ll do.”

“...? If I *insist*? ...Wait, you’re not gonna try to grab Yuki from me, are you? Is *that* your grand plan? Are you gonna attack both of us now...?!”

“...Who the heck ever said that?”

Maybe that would check the *Ferris wheel* box off my list, but it’d cost me a hell of a lot of other things. I wasn’t about to fall *that* far, no. So I kept my eyes pointed forward, with a hint of a smile on my lips.

“But you know, Saionji...I really should apologize to you first. I mean, even Himeji got angry at me.”

“...Of course I did, Master. Normally, I would try stopping you with everything I had.”

“Um... Wh-what? What’s this about?”

“We’re talking about what I’m gonna do shortly. So...sorry, Saionji, but I’m going to be *using* you, starting now.”

The moment I said that, I glanced to my right. With our car near the top of the wheel, we had a beautiful view of the starry sky and the nightscape below. Beautiful, yes, but otherwise perfectly normal for a vantage point like this.

But then...

“...!”

Suddenly, my view began to shake violently, and a wave of dizziness swept over me. I felt awful, almost like I was going to throw up. Losing my sense of balance made it hard to stay on my seat, and I slumped down onto the floor of the car.

“Huh? ...Sh-Shinohara?!”

This must not have seemed like an act—and in fact, it wasn’t an act at all. Saionji, sitting across from me, flew into a panic. Her face paled as she pushed Himeji off her lap and knelt down next to me, not minding the dirt it’d leave on her skirt. She held me up by my shoulders, her face right above mine.

“Shinohara! Shinohara, what’s wrong?!”

“...Are—are you sure you should be so close to me like this, Saionji...? That’s probably gonna check the box, you know...”

“I... I *know* that, but it beats watching you suffer like this! Your breathing’s clearly abnormal right now! ...Hold on one second, okay? I’ll access the control system and have them get us down—”

“You won’t need to, Rina.”

Himeji had been silently watching so far, but with those few short words, she was ready to enter the fray. Elegantly standing up from the seat she was on, she turned her clear blue eyes toward Saionji and gave her a deep bow.

“I’m deeply sorry about this. I will apologize in place of my master, so please, calm down.”

“Apologize...? What do you mean, Yuki? Are you saying this was just an act?”

“No, it is not. My master truly *is* in no shape to get up right now...but he is neither sick nor injured. Did you not notice? Ever since we boarded this car, my master hasn’t taken his eyes off me and you, Rina. We’ve had this beautiful view, and he never once took a moment to look at it. In fact, he nearly fainted on the free-fall ride we took about an hour ago.”

“...Huh? You mean...?”

“Yes, your assumption is correct. My master...has acrophobia—a fear of

heights.”

Saionji’s mouth hung open, as she let my upper body slip through her hands and fall to the floor. It was the final blow for me, and this time I really did fall unconscious.

#

“I swear...Shinohara, you’re just so...so...”

So.

When I woke up around two minutes later, I was sitting down on the seat of the car, getting lectured by both Himeji and Saionji, one on either side of me. And...yeah, I was clearly the bad guy this time. I apologized with everything I had, and thankfully, they let me off the hook just before the car reached the bottom.

“All right,” Saionji said as she set foot back on solid ground. “I failed to stop you on the Ferris wheel. And with the shopping thing, you could easily do that right *now*, if you know how... I’m not liking my chances. But if this goes on to the third and final quest, I’m showing you no mercy. *None.*”

Saionji’s ruby eyes glistened as she gracefully walked ahead of me. The quest still wasn’t decided yet, but I guess she saw no way to keep me from winning.

And she was right. We could check the *shopping* box in a matter of seconds. After all, there was nothing saying we had to do it at a clothing store. All anyone had to do was “try on something,” and that could mean a lot more than clothes. In fact, in a theme park like this, there was all *kinds* of stuff to try on.

So, once Saionji had stalked off, we went to the nearest merch stand...and there we saw two familiar-looking Ohga students.

“Hmm, which of these would look good on Sarasa, do you think?”

“These cat ears, of course! Mee-yow!”

I complimented them on their souvenir purchases, and then my checklist was complete.

Now I had everything I needed to wrap up the second quest. However...

*How’s Asamiya doing with her side of this? It looks like holding someone’s*

*shoulders and lifting them up count as “embracing” well enough, so hopefully it’s working out well for her...but if not, I guess all four of us will have to take another trip up the wheel. Really hope I can avoid that if possible...*

I dwelled on this as Himeji and I waited for them to return. After ten minutes or so, the two of them finally appeared at our agreed-upon meeting spot...but something didn’t seem right. Enomoto had that usual sourpuss look on his face, but Asamiya looked almost in distress, as if her head was full of uncertain, confusing thoughts.

“...Sh-Shino, um, c-come... Come here!”

“Huh? ...Whoa!”

Before I could check my device, she pulled me by the arm and dragged me a short distance away from Enomoto. Bringing her well-defined face close to mine, she began rattling on at high speed.

“L-listen to me, Shino! Just now, um, when we were on the Ferris wheel, there was this really strong gust of wind from above, right? And I...just a little, teeny bit... I got a little scared, okay? So I closed my eyes, and the next thing I knew, Shinji was right there, holding me by the shoulders! All, like, whispering ‘Just stay still, stay still’ into my ear! ...And that’s not even all!”

“...It’s not?”

“Once I caught my breath, I said thank you and all, and what do you think Shinji said to me? He said, ‘It’s only natural to protect the people who you care about...so don’t ever leave me again.’ That...! Isn’t that *crazy?!’*”

“Wha...? Are you serious?”

“Totally!”

My thought process stopped for a moment at this very sudden development. After a few seconds, I took my device out, and sure enough, Asamiya’s checklist was completely filled in. And no wonder. Enomoto hadn’t just given her a hug—he’d basically told Asamiya he loved her. It was perfect. If he didn’t earn a check for *that*, it would’ve had to be a bug in DearScript.

*So both our lists are complete. We’ve won the second quest. But what*

*compelled Enomoto to do something like that out of nowhere? Has this whole thing made him realize how much he cares about Asamiya...?*

Any thrill of victory I was feeling was greatly overshadowed by my curiosity. Then my device let out another quick burst of vibration. It was, of all things, a message from Enomoto. The timing was so perfect, I frowned at it at first, but then I decided to open the text anyway.

*This is what you wanted, wasn't it, Shinohara? I hadn't noticed anything. Even so, this just felt like what needed to be done. What a ridiculous charade it all was... Me and Nanase are the furthest thing apart from boyfriend and girlfriend.*

*"..."*

I read through the shocking message a few times over before looking back up. A mess of emotions ran through my head as I looked at Enomoto, standing just a little away and looking peeved as usual. Nothing about his face indicated that he had suddenly awoken to love.

*So, after all this time, he still hasn't noticed Asamiya's advances at all? He just surmised with perfect accuracy what my orders were and then assisted me with them...? Is he the sharpest or the dullest knife in the drawer? Which is it?!*



I felt all the energy drain from my body, and I suddenly felt like my head was spinning.

b

“So Hiroto came back to win the second quest. It’s one to one in the Unique Star competition, and we’re moving on to the final quest, huh...? Yeah, things seem to be going well. The way the Game’s developing, and everything else about this, too. It’s all exactly like I planned it.

“But Hiroto sure has a lot of amazing people around him, doesn’t he...? A lot of cute girls, yeah, but they’re all *seriously* talented. I guess a Seven Star naturally attracts people like that. Fate at work, sort of.

“Hmm... Maybe I’m a little jealous.”

## Guardians of Nanase Asamiya and Shinji Enomoto

Big news! BIG news! Listen up!



The Ferris wheel at Union Park! Miya and the president finally hugged! I didn't fully hear it, but I think he pretty much told her he loves her, too!



Read 32  
8:21 PM



fr? 8:21 PM



Yeahhhhhh!!! Nice one, prez! What a guy! 8:21 PM



It sure took a while to reach this point. They've been flirting constantly ever since first year, but they wouldn't stop going at each other's throats, either! It was so irritating, I didn't know what I was gonna do! 8:21 PM



Exactly. Like, how could they never notice? Nanase's facial expressions are so different when she's talking to Enomoto vs. when she's not 8:22 PM



Right? It's fun to watch them almost, but not quite get together, but I kinda wish they'd enjoy their last year of school as an actual couple! 8:22 PM



Anyhow, I hope Nanase reports on all this, at least to her female friends. I'm sure they're gonna get together soon 8:22 PM

Mm, I dunno...



They had a really good mood going earlier, but the moment they got off the Ferris wheel, Miya ran up to Hiroto and the president just smirked at them... Hmmm?



Read 32  
8:22 PM



...Ahh. 8:22 PM



So, the usual 8:23 PM



But, hey, a lot happened between them today. They must at least be a bit aware of that...right? 8:24 PM



They're STILL not together?!! 8:24 PM



## Chapter 4

### The Former Number One's Languid Eyes

Tuesday, a couple days after the end of the Unique Star competition's second quest, I was looking at my device in the living room of my manor, Himeji in her maid outfit by my side.

The story so far was that Saionji had won against me in Mano's quest and I'd won in Asamiya's, so we were tied 1–1. The next quest would decide who the purple star would be awarded to, so it was with some trepidation that I had been waiting for our orders to get posted.

Right now, I wasn't sure why I'd bothered.

"...What's up with *this*?" I couldn't help muttering out loud.

The reason for my surprise was, of course, because I was reading the details for the final quest that had just been posted in the DearScript app. It was something very different in nature from what had come before...or, really, something that made zero sense at all.

Here was the summary:

*Unique Star Competition – Final Quest*

*Client: Shizuku Minami    Assigned to: Both players*

*Quest: "I'm way too popular, and it's causing me trouble. Do something!"*

*Victory Conditions (both players): Fully complete Shizuku Minami's request.*

That was it.

"Well." I sighed, shaking my head. "I've got a few questions about this, but let's cover every piece of info we know, one by one."

Himeji's hair shifted a bit as she nodded. "Right," she said in her clear voice. "First, the client. Ms. Shizuku Minami is a second-year student at St. Rosalia

Girls' Institute in the Fourteenth Ward. She was selected to compete in ASTRAL during the May Interschool Competition, so I think you've had at least some interaction with her."

"Right, yeah. I only ran into her in the final battle, though, so I don't really recall talking to her. She seemed like this really chill, almost cynical girl."

"Yes, I had the same impression of her. At the start of ASTRAL, Ms. Minami was a Four Star in possession of one Unique Star, but since St. Rosalia finished in sixth place overall, she was forced to give up that color star. Now she's a regular Three Star."

"Hmm... Now that I think about it, what happened to that Unique Star? Enomoto didn't mention anything to me, so I guess it didn't make it to Eimei."

We pondered over that for a little while. Minami's Unique Star would've been distributed to one of the top five finishers in ASTRAL—Eimei, Ohga, Tsuyuri, Otowa, or Shinra—but I never did hear how that turned out. Just thinking about it by myself wouldn't provide any answers, though, so I decided to ask the provost about it later.

Back to Shizuku Minami.

"In terms of other information on her... She did possess a Unique Star once, but looking at the data, she's never been an exceptional performer. She wins around two Games out of ten against higher-ranked players and seven out of ten against lower-ranked ones. That's pretty much the average for Three Stars."

"Yeah? Well, Unique Stars are rare, but you might still blunder into one, after all. I got my red star almost completely by accident, too."

If a Unique Star holder loses in a Game, they must give up their Unique Star first. That's a fundamental rule, and as a result, those stars definitely aren't the exclusive domain of the top-ranked players. The tough part is keeping one; Minami, after all, lost hers a scant few weeks after earning it.

"That's nearly all we know about her, it looks like... So what about the quest?"

I put my right hand behind my head as I looked down at the DearScript app. *"I'm way too popular, and it's causing me trouble. Do something!"* ...I guess that sounded like a reasonable enough request. Looking back, Mano wanted to

confess her love to Fujishiro, while Asamiya hoped to get closer to Enomoto. This was kind of the opposite, but I guess Minami wasn't asking for anything that different.

The main problem was the extremely vague victory conditions: "Fully complete Shizuku Minami's request." The exact conditions were written out in precise detail up until now, but *this* wasn't any help at all. I had no idea what to do.

Even the attached video message was a head-scratcher.

*"My request? ...Well, it's just what I wrote. I've been attracting people like crazy these days... Too many guys are trying to get my attention. Like, sometimes I even have a line of men waiting to confess their love to me... Okay, not really. I might've exaggerated a little there. But anyway, this is nothing but a pain... I don't mind girls, but nothing about attracting guys makes me happy at all. So do something about it, please."*

That was where Minami had stopped recording. This video, too, gave us almost no additional information.

"If I had to guess..."

Himeji had suddenly spoken up in that calm voice of hers, clear blue eyes looking at the screen. Her silver hair swayed gently as she shifted her gaze to me.

"...it's *also* our job to figure out exactly what the intent is behind this quest. We have to nail down the nature of Ms. Minami's request, then fully solve it for her. And if you and Rina have the same victory conditions, I suppose that means whoever completes them first wins."

"I see... Well, I guess we'll have to make her talk to us more first."

"I suppose we will, yes."

Himeji nodded at me as I put my hand to my lips... The final quest of the Unique Star competition required us to help out Shizuku Minami with her romantic problems. Those problems were different from the ones we'd handled before, which was admittedly throwing me a bit, but either way, this was our last battle. Beat it, and I'd not only obtain the purple star but also find the

gamemaster of DearScript—the person I had been looking for.

*...I'm almost there.*

I braced myself for what was to come.

#

After school the next day, Himeji and I took a trip over to the front gate of Minami's school—St. Rosalia Girls' Institute, in the Fourteenth Ward.

St. Rosalia was one of the few girls-only institutions on the island. It placed eighteenth in last year's school rankings, and apparently it had more of a peaceful, laid-back feel than most schools. It didn't really seem like competition was in their blood, and getting admitted there was less about talent and more about bloodlines and family status. Basically, it was a school for rich girls.

The school was built on a large stretch of land near the center of the Fourteenth Ward, and the campus was off-limits to students from other wards—or, to be more exact, *male* students from other wards. If a guy wanted to get in, he had to be a blood relative of an enrolled student, he needed to have a proper appointment, *and* he needed a chaperone with him at all times. Most of the student body lived in dorms on campus grounds, too, which is why all the boys on the island dreamed of getting close to a girl from St. Rosalia.

But enough idle gossip.

"...You're Ms. Shizuku Minami, correct? Could we have a little of your time?"

Around half an hour after we began staking out the main gate, Himeji took a step forward, blocking the way of a girl walking down the path, who gave her a dirty look.

"...What?"

If you had just one word to describe Shizuku Minami, *languid* was probably the most suitable one. She wore a white hat plunked on top of blue hair cut off squarely at the shoulders, which complemented her sleepy eyes and quiet manner of speaking. She was a little shorter than average for her age, and while she didn't seem completely antisocial or anything like that, she also didn't stand out from the crowd at all.

“...”

Either way, our sudden presence did nothing to improve her mood as she looked at us. According to Kagaya’s research, Minami always visited either the nearby convenience store or bookstore after school, so I’m sure she was irritated by having her routine interrupted. But instead of reacting to that, I looked back at her sleepy eyes.

“Listen, Minami, I wanted to ask you something.”

“What, not even a hello? ...Weirdo. And why do you know my name? You a stalker?”

“We’ve met before. We had this exact conversation in ASTRAL, actually.”

“Did we...? I’m dealing with heartbreak right now, okay? I stopped because this cute maid spoke to me, but then *you* showed up. You tricked me.”

“Okay, I’m sorry about that. But you’ll at least hear me out, won’t you?”

“...You don’t think maybe you have the wrong person?”

“It’s a bit too late to try and throw me off with that gambit, you know.”

She seemed unenthusiastic but was also being unexpectedly obstinate toward me. I shook my head a little and sighed. Clearly, I was going to get nowhere with her like this...so I decided to force the conversation along.

“So...right. Let’s start at the beginning. My name’s Hiroto Shinohara, and I’m not approaching you because I’m a stalker or thinking you’re someone else or whatever. It’s because of the request you sent to Meetia. You didn’t forget about that, did you?”

“You’re not even listening to me... *Haaah...*”

The moment I tried bringing up the quest, Minami let out an annoyed sigh. She brought her face up, brushing her blue hair back...and *finally* seemed to realize what was going on around her. Her shoulders twitched.

“A-are people watching me...?”

They were. To be honest, the sight of the strongest player in the Academy and his silver-haired maid waiting at the school gate had attracted a small crowd

even before Minami showed up. They were listening in on our conversation, curious about every word and wondering where this was going. Himeji and I were used to this by now, but I'm sure it couldn't have been more uncomfortable for Minami.

She seemed to waver for a little bit, but then she sighed, resigned to her fate.

"...Come over here."

Spinning around, she began to walk away, guiding us.

"...Let me say just one thing first."

Himeji and I had been taken to a back alley a couple of turns away from the main street. It was situated behind a row of houses, and not a lot of light made it in, but being this close to the school, it was still kept spotlessly clean. Once we'd arrived, Minami turned around and began talking.

"I just... I wish you'd stop that. You're really famous... Just talking to you makes me stand out. I *hate* standing out."

"Hm? Oh, right. Sorry about that."

"...You didn't even mean it, either... You're the worst..."

"No, no, I regret it, okay? We'll keep it to private places from now on. So..."

I shrugged a bit, hearing Minami blame me for all her problems, then took out the device in my pocket. I grinned and took a step toward her.

"Like I said earlier, I'm here to tackle this quest." I showed her my DearScript screen. "'I'm way too popular, and it's causing me trouble. Do something!' ... You're the client, right?"

"...Yeah." She nodded, her long bangs overlapping her sleepy eyes. "Lately, I've been way too popular...like I got the invincibility star in a video game. I'm sure *your* heart is melting over me, too...and now we're in this back alley, I bet you can't *stop* thinking about all the things you wanna do to me..."

"...Are you, Master?"

"No, Himeji, I'm not. And my heart isn't melting, either."

I did think she was cute, but that was about all I'd felt for her so far... But

enough about that.

“So about this request, Minami... Can you give us a bit more information, maybe? Like who’s doing what to you, and what you want done about it? I can’t solve the problem if I don’t have a grasp of that.”

“Um...I don’t wanna talk about it much. Like I said, you’re famous... Just being involved with you will turn it into this big thing. I don’t want you prying too much.”

“Well, then we won’t make it a big thing, okay? Don’t worry. Just because I’m a Seven Star doesn’t mean I have paparazzi all over me twenty-four hours a day. I can easily handle this in a way that won’t inconvenience you.”

“...You’re weirdly stubborn...”

I held my ground against Minami, no matter how ready she was to turn me down. Finally, she let out a deep, resigned sigh. Reaching into her bag, she removed her device and started tapping on it. Then, on a small screen she projected in the air, she displayed the list of calls she’d received on her device. The topmost one was from a name I recognized.

“...Kanade Yuikawa?”

“Yeah... From the Ibara School. The really strong guy from ASTRAL. He’s being so pushy with me...like, to the point where it feels dangerous. So stop him for me.”

The words came from Minami in dribs and drabs, given out with her usual unenthusiastic tone. It sounded like a surprisingly honest request, considering the way she’d been acting up till now. Kanade Yuikawa, the ace from the Fifteenth Ward’s Ibara School, was a man who’d struck me as handsome and attractive at first, but the attitude he’d showed during MTCG had sure changed my opinion of him.

*But I don’t think he and Minami had any contact during ASTRAL, right? Either way, he acts all nice at first, but it never lasts.*

The more I thought about this, the more questions I had...but, well, if I had some new info, I may as well act on it. I couldn’t just sit around forever.

So...

“...All right. We’ll take care of Yuikawa right away, so you just sit back and wait for us to get in touch.”

“Oh... Okay. I will.”

Minami immediately glanced away, and Himeji and I left the alley behind us.

#

“...Look, what’s going on here, Minami?”

It was evening one day later, and I was sitting on the sofa in my living room, admonishing the client through my device. Shizuku Minami was on the other end, and we weren’t on video chat, but I could sense the surprise in her voice.

*“Oh... You. The stalker... Why do you know my ID?”*

“Because you gave it to me yesterday. And I’m *not* a stalker.” I sighed. “Can you stop feeding me a bunch of lies with a straight face? I contacted Yuikawa, and he didn’t know anything about you.”

That was the truth. I’d had the Company use their information network to poke around Yuikawa, but they hadn’t found a single thing linking him to Minami at all. That message he’d sent her had apparently just been an innocent question, asking if she knew who received her Unique Star.

“I tried browbeating him and asking him some leading questions just in case, but he still had no idea what I was talking about. He said he’s still trying to rebuild his rep after that MTCG fiasco, so he wasn’t about to make blind passes at girls like that.”

*“...Hmm... You sure found out quick...”*

Minami sounded a bit regretful after that one-two punch I gave her...but I guess that meant she’d known what she was doing when she lied to me. This wasn’t a case of mistaken identity or whatever. She was clearly giving me a false story.

“Ugh... If you sent that request, why are you hiding the truth about it? You want me to do something for you, right?”

*“Mm... Well, yeah, but... I mean, I asked Meetia for help, not you. I didn’t know*



*somebody so famous would be sent in instead... And I don't have a single reason to trust you, either."*

*"...You can't trust me?"*

*"Yeah. If you swear you'll solve this problem for me, then fine...but if you can't, all it'll do is make me stick out more. That'd be the worst...so I don't want to tell you what it is. I'm, like, the opposite of an attention seeker... An attention avoider. It's a new trend."*

*"I don't think it is, really... But is this the line you're giving Saionji too?"*

*"Saionji? You mean the Empress? Yeah, it is... She's cute, at least, so she's a hundred times better than you, but I still don't trust her yet. So...yeah."* Her voice went down to a whisper. *"Don't bother me any longer."*

Then she ended the call.

I looked up at the ceiling, listening to the lonely dial tone. Himeji, who had come in at some point, placed a cup of tea in front of me.

*"Here you go, Master... Not going well, I take it?"*

*"Thanks, Himeji. And...no, she's being completely unapproachable. I mean, she fed me that story about Yuikawa to throw me off the case, so it goes without saying that she's got zero interest in giving me anything useful."*

*"I see. She's very headstrong. But I guess there's no helping that."*

I gave Himeji a confused look. She responded by brushing her hair back and taking out her device.

*"I was wondering why Ms. Minami fears attention so much, so I asked Ms. Kagaya to examine her backstory in further depth for me. I just received the findings."*

*"Oh, you were doing that for me? ...Hang on, didn't we look into her before and not find anything unusual?"*

*"That's correct, Master. At least not in her *high school* history, we didn't."*

Himeji stopped talking for a moment, a gloved finger tracing its way along her screen as she brought up a text file. She suggested I read it from the top, and I

did.

The content was...well, to be frank, astonishing. As Himeji implied, Shizuku Minami had been a perfectly average student in her high school years, but it's what came before that mattered. She had come to the Academy after graduating middle school, but apparently the school she had been attending was a rather unique one—a combined middle and high school, one of the few in Japan that employed a ranking setup modeled after the Academy's star system. It was simpler than the one on the island, but the school still managed to put up good results, and it seemed like a lot of their grads were future elites of society.

In the Games played over there, Minami had an undefeated record. From the first day of middle school until her graduation, she didn't lose even once, which would make her kind of like the Empress here on the Academy, I suppose. No one had ever done this before in the school's history, and it made all the other students idolize her. That's how strong Shizuku Minami was, and everyone assumed she'd continue her domination in her high school years as well. However...

"The moment she finished middle school there, she abruptly quit and moved to the Academy. She didn't make use of her skills to apply for a high-end school, though, but opted for St. Rosalia, on the lower end of the school ranking..."

I slowly read it out loud, having trouble hiding my surprise. Despite the flawless, dominating record she put up at her old school, Shizuku Minami had simply left it all behind. Transferring over to somewhere in the Academy was a pretty natural route for the top student of a middle school to take in their education, but Minami's school of choice had been St. Rosalia, which didn't place much importance on Games at all. That made no sense—and what's more, after she moved to the Academy, Minami's Game performance plummeted. She was like a whole other player, really. You never would've guessed she'd gone unbeaten in middle school.

"It's quite baffling," Himeji said in her soothing voice as she projected another screen showing Minami's Game statistics. "But if we're presented with this much information, I think the picture is becoming clearer now. It seems very likely that all this is on purpose. Her past history suggests as much; sometimes she loses to players well below her in ability, while other times she trounces

top-ranked students. Thanks to that performance, Ms. Minami's been stuck at the Three to Four Star range, and I can only surmise that's exactly what she's aiming for."

"Hmm... You figure she's doing it because she doesn't want to stand out? She was a celebrity all during middle school, which put a lot of pressure on her, and she moved to the island because she got sick of it. Given her past, maybe she wants to keep as low a profile as she can over here."

Himeji nodded at me. "I do believe that's what we see here, yes."

...Yeah, that would make sense. If so, she had a perfectly valid reason for wanting me and Saionji to stay out of her life. But that didn't mean I could just say "Oh, okay, sorry about that" and give up. I was tied 1-1 with Saionji in the Unique Star competition. If she got ahead of me, all the hard work I'd put in so far would be for nothing.

"So the next question is how to get her to open up to us...but that probably won't happen until we can win her trust, I don't think. If we can convince her that there's a higher chance of us solving her problem than there is risk of her standing out, then maybe she'll explain what's actually going on."

"I think that's quite possible," agreed Himeji. "She's already reached out with her request, so I'm certain Ms. Minami wants *something* to be done for her."

To sum up, the key to this final quest in the Unique Star competition wasn't the nature of Shizuku Minami's request so much as simply winning her trust. We needed to convince her that her mission was in good hands with us.

"But if we think about it like that, Master, I have to say that Rina might have a slight advantage. As a woman, she has the right to freely travel around the St. Rosalia campus, and her looks would likely help build a rapport with Ms. Minami sooner as well. I'm sure she's already contacted Ms. Minami a number of times by now."

"No doubt. So we're gonna have to play catch-up... I mean, if this job's about being *too* popular, I suppose it's nothing all that particularly urgent or anything, though... Hmm?"

I had noticed my device vibrating slightly on the table, and I reflexively picked

it up. There was a notification from DearScript. I opened it, as nervous as I always was whenever this happened, and a *New Objective Unlocked!* popup was front and center.

*Order: After school tomorrow, follow Shizuku Minami to a certain location and participate in the simulated Game she will hold there. Win, and you will earn Shizuku Minami's trust. If you lose, or if she spots you following her before you discover her destination, you will fail the order.*

““ ... ””

Himeji and I exchanged glances at this almost-too-timely piece of info. What was the deal here? It was such a specific order that I began to wonder if there was a secret microphone somewhere in the room, and the feeling that it had perfectly anticipated our conversation was a little frightening.

What's more...

“I still don't really understand exactly what it's getting at. *Maybe* I see the point of tailing her, but how does that connect to a Game? And just winning that will make her trust me...?”

“It's a riddle, certainly,” murmured Himeji. “I feel like following her would make her even warier of us, though.”

We put our heads together over it for a little while longer, but we were clueless about what the order meant. Regardless, what we thought about it didn't matter, technically. Whether we understood them or not, DearScript's orders were absolute. There was no room to question or agonize over them.

“Ugh...”

So I decided to summon the Company and formulate a strategy for tomorrow.

#

The main trick to tailing someone is to make sure your target isn't on the lookout for you. If they think someone might be shadowing them, that alone greatly ups the risk. After all, if you're following someone, you don't really know what their destination is, so you have to stick fairly close to them or you'll lose your target. But if you try that and they look over their shoulder and see you, the chase is pretty much lost right there and then, too.

So we decided to take a more innovative approach.

*“...Ms. Minami just turned the corner of the building, Master. She’s walking at a normal pace; her suspicion level’s still at 0 percent. Continue to slowly track her.”*

“Roger.”

Following Himeji’s voice in my right ear, I started walking again.

My target was Shizuku Minami, but I didn’t have her anywhere in my sights. I did have a simple map on my device, though, that gave me Minami’s location at all times. I was also receiving surveillance photos of her on a regular basis, presumably from hacked security cameras of stores and stuff. I had all that information, plus the latest updates transmitted through my earpiece.

This was the method I’d chosen to stalk Minami—real Company-style tracking, as Kagaya had put it. It completely eliminated the risk of revealing myself (the biggest threat to any job like this) at the cost of breaking any laws necessary to keep constant tabs on the target’s location—a brute-force approach to the problem. If I wanted to be doubly safe, I could probably stand to be even farther away from her, but then I ran the risk of breaking my DearScript orders, so I’d compromised on that a bit.

*No way she’ll realize anything’s up now...but this is kind of criminal, isn’t it?*

I sighed lightly as I looked at the hidden footage on my device. No “kind of” about it—this *was* criminal. We were using all this illegal tech to track a student at St. Rosalia—a gentle, law-abiding, and fairly good-looking girl—and that did nothing to calm my pulse.

“Whew...”

*“Ms. Minami is entering the roundabout. I think she’s going to board a train... Master, your breathing’s sounding a bit heavy at the moment. Is this situation exciting you?”*

“No...”

I instantly denied Himeji’s pointed observation. Yes, my heart was beating fast, but this wasn’t a fetish of mine or anything.

*A train, huh...? Where's she planning to go?*

I followed in Minami's footsteps, raising an eyebrow at my device. Company-driven research told me that she mostly stayed on school grounds, except for her trips to the convenience store and bookshop. She wasn't the type to go on longer trips at all.

"She might just be going to see a friend or lover...but no. Given the timing, she must be going out for some business with Saionji."

*"Right. It makes sense if Rina's received some sort of new order herself, likely involving a Game at the spot they'll meet. For now, though, we have no idea what this Game might be... You may want to hurry just a little bit, Master. Ms. Minami is through the station gate, but the next train is coming in two minutes."*

"Got it. Thanks, Himeji."

I had a few concerns, but right now, my new order was job number one. Ending my conversation with Himeji, I briskly walked toward the station, taking a different stairway than Minami to reach the platform and exercising maximum caution as I slipped into the arriving train.

"Right..."

Inside the train car, I examined my surroundings. At a time like this, after school had been let out, trains would normally be packed with students returning to their dorms or going out for some fun, but that didn't seem to be the case for St. Rosalia. Apart from me, there were just a few girls wearing the same uniform as Minami.

*"Good job, Master. You can probably relax for now."*

Himeji's soft encouragement reached my earpiece. Having my stalking behavior praised by another high schooler (and a maid, no less) was pretty nonsensical if you gave it some rational thought, but like Himeji suggested, pursuing someone took a lot out of you mentally. You had to be on your toes at all times, which made the seconds and minutes seem to drag on forever.

After a few minutes of relaxing in my seat as the train bounced up and down:

*"...Get ready, Master. It looks like she's getting off at the next stop."*

She'd be doing so in the center of the Fifth Ward. That's about as big as the Fourth Ward, so it'd be bustling with students during these after-school hours.

Minami worked her way through the crowds, eventually getting sucked into a small building near the station. The sign at the top featured the logo for a karaoke chain found everywhere in the country. This must be her destination.

"Hmm..."

I no longer had to fear being discovered, so I breathed a sigh of relief as I went inside. Minami, her uniformed back turned to me, was waiting in line at the front desk.

"Good afternoon! Are you by yourself, or are you waiting for someone?"

"Waiting... Also, I have a reservation for Minami..."

"Ah, yes... Shizuku Minami, party of three for two hours, correct? One other member of your party is already here, so feel free to grab the mics and go to your room!"

"...Huh?"

Minami looked up a bit. "Three?" she asked, puzzled. "No, I think it was two..."

"It's three, trust me."

I talked over Minami from behind. She shivered a bit, then turned around, scowling the moment she recognized me.

"...Why are *you* here?"

"Why? So I could join this Game or whatever you have planned. Why else? I got added to the reservation, too."

"I didn't know about this... I didn't invite you. And now you're forcing a girl into a private karaoke room...? You really *are* after my body, aren't you? And you're making it a three-way, too...?"

"What are you *talking* about?"

These accusations amazed me, but I reached out and took a basket of

microphones from the front-desk clerk. The DearScript gamemaster must've changed the reservation that Minami had made. The clerk didn't seem to think anything was amiss anyway.

Then...

"Come on, Minami, won't you stick out too much if you stay here in the lobby? Let's get going."

"...Ugh... You and your smooth talk..."

Minami complained about it under her breath, but she must've eventually given up because she quietly said, "All right," and followed me.

#

When we arrived at room 502, we found someone waiting for us.

"There you are, Shizuku...and Shinohara, too."

Sarasa Saionji was seated on the sofa, arms crossed defiantly and a faint smile on her face as she looked at us with her ruby eyes. She must've known from her orders or something that I'd show up, because she didn't seem surprised by my presence. In fact, her demeanor told me that she was already pretty friendly with Minami. I didn't think they'd known each other much at all before, but she must've closed that gap a fair bit in these past two days.

There was a one-drink minimum, so we all ordered something and sat down. A long table was set diagonally against a corner of the room for us to sit around.

"...Mm..."

Minami, sitting across from me (or diagonally in front of me, I guess), glanced up after taking a sip of her iced bubble tea. Her sleepy eyes were watching me with clear suspicion.

"Let me ask you again... Why are you here? I came here because I thought I was playing a Game with the Empress...but I didn't ask for you. I told the Empress not to tell you, too."

"She's right. Not telling you was part of my orders, Shinohara."

"...Your what?"



“My orders. Basically, Shizuku, the ‘gamemaster’ that gave us your request has also given us assorted orders to follow...more or less.”

“Hmm...? I don’t really understand that...but if he’s here, then whatever. I’ll let you join in, too. Think of it as a first-time log-in pity bonus.”

“Wow. How generous of you.”

“It’d be too much a pain to kick you out now...and besides, I’m the emcee here. The person calling the shots. I could make you do anything I want to. Lick my boots, you name it.”

“...”

“...? That was a joke. You were supposed to jab back at me. You’ll lose points for that.”

“I really can’t keep up with this,” I said as Minami made some kind of attempt at a joke with her usual lethargy. But I guess she really *would* let me join this Game. She couldn’t have known that I’d be here, but I guess that didn’t matter much rules-wise.

“Here’s how it’ll work,” she said, shaking her head a bit as she stirred her drink with the straw. She kept her blue eyes focused on her glass as she continued.

“We are about to play a type of Game, but if we did a normal one, it’d be me against the Empress and the Seven Star, and I’d hate to have that on my record. So it’ll all be analog this time... Your job is to guess exactly what my request is.”



“Your request...? You mean about how you’re too popular and it’s bothering you?”

“Yeah. I’m cursed by my popularity... I got all these men in my life, and I hate it, but I’m not gonna tell you anything else. I don’t want to anyway. But you want to know more...which puts us at a standoff of sorts. So I’ll just make *that* the Game. Beat me, and you’ll automatically know the nature of my request... It’s a genius idea.”

“Y-yeah, I don’t think it’s a bad idea,” said Saionji. “But how are we supposed to guess, Shizuku? Like, we have a lot of questions—who’s coming on to you, what do you want done about it...? You’re not going to ask us to guess without any hints, are you?”

“I didn’t say that... If I did, I think you might torture me.”

“Hee-hee! You always exaggerate like that.”

“...? That wasn’t a joke. I was serious. Who knows all the horrible things you two might do to me...”

“We won’t, okay? It’s really hard to tell when you’re joking and when you’re not, you know.”

Minami honestly appeared a bit frightened, but Saionji just folded her arms over her chest, her hair swaying gently.

“Yeah...,” Minami said, sounding a bit disheartened, but she soon got over it and raised her head back up.

“We don’t have long, so I’ll keep going... You need to guess what my request is. But not without any hints... Have you heard of lateral thinking puzzles before?”

“Lateral thinking...?”

I blinked at this unfamiliar term. Saionji apparently knew what it meant, though, because she nodded, a smile unfolding on her face.

“Sure, I know about those. They’re a well-known kind of riddle.”

“Oh? Great... Okay, you explain them.”

“...Huh? Is that why you asked? Well, sure, I guess...”

It seems Minami really *was* that lazy. Saionji, having this job pressed upon her, sighed a bit, then her ruby eyes turned toward me.

“Well,” she began, organizing her thoughts, “a lateral thinking puzzle is kind of like a deduction game that works entirely with people talking. They’re sometimes used as the basis for Games on the Academy—the Treasure Hunt Board Game you and Akizuki played during the Fourth Ward Challenge, for example. More specifically... Actually, maybe it’s easiest if I just give you an example.”

“An example? Sure. Go easy on me.”

“Fine. Here’s the most famous one. A man walks into a seaside restaurant and orders turtle soup. The waitress brings him the soup, he tries a spoonful, and then he looks back at the waitress, confused. He asks her, ‘Is this really turtle soup?’ The waitress assures him it is, but the man pays for his meal without taking another bite and leaves the restaurant. That night, he takes his own life. Why?”

“Huh? ...What d’you mean, ‘Why?’”

“Like, why did he do it? You can’t just give a reason, either. You have to give the whole story behind it.”

Saionji sounded like she was having fun with this game. She had a cheeky smile on her face, and I reluctantly fell silent. This *was* a famous riddle... I was pretty sure I’d heard it somewhere before, but that was about all I knew of it. I tried thinking a little, but there was no logical connection between any of the events. It made no sense to me.

“Hee-hee! Give up? It’s kind of refreshing to see you totally lost like that.”

“Oh, sure, lord it over me, Saionji. ...You haven’t even begun to explain any of the rules yet, you know. With the Treasure Hunt Board Game, we had to use questions to figure out where our opponent was, so if this is a similar sort of puzzle, do you solve it the same way?”

“Huh. That’s actually pretty sharp of you, Shinohara. You’re right—in a lateral thinking puzzle, you’re allowed to ask yes-or-no questions. Anything related to

the game is just fine. In the example, you could ask things like ‘Was it really a suicide?’ or ‘Was the waitress lying?’ and with every question, you come that much closer to the truth. Generally, one person asks the riddle and multiple people are trying to figure out the answer. After all, ‘lateral thinking’ means looking at things from multiple angles to make new connections... That’s why it’s hard to make a breakthrough if you do it by yourself.”

“...Okay.”

So we’re posed with a question, and we try to come up with an answer. But the question isn’t solvable as it stands, so the people trying to answer it ask questions to get the information they need. That sort of thing.

“That makes sense to me. So what’s the answer to your turtle soup example?”

“I’m not gonna tell you. Hee-hee! I hope you obsess over it, lose sleep over it...and when you read the answer and realize it makes perfect sense, curse yourself for not thinking of it. Then you’ll experience the exact same pain I have.”

“Wow, way to be helpful there,” I muttered. It’s not like I was *that* bothered by it...but still, maybe I’d do a little research on it later.

Regardless, with Saionji’s explanation complete, Minami took up the reins once more.

“That’s the general idea behind lateral thinking puzzles...but what we’ll be playing is a Game that adjusts those rules a little. Basically, everyone asks *and* answers the questions... All three of us will pose a riddle of our own, and we’ll all try to answer them. That sorta thing...”

“I see,” said Saionji. “And your question to us is what your request is, right? The truth behind your claim of being so popular it’s causing you trouble. But what about me and Shinohara?”

“I have things prepared for you... They don’t call me ‘Meticulous Minami’ for nothing.”

As she kept mumbling under her breath, Minami reached into her bag and took out two cards. They were about the size of playing cards, and each one

had a cute design on one side of it.

“This is a spare pack of cards I have, where each one in the set is different... The other side is blank, and I want you both to write a name on yours. The only condition is that you have to write the name of the girl who’s most on your mind right now... That’s it. Kinda feels like a school sleepover, don’t you think?”

“The girl most on my mind right now, huh...?”

*“...I see. This is indeed fascinating.”*

Both Saionji and Himeji seemed bemused by this, but I didn’t really know how to react. So I directed the conversation back toward Minami.

“There’s a few things I’d like to say about this. I get that I have to write the name of the girl most on my mind, but it can be anybody’s name, right? It might be someone you’ve never met before.”

“That’s true... So let’s limit it to Academy students. I pretty much know all the girls on the island... Though if I don’t recognize them, maybe you could introduce me sometime?”

“You’re *that* up on everyone in the island? That’s pretty incredible,” said Saionji, sounding impressed. “But you want *me* to write down the girl most on my mind, too? Not just Shinohara?”

Minami nodded slightly. “Yeah. I don’t know any of the guys...”

She picked up the as-yet-untouched glass of iced tea she’d ordered with her bubble tea, then placed it right in the center of the table.

“Only the person with the iced tea has the right to ask a question... That person can give the glass to anyone they want, then ask them a single question. When asked, you have to give an honest yes-no answer. All the information you want to know will be revealed...but I’ll be using the same method to figure out the names you wrote down on your cards. And if I figure out the answer before you do, I’ll leak it out on STOC anonymously. An exclusive story... A scandal... You’re trying to expose my hidden secrets, so you need to take a little risk yourselves.”

“Risk, huh...? Well, all right.”

I knew Minami completely shunned the spotlight, but for me and Saionji, gossip about us got passed around on a daily basis, so it wasn't any skin off our noses. Still, considering we'd never know what Minami wanted from us unless we won the Game, I had every reason to take this thing seriously. If I could get her to talk to me, and not my opponent, then that would pretty much mean curtains on DearScript.

"...Any questions...? If not, write your names down... We only have this room for two hours..."

With the rules understood, Minami gave us both black markers. I shot a glance at Saionji before taking it, and her ruby-red eyes met mine for a single instant.

We took our markers at the exact same time—and a few seconds later, we had our cards with a female student's name written on them lying face down in front of us. It was only now that it really sank in how weirdly analog this was compared to most normal Games I'd played. If I wasn't using my device, then of course I had no access to Abilities, and there wasn't much room for cheating, either—a pretty stiff handicap for me.

*But I still have to do it. And at least I've got an auxiliary brain in Himeji.*

That gave me a bit of relief as I nodded lightly to myself to steady my breathing.

After an impartial dice roll, I earned the right to go first.

"Okay, I'm gonna dive right into my first question."

I took up the glass of iced tea—the talisman I needed to ask questions—and looked toward Minami. She nodded back.

"All right... This is making me kind of nervous...like those interviews at the start of porn videos..."

"Well, don't be. And don't phrase it like *that*."

"I'm a C-cup, by the way..."

"I didn't ask."

Once again, Minami was saying the most outlandish things in her trademark

lethargic drawl. Resisting the urge to avert my gaze, I went into “top on the Academy” mode and asked my question.

“First, your request. You said you’re too popular and it’s causing you trouble, but is it really true that guys are giving you unwanted attention? You’re not just deluding yourself?”

“Wow, that’s really mean... I wouldn’t babble on about a bunch of nonsense like that. My request is completely the truth...”

She briskly shook her head and denied my accusation. I had my fair share of doubt about the fact that she was “too popular,” but she was forced to answer with the truth here, so apparently her request to Meetia hadn’t been fake, at least.

Minami, taking the glass from me, turned toward Saionji. “I have a question for the Empress... Did you write down the name of an Ohga student?”

“No. I have a lot of friends there, but you asked who was ‘on my mind’ the most...”

“Ah... Too bad. I kind of wish I had younger students at my school call me ‘big sis’ and stuff. It’d be so nice, almost like having family there...”

“Oh? Um, I actually have a few students like that. Over in Ohga.”

“Awesome... Amazing... Thank you.” Minami gave a satisfied nod.

“Big Sis Saionji, huh?” I murmured with a look that was almost a smirk.

“...What, Shinohara? Do you have a problem with that? Maybe this is a shock to you, but people actually admire me at my school. I wasn’t some low-down Seven Star with a bad attitude like you.”

“I’m not about to deny that, but I think we’ve both got pretty bad attitudes, Saionji. If you were *really* the sweet, gentle big-sister type, people wouldn’t have nicknamed you the Empress in the first place.”

“Hmph...”

Saionji tucked her arms underneath her chest, pouting and looking annoyed. Then, removing her eyes from me, she pushed the glass back toward Minami.



“Ignoring the completely oblivious man next to me for the moment, here’s my question... Shizuku, when you say you have guys haranguing you, are you talking about high school students on the Academy?”

*Ahh, right...*

I had to applaud her for that question. Certainly, we had been going on the assumption that this was someone the same age as her, but that wasn’t a known fact yet. For all we knew, they could be elementary school students, or even older men.

But Minami shot that down with a nod. “Yes... I’m talking about high school students on this island. And not guys that’ve been held back or anything, either... My turn next.”

She had answered in the same matter-of-fact tone as always, then turned toward me and pushed the glass my way. Her blue eyes, a shade darker than Himeji’s, were locked on to mine.

“You’re a lot easier than the Empress. You stand out a lot, and it’s easy to tell who you’re involved with... It’s your maid, isn’t it? The cute silver-haired girl that’s always with you.”

*“...Ohhh?”*

I heard a quiet voice filled with expectation and unironic interest in my right ear, which, of course, belonged to the maid in question. I scowled a bit as Saionji stifled a laugh, and then I shook my head.

“No. Not her.”

“...? No...? I really thought it was. Are you being unfaithful to her...?” Minami asked.

*“Are you, Master?”* Himeji sounded a little sulky.

“...It’s not like that,” I said somewhat apologetically.

If asked which girl was most on my mind, Shirayuki Himeji certainly would be an appropriate reply, but everybody knew that we were together almost all the time, so writing her name on the card would really make this way too easy.

*Still, though, now’s about when I really want to start narrowing down the*

*potential candidates.*

I brought my hand to my lips as I thought quietly to myself. The last question confirmed to us that the people going after Minami were Academy students. Looking back at her video message, she said it was only “of late” that she had begun drawing their attention, which brought one possibility to mind.

“Okay, Minami, question... Did the people trying to win you over participate in ASTRAL?”

“...! Y-yes...you’re right. You’re surprisingly sharp.”

Minami’s eyes had opened a bit in surprise, then she’d nodded, her bangs bouncing up and down. That really *did* narrow it down...but it didn’t look like she was panicking much about it yet. She played with the straw in the iced tea for a bit, then turned back toward me.

“If it’s not your maid, then it’s pretty much set in stone... You wrote the Empress’s name on your card. Final answer!”

“Oh? Me? Really? Hee-hee! Aw, geez, Shinohara, that’s unusually honest of you.”

“...Huh? Why would I write that?”

“...? You run into each other a lot... Enemies or not, if you see a girl this cute every day, of course you’d be attracted to her. As they say, there’s a thin line between love and hate...”

“I don’t think that applies here, okay? Think about it, Minami. Maybe we see each other a lot, but how am I going to think of her as potential girlfriend material when we’re constantly antagonizing each other? That’s the *least* likely choice I’d make in the whole world.”

“It is? Surprising...”

“Hmph... Well, fine, then, Shinohara. It’s not like I care *who* you like.”

Saionji gave me a pointed glare, arms still crossed. I thought again how this question might have hit a little too close to home. If Minami chose it especially for me, then she was one shrewd tactician.

Regardless, it was once again my turn to ask a question. I knew now that the

guys pursuing Minami had been in ASTRAL, but the real work remained to be done.

*Minami was playing for the St. Rosalia team, so she didn't have any male teammates. But by the time her side played ours, she was already working for the Chameleon, so...*

I attempted to retrace my memories of the event. Toward the end of ASTRAL, Shizuku Minami had stood before us in a team with two other players—both from schools other than St. Rosalia. One was Seiran Kugasaki, the Phoenix—a Five Star from the Otowa School in the Eighth Ward. The other was Toya Kirigaya, the Demigod Dictator—a Six Star from Shinra High School in the Seventh Ward. Both of them were big names and major superpowers in the Game scene...and most importantly, they were both men.

But whether or not there'd been any talk of love or romance between Minami and either of them was kind of a gray area. I mean, Kugasaki *worshipped* Saionji. He called her his “goddess,” and I doubt he'd suddenly be infatuated with some other girl *that* quickly. Kirigaya, on the other hand... I couldn't make any guesses about his taste in women, but I got the feeling that Games greatly outweighed love in his mind.

“...Hello? No question yet? My frustration waiting for you is at, like, 9.7 out of ten...”

Minami, diagonally across from me, was trying to hurry me along. I could have ignored her and kept on thinking, but I probably *was* taking an undue amount of time, so I decided just to play it safe.

“Um, just to confirm, should I take your request to mean that *more than one* guy is pursuing your love?”

“That's right,” she promptly replied. “If it was just one, I wouldn't call that being ‘too popular.’”

Then Minami claimed the iced-tea glass and asked her next question to Saionji: “Is your person a second-year who played in ASTRAL?” She was drilling down to specifics now, and Saionji's answer was yes. Minami was getting much closer.

*But...assuming I'm not overthinking this, I think Saionji wrote down the same name that I did. And if she did, there's no way Minami's gonna guess it.*

That's right.

That bit of eye contact I'd shared with Saionji at the start of the Game was all about the two of us working out who we'd write down on our cards. We couldn't write down just anyone if the topic was who's "most on our mind right now," but "on our mind" doesn't necessarily have to have a romantic aspect to it. We could just be interested in this person, or hoping to know more about them—which is why both me and Saionji had written down the first name we'd thought of: Shizuku Minami.

That was almost certainly the best way to go in this Game. After all, even if Minami figured it out, there was no way she could tell us the correct answer. She'd already told us that if she got her question right first, she'd post the name on STOC for all to see—but given how much she hated the limelight, it'd be absolutely impossible for her to post her own name there.

*She came up with the rules, though. I'm sure she must've thought of that...*

I glanced at Minami. She looked as quiet and calm as always.

"If I could eliminate one candidate," Saionji said, pointing at me, "he's not pursuing you, is he?"

"I wish I could say he was, but no..."

The glass returned to Minami.

"Hmm... What next...?"

She looked at the clock in the room, then scratched her head a little. I thought she'd attack Saionji again, but after a lot of thought, she turned toward me instead. I guess she was worried about how little information she'd gotten out of me so far.

"Did you write down someone attending Eimei...?"

"No, not Eimei. Another school."

"Oh... This is tough."

She didn't sound disappointed at all about missing the mark as she shook her head. I accepted the glass of iced tea from Minami, watching her blue hair bounce around with every shake of her head, and thought about my next question—but suddenly, a doubt sprang up in my mind.

*...Wait. That was a little weird just now, wasn't it?*

I frowned and decided to chase that thought a bit... It wasn't that the previous question had been strange at all; what caught my attention was the order she'd chosen to ask her questions in. If she had asked that one first, that would've eliminated all Eimei students right there, and *that* would've told her it wasn't Himeji from the very start. Maybe she was deliberately asking pinpoint questions in order to reach the answer sooner, but it wouldn't benefit her to suddenly change her strategy right now. She'd wind up wasting multiple turns like this.

*Okay, so maybe Minami isn't actually interested in guessing my answer...?*

She was barely taking this seriously, and I actually considered that idea for a moment. But if she was trying so hard to hide what her request was, I couldn't really believe she'd have a change of heart now all of a sudden. If not, though, what could this behavior from her mean, unless she was just trying to waste time?

*...Wait. Was that it?*

*Yeah... The only way this Game really ends is if we run out of time, isn't it?*

I brought my hand to my lips, feeling like I was on the cusp of something... That was it. The rules called for all three of us to guess the answer to the questions we were posed, but nobody said the Game ended if one person guessed the answer right. The only thing that Minami had specified was that she had this room for two hours—at which point the Game would be forced to conclude. That glass of iced tea represented our right to ask questions, and we couldn't take it out of the karaoke parlor.

Taking a peek at the clock, I saw that we already had less than half an hour left. If Minami was stalling for time whenever her turn came up, I feasibly had two, maybe three chances left.

“Listen, Minami,” I slowly began. “I’m reasonably sure this Game ends once our time is up in this room. Is there no way to extend that?”

“...! You mean...in terms of the rules at the karaoke place here...?”

“No, in terms of the Game’s rules. Is there no way to make the Game last longer than that?”

“Mmm... In that case, the answer’s no.” Minami shook her head lightly. “I reserved the room for two hours... That’s the time limit. When we reach that point, I’m going to chug this iced tea, and you can’t ask any more questions.”

“You’ll choke on it.”

“I don’t care. I’d want nothing else.”

She returned my gaze. So, no overtime, then, I suppose. I had just spent a valuable question confirming that, but seeing as I’d let Saionji in on that piece of info, too, it hadn’t wholly gone to waste. A lateral thinking puzzle is a deduction game where you have to look at things from multiple angles to figure out the answer. We might be opponents in the grand scheme of DearScript, but in this Game, Saionji and I were playing co-op.

“...”

Minami, facing both of us, had her glassy blue eyes on me as she tried to figure out my intentions. Then she moved her glass toward Saionji.

“Did you...speak with this girl today?”

“...Yes.”

She had completely changed her attitude from before and was now quickly closing the distance... She must’ve known the answer from the start, after all. With the rules we were given, it was only natural that Saionji and I would write *Shizuku Minami* on our cards. She had foreseen that before the Game began, and she was now testing us; would we figure out the machinations behind this Game and discover how to break through them? This was her way, I suppose, of determining whether we were worthy of her trust or not.

“Hmm... Okay.”

Saionji looked at the glass in her hands for a little while, lost in thought, then

lifted her chin slightly. Her ruby eyes were right on Minami.

“I’m going to get right to the heart of it. These men trying to romance you... Is it really *love* they feel for you? Do they want to go out on dates with you, or become your boyfriend?”

“...? Well...I don’t know how people *feel*...”

*...What’s up with that?*

Saionji’s query hadn’t just confused Minami, but also me. Had she really needed to ask whether this was about love or not? Minami had already admitted that there was more than one man trying to get her attention, so I really didn’t see how the answer could be anything but “yes” here.

And yet...

“...No, they don’t.”

*Wha... The answer’s no?*

Despite my prediction, Minami shook her head. “I thought so,” Saionji replied, sounding pretty satisfied with herself. Then her ruby eyes turned toward me, as if to say that had been payback for earlier. That’s the point of lateral thinking I guess—being able to view things from another angle.

*No, wait, so...*

My mind began to race, my hand reaching my lips a moment later... If her answer to that was “no,” that changed the whole premise of this story. Someone was definitely trying to court Minami, but they didn’t have romantic feelings for her. That meant they were hounding Shizuku Minami for completely different reasons.

*Ah... I get it. We’ll have this all worked out by the end. The only problem is the time...*

I tapped my earpiece and gave Himeji a certain directive. Judging by her furtive glances, Saionji understood what I was attempting. Basically, it was the only way to retain the right to ask questions without having to extend our time in this room—and if we were too late with it, we’d both lose.

“ ... ”

Minami, meanwhile, was no longer making a secret of her stalling tactic. She cupped the glass with both hands, mumbling along in her usual unhurried, low-energy tone.

“I can see exactly what you’re thinking... The name written on your card belongs to the person you’re talking to. Someone you really want to ravage... right?”

“...Oh? Is that your question?”

“No... It’s still my turn. You were just one step away... You didn’t make it to the truth behind my request.”

“Why the past tense? The Game isn’t over yet.”

“It may as well be... You have only three minutes left... You used up five minutes thinking to yourself just now, so I deserve to take up that much time, too... Complete victory for me.”

She gave us the cruel truth in her slow-paced voice. In short, she didn’t intend to do anything before the time expired. We were in no position to complain about it, but by the same token, this Game was also over for us.

Or it should have been...

“...Thanks for waiting!”

“Hngh?!”

Just then, a peppy voice emerged from the door. Minami, who was facing away, jumped in her seat. As she looked around, trying to figure out what was going on, Saionji and I blithely stood up and accepted the drinks from the clerk—ordered through the Company just now. They were, of course, two iced teas.

Sitting down on the sofa, we both grinned at Minami.

“Hee-hee! You’ve got the right to ask questions when you have a glass of iced tea, right? You never said that *particular* glass, and you didn’t say we couldn’t order more, either.”

“Yeah. Now it’s our turn for as long as we want it to be. Okay?”

I placed my glass in front of the dumbfounded Minami. Saionji grinned.



“First,” I said, “let’s go over what we know. After the end of ASTRAL in the May Interschools, you suddenly became extremely popular with men. You attend a fairly cloistered girls’ school, so I can certainly see how appearing in an event like that might’ve attracted a lot of interest in you...but the way you put it, these men seeking your attention aren’t doing so for romantic reasons.”

“Exactly,” added Saionji. “Which leads to what you mean when you said you’re ‘attracting guys.’ Let’s look back at ASTRAL. You were one of the few players who survived until the final stages. You duked it out all the way until Day Four, when all the remaining players were much higher ranked than you. In other words, you showed real *strength* in that event. I’m not sure if you meant it like that, but you gave the whole world a glimpse of your talents. I think you realized that, too, right, Shinohara?”

“Well, yeah. If I hadn’t, I don’t think I would’ve been able to make it so far in this Game. Right, Minami? You normally hide all your talent, but you revealed a little of it in ASTRAL, and all your friends saw it. And by ‘friends,’ I don’t mean your St. Rosalia classmates, but the two people who teamed up with you in the second half—Seiran Kugasaki and Toya Kirigaya.”

The moment their names left my lips, Minami’s face noticeably tensed up. We were on the right track, and we kept on pressing her.

“Those two saw how powerful you are, and that attracted their attention. Kugasaki runs the Self-Styled Holy Knights, and Kirigaya’s part of some shadowy group I’m not wholly clued in on yet, but anyway, it exists. I’m sure either of them would want a dark-horse talent like you.”

“Right. And you described that as them being ‘attracted’ to you. I bet it felt like they were all over you—two high-ranked players competing for your attention and all. But you hate the limelight, so you weren’t happy about all the attention. That’s why you posted on Meetia to help make them stop...but you framed it as being suddenly super popular, so this affair wouldn’t attract undue attention.”

Saionji cutely chuckled at my summary.

Minami, meanwhile, stayed frozen for a moment, staring down at the table. After a little while, she took out her device and extended our stay in the room.

Then, turning her head back up, she looked us both in the eye.

“You’re absolutely right... Wow, you two. I didn’t think you’d actually get it...”

“Thanks. Are you willing to admit we won, then?”

“Of course I am.” She nodded meekly at us, all the hesitation from before now firmly in the past. “I can entrust you with this... But...” Her facial expression changed just a little bit...to one of dissatisfaction. “I might...be a little angry now.”

Through her pursed lips, I could sense just a hint of that aura from her undefeated glory days, and I inhaled sharply.

“Um, by the way...”

A few minutes later, we were still in our karaoke room—Minami had extended our time, so there was no reason for us not to use it. We were a lot more casual with each other now that the Game was over, and as I enjoyed my iced tea, I decided to ask Minami a question.

“What were you like in middle school, exactly? I mean, I did my research, so I know you were unbeaten and super strong and all, but I’m still having a hard time picturing what you were like.”

“Hmm...”

Minami’s bangs shook gently as she considered my question. She looked as if she wasn’t sure whether or not to talk about it, but she must’ve decided that she trusted us all the way now, because she quietly began to speak.

“The middle school I attended used pretty much the same system as the Academy... There was a Game system, and rankings, and so on. I found it pretty fun, so in my first year there, I just did it to hone my skills. I’d think about stuff, figure out strategies, work hard to be better than everyone else...and I kept improving. I didn’t lose once.”

“Yeah.”

“And that was fun at first, of course. I liked the praise I got...but it started to grate on me a little after a while. I was changing...and so were the eyes of everyone around me. I think you’d understand.”

I nodded back at her. “Mmm... That tends to end up happening. If there’s one person who’s way more talented than all the average people around them, they get attention, both good and bad. And they get blamed for a lot of other people’s emotions.”

“Right. The excitement, the hatred, those...expectations from people I don’t even know. I don’t think I was suited for dealing with all that. I’d been living in my own little perfect world, but now all these other people were watching me... and once that dawned on me, it suddenly got so boring.”

“...You mean, you stopped enjoying it? Or did the pressure get to you?”

“No, something more basic than that... I mean, I’d worked so hard for my own sake, not for anyone else’s. So I didn’t want anyone to share in that...or take it away from me. ‘I don’t belong to anyone...’ That’s how I felt, so I went as far away as I could for high school. Someplace where no one would pay attention to me... Where I wouldn’t stand out. And if I stayed on mainland Japan, there’d always be rumors about me...so I went to the Academy.”

“Ahh, I see... Is that why you deliberately picked St. Rosalia, with its low ranking and all?”

“...? No... I picked it because a lot of cute girls go there.”

“...Oh. Okay.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at the straightforward way Minami said that. Then Saionji, who had just been listening for the past little bit, leaned forward.

“Can I ask you something, too? You said you’re trying not to attract attention, Shizuku...but why did you play in ASTRAL, then? You even had a Unique Star.”

“Uh...yeah. That was my biggest mistake. This girl with a Unique Star challenged me to a Game last month, and I was trying to lose, but I won instead...and, well, when they were picking our team for ASTRAL, I’d just become a Four Star with that purple one. It was a huge mistake... The next time a cute girl asks me for a Game, I’m gonna do all my research on her before committing.”

“...I see.”

If it was something as small as that, which was why guys like Kugasaki and Kirigaya were pursuing her, I suppose Minami did deserve some of our sympathy. We had our answers, but now Minami wanted to talk about her request.

“So...that’s why I really didn’t want anyone to befriend me or have expectations for me. I wanted someone to do something about it...so I made that request, but...”

Minami raised her gaze, unsure whether to continue. Those blue eyes that looked at me, then Saionji, had a forlorn sort of shimmer to them.

“When I said I didn’t trust you, it wasn’t anything you did... It’s just that... Sairan Kugasaki and Toya Kirigaya are both bad news. Getting them off my back might not be that easy...”

“Oh? Are you saying you’re worried about us?”

“Simply put, yes...but you won my Game. You proved your strength. So...can I believe in you?”

Her weak voice held both hope and anxiety. She wasn’t very good at having other people share their feelings with her, and I suppose she wasn’t much used to the opposite, either. And her concern was valid—Shizuku Minami was a prospect with vast potential. She was probably worth a whole lot more than she thought she was. Kugasaki and Kirigaya were likely both dead serious about pursuing her, to the point where they’d stage some kind of large-scale Game to decide who got her.

*That’d be the worst-case scenario, though... Hmm?*

Suddenly, I felt my device vibrate in my pocket. My mind froze. Looking at the screen, I saw it was another notification from DearScript. My orders about winning Minami’s trust were fulfilled, and now I had another *New Objective Unlocked!* window to read.

*Additional Order: Make contact with Toya Kirigaya at 1:30 p.m. tomorrow at the Seventh Ward station and convince him to give up on Shizuku Minami. However, you must do this in a way that does not involve a Game.*

“...Is that one of your orders?”

I showed Minami my screen. She blinked at it for a bit.

“Yeah. Basically, it’s one of the things I have to do as part of this Game we’re in. No matter how crazy it is, if I want to beat Saionji, I’ve got no choice but to do this... Actually, what about you, Saionji? Did you get assigned Kugasaki?”

“You guessed it. To explain it in a way Shizuku would understand...basically, in order to win this, I need to stop Kugasaki, and Shinohara has to stop Kirigaya. Those are our victory conditions.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said, looking at my device. “The gamemaster’s powers are unfathomable, though. They don’t seem to be watching us, but they knew the Game just ended and immediately gave us these new orders...but it’s not all bad, either. I know from previous experience that none of these orders are physically impossible to complete. In fact, it’s been proven to us that no matter how tough these orders are, if they’re given to us, it means there’s absolutely a way to fulfill them.”

Ever since Saionji and I kicked off this Unique Star competition, everything we’d done as a part of it—from the Rainbow Pâtisserie rules to our double date schedule—had been foreseen by the gamemaster. Thinking about it like that, these orders must be just as doable. All that mattered was whether me or Saionji satisfied the winning conditions first.

I looked at Minami, still pretty anxious as she eyed us, and spoke as confidently as I could.

“Don’t worry, Minami... Your request is as good as solved.”

#

The next day, after using Minami’s device to send Kirigaya a message saying *I want to talk* and steering him toward the location I’d been given, I was also on my way there, arms folded as I quietly thought to myself.

*I said this was as good as solved...but who knows?*

This same issue had been puzzling me since yesterday. I mean, I’d told the truth to Minami; our orders in DearScript were set up so nothing was completely impossible to carry out. That much wasn’t a lie, but we were only talking possibilities here—we hadn’t been given step-by-step instructions. The

gamemaster might be able to see everything, but that wasn't true for me.

*Normally, we'd stage a Game over Minami or something like that. Can I really finish this just by trying to reason with Kirigaya? I mean, he's so combative, I'm surprised he wants to get someone as introverted as Minami to join his group.*

I'd racked my brain but made no progress at all. My right hand went up to my lips, and just then, Himeji's clear voice came through my earpiece.

*"Keep in mind, also, that speed is what you're competing over. Knowing what Mr. Kirigaya is like, even if you can avoid a Game and just discuss it with him instead, he's bound to apply some sort of condition to agreeing to leave Minami alone. With Rina, on the other hand, she already has Kugasaki's unconditional love and respect, so she might get him to agree within seconds."*

*...Yeah.*

I sighed a little at Himeji's prediction... And, really, she wasn't wrong. Kugasaki and Kirigaya were both tough opponents to have, but for Kugasaki, Sarasa Saionji was his biggest weak spot. He loved the Empress from deep within his heart, and I was sure he'd follow any orders she gave him. Saionji herself had admitted as much yesterday, saying "Hee-hee! Sorry about that" and smiling at me as if she'd already won.

So the odds already seemed against me here...but I couldn't just give up, either.

*"...Whew."*

I let out a sigh as I saw Kirigaya at the agreed-upon meeting point.

*"...Hey, Kirigaya. Nice to see ya."*

We were on the main street in front of the Seventh Ward station, which was lined with office buildings and restaurants. Kirigaya had been leaning against the front window of a store when I called out to him from the side. "Huh...?" he said, giving me a dubious look. He clearly wasn't up for an idle chat today, but once he saw who I was, his lips curled into an evil grin.

"Hya-hah! Hiroto Shinohara, huh? What a coincidence. What're you doin' on my turf?"

“What am I doing? What, am I not allowed in the Seventh Ward without good reason?”

“Huh? Nah, man. You’re always welcome here. Around these parts, strength means everything.”

Kirigaya brushed his hair back. He was being openly hostile toward me, but I kept it cool, giving him an “Oh yeah?” before getting to my real reason for being there.

“So I got some news for you... Minami’s not coming. That message yesterday was from me.”

“Huh...? Dude, what the hell’s up with that? She hangin’ with *you* now or somethin’?”

“Not in the way I think you mean...but more or less. I’ve been asked for a couple favors, so now I’m here to stop you from dragging her over to your side.”

I took a step closer to Kirigaya, a faint smile on my lips. His slicked-back hair and intimidating sneer wasn’t exactly reassuring to see, but I wasn’t about to show any fear on my face. I looked at him, keeping it cool on the surface.

Kirigaya, for his part, fell silent for a moment...then gave a small shrug.

“Drag her over, huh...? No way. I dunno how you’ve jumped to that conclusion, but there’s no way I’d ever do anything that lame. Not even once in my life.”

“...Not even once? But you’ve been in contact with Minami since ASTRAL ended, right?”

“Yeah, I reached out to her. Personally, I mean. But that’s just so I could take her on in a Game. I wanted to see for myself whether those flashes of talent she showed in ASTRAL are the real deal or not.”

“A Game...?” I whispered to myself. *Now* this was starting to come together. Knowing what I knew about Toya Kirigaya, that kind of behavior seemed to make a lot more sense. He knew the kind of raw talent Minami had, but he didn’t want it for himself—he wanted to *dominate* it.

“But, you know...” Kirigaya said, shaking his head with apparent boredom. He seemed a little annoyed as he thrust a hand in his pocket. “A little bit ago, I did some looking into her past. Middle school, to be exact. Did you know, Shinohara? She used to be in the same kinda invincible echelon *you’re* in. But she gave up the throne...and now she’s attending *St. Rosalia*? That’s such crap. She just ran away, y’know?”

“...? What’s it matter *what* she did?”

“Hya-hah! What’s it matter? It’s the whole damn thing, man. If you run away, even just once, you’re done for. And playing a Game against someone who’s a shell of her former self like that? That’d *never* satisfy me!” As he spoke, Kirigaya leaned toward me, his malicious grin curling up even further. “No, it’s all *you*, Hiroto Shinohara. *You* excite me more than anything. You get my blood really pumping.”

“...Can you stop being weird?”

“Heh. Nice. Not too many people can show me that kinda attitude. I’d love to take this chance to fight it out with you right now, but...”

I thought he was challenging me to a Game on the spot, but Kirigaya stopped cold just before that.

“Hiroto Shinohara,” he said as he took out his device. “Do you know...about the summer event comin’ up?”

“The summer event? ...No, I don’t.”

“Ah. Well, it’s a huge Game-based event—one of the biggest on the island. The attention, the excitement... Everything’s top of the line, y’know? And I *know* we’ll both get picked to play in it...so how ’bout we settle the score then?”

“...Hmm? I’m surprised you even have that kind of patience.”

“Hya-hah! What the hell’re you talkin’ about, Seven Star? This’s a duel between you and me, man! You think some random street corner like this is the right stage for that kinda epic matchup? And also...”

He thrust the screen of his device toward me. It was displaying his own



profile, showing his rank and other stats, and on it I could see four regular, normal stars, the black Unique Star he'd put to use during ASTRAL...and one other. There, on the far end of the display, was the gray star Shizuku Minami had lost in ASTRAL.

"...! So *you* got it?"

"Yep. *Your* ass is still takin' up the Seven Star slot, so this gray star replaced one of my normal ones, but that makes me a double Unique Star holder. I still haven't done much research into using it yet, though, so as I said, I got no interest in springin' a Game on you right now."

"..."

"Hya-hah...! So watch your back this summer, Seven Star! I'm gonna stir up *all* the shit, go crazy, and make sure your career here is over for good. You're one hell of a toy, but I can't waste my fun on a bunch of dumb crap. I'll play with you till I'm good and bored, then I'll *destroy* you. You got that? The next event is gonna be your last."

With one more evil grin, Kirigaya turned his back to me and tromped down the street. I guess he was already making plans for whatever this summer event was. That was how Kirigaya always worked, though; he'd spare no effort to maximize his fun.

As I watched him go, I brought my right hand to my lips. This *did* seem like another potential crisis on the horizon for me. That said, couldn't it also be treated as Kirigaya renouncing his claim on Minami? Had I satisfied my victory conditions...?

*...Oh, right. Saionji...*

Snapping out of it, I calmed my rushing heartbeat and opened the DearScript app. I couldn't use it to see how Saionji was doing with *her* orders, of course... but looking at the bottom of the page, I saw the word *CONGRATULATIONS!* and text confirming that I had conquered the final quest.

*I won...? But why?*

*"Congratulations, Master."*

Himeji's voice startled me a bit. But she also had an answer to my question—although she sounded pretty fuzzy about it, too.

*“Ms. Kagaya is keeping an eye on Rina, but she... Well, how would I describe this? Mr. Kugasaki's gone down on his knees in public in front of her, saying ‘If you want me to leave Shizuku Minami alone, then you have to play a Game with me!’”*

*Oh. Ohhhh... That makes sense.*

I gave her a little nod of understanding. I guess that was one of the side effects of being treated like an object of worship. It was the exact opposite of Kirigaya, who idolizes the thrill of combat so much that he was patient enough to wait for the perfect opportunity to fight me.

But anyway...regardless of the reason, Saionji had yet to complete her final orders. Looking at my DearScript app, I really *had* completed the final quest—and with that, the Unique Star competition we'd spent over three weeks on ended with me as the victor.

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“...Hee-hee! I knew you could do it, Hiroto. No way were you gonna lose to something like this. But since we've come all this way, it'd be nice if you could play with me for just a little longer. So keep on trying, Hiroto, if you want to see me...okay?”

#

“...”

A few hours after my “negotiations” with Kirigaya had ended, I was in my living room, facing Saionji in her hoodie disguise across the table.

She had only arrived here around twenty minutes ago. After finding a way to avoid a Game with Kugasaki and make it look natural, she plodded back here, exhausted, and promptly changed clothes. She had her head propped up on one arm against the table, still not willing to admit defeat.

“Hngh... Why couldn't I win this one? When I saw that last order, I didn't think I could possibly lose. What kind of trick did you pull?”

“Actually, I didn't do anything this time. Kirigaya just happened to be losing

his attachment to Minami when I talked to him.”

“Oh... He was? So, if I was assigned *him* instead of Kugasaki... Ahh, forget it. It’s so lame, thinking about what-ifs after I lost.”

Her stunning red hair spread itself across the table as she put her head against it, chiding herself. Indeed, if our assignments had been swapped, I think she would’ve easily won, but I guess her pride as the Empress prevented her from clinging to that thought. Hardship seemed to go hand in hand with her sometimes.

And not that I felt pity for her, but...

“Well...I *do* have you to thank for winning the Game against Minami, though.”

“...D-don’t be stupid! I wasn’t asking you for praise.”

She looked to the side, pouting. I was a little put off by that blunt response, but then she softly whispered, “...Still, thanks,” and I suddenly needed to find something else to look at, too. That...had been a little unfair, I think. She’s cute enough as it is. I wish she wouldn’t get all real with me like that.

“Um, so, Saionji.”

“...Excuse me. I’m sorry to interrupt your flirting, but could we get back on topic?”

““ ...!””

Himeji’s voice cut in from the side and startled both of us. We blushed and cleared our throats, trying to hide our shame as Himeji sullenly glared at us.

“As you know,” she began, “my master was the first to complete Ms. Minami’s request for the Unique Star competition’s final quest. You could say that she’s no longer as ‘popular’ as she was before. She contacted me earlier, but apparently Mr. Kugasaki has already sent her a book-length apology letter.”

“Sounds like something he’d do, yeah... On the other hand, I don’t think Kirigaya’s gonna bother talking to her again.”

“No. But with that, my master has won the competition two games to one against Rina, and the purple Unique Star offered as the prize will now go to him. As for DearScript, the gamebook driving this competition, a new page has been

added now that the final quest is complete. This is likely going to be the final page, but... Master?"

I felt her clear eyes on me as I nodded and took out my device. Launching DearScript, I found a new page with a single, one-line order:

*Order: Go to [REDACTED] on June 10 at one PM to meet the DearScript gamemaster.*

"...Hmmm?"

Saionji leaned over from across the table. "You'll meet the gamemaster...? That's your reward, huh? It really *is* the final order."

"Yeah. Though, actually, what reward would *you* have gotten?"

"...? What do you think? I'd have Meetia tell me my fortune for love—ah! Wait! No, it's a secret! I don't need to tell you all *that*! But this is your childhood friend, right?"

Saionji suddenly exercised her right to remain silent, despite having basically revealed everything anyway. I wanted to press her for more details, but those ruby eyes stopped me, so I took the hint and returned to the main issue at hand.

"Well, I know that I can meet the DearScript gamemaster tomorrow afternoon, but unfortunately, the location's been blacked out. I have no idea where I should be going."

"Yes, that's correct," Himeji chimed in. "We looked into it, and it doesn't appear to be a bug. It's likely the way the app was designed to behave."

"So your friend's not telling you where you'll find her on purpose? That doesn't make much sense. Can your team of cheaters do something about that, Yuki?"

"It's called the Company, Rina... And sadly not. I did think about that already, of course, but..."

Himeji looked up at me and shook her head slowly, an apologetic look in her eyes. Seeing her response, I let out a deep sigh.

"We've lost contact with Kagaya and everybody else. We had no problems

getting through to them all through the final quest, but now my earpiece has gone silent.”

“We lost contact with *everyone*...? Did they leave after the job was done?”

“No, it shouldn’t be something like that...but either way, we cannot expect any support from the Company for this. If it was a simple program, I could find a way around it myself, but DearScript has some fairly tough protection, sadly...”

She might be the leader of the Company, but Himeji really couldn’t hold a candle to Kagaya in terms of computer skills.

“...Ah, well. We’ll have to go right to the provost, then—hmm?”

I was about to contact Provost Ichinose, the direct employer of the Company...but then my device on the table started to play a shrill ringtone. Looking at the sender, I saw that it was a phone call from the provost herself. Her timing was a little too convenient for my tastes, but I motioned with my eyes for Saionji to keep quiet as I cleared my throat and answered the call.

“Hello, this is Shinohara.”

*“Hee-hee... Hello, Shinohara! It’s been a while, hasn’t it? The Company told me how the Unique Star competition worked out. Very impressive work! Even with all the help the Company gave you, you performed exceedingly well against the Empress. I’m sure you must be mentally exhausted by now, huh?”*

“Yeah, I suppose so. It went on for a while, so I’m definitely feeling the fatigue.”

*“Are you? Well, get a good night’s rest tonight. You’ll have your purple star by tomorrow morning. That’s your fourth color star...hee-hee! One step closer to becoming a legend, aren’t you?”*

“A legend...? Well, fine. But listen, um, Provost...”

I wasn’t sure how to react to the provost’s gleeful appraisal, so I just got down to business instead. First, I gave her a rundown of what we were dealing with right now—the final page of DearScript, which had been revealed after the competition’s end, the special trick preventing me from seeing the location of our meeting, and the Company suddenly going offline just when we needed

their help.

*“Hmm...,”* the provost quietly murmured after I explained everything to her... but this wasn’t the sort of serious sound of her being troubled or put in a difficult position. In fact, if I wasn’t mistaken, that “hmm” was her way of saying, *“Now this sounds like something interesting.”*

*“All right. So what you’re trying to tell me is that you beat the Empress in the competition, but you still can’t meet your childhood friend yet. And you can’t bear the thought of missing this chance to see her, so you want the Company to bail you out right to the very end. Is that it?”*

“Uh... That feels like kind of a mean translation, but putting it bluntly, yes, you’re right.”

*“Hmm, I see, I see... Heh... Heh-heh! Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”*

The uproarious laughter from the other side of the line made me yank the device away from my ear. I froze up, failing to comprehend her reaction, but then the provost continued, talking loud and fast enough that I didn’t need to turn on speaker mode.

*“Now I get it! It all makes sense! Wow... Finally, the riddle is solved!”*

“Uh, I think I’m gonna be stuck with this ‘riddle’ forever unless you explain what you’re talking about...”

*“Well, just before, I received a message from my contact account for the Company. It was sent by ‘Anonymous,’ but looking at the CC’s, I think everybody but Shirayuki was involved in it. Here’s what it said: ‘We helped you all the way up to obtaining the purple star, but you’ll need to search for your cute li’l childhood friend yourself, Hiro! We’re going on vacation!’”*

“...?! That’s totally Kagaya who wrote that!”

*“Hee-hee! Isn’t it funny, how they’re not even bothering to hide the truth? It’s a pretty jokey message, yes, but the Company’s gonna be boycotting your next quest, it looks like. Guess you got on their bad side, huh?”*

“Their bad side? I didn’t—”

*“Like, maybe, having that flirty date with Shirayuki.”*

“...Sorry about that.”

I was so acutely aware of what she was talking about, I didn’t even bother trying to defend myself. Even if she’d just been watching in from her remote feed, I couldn’t imagine how hard it had been for Kagaya to provide support for our pseudo-date from start to finish. And her stance was perfectly valid, too. The Unique Star competition was over, and DearScript wasn’t going to win or cost me stars any longer. Deploying the Company just to track down an old friend *did* seem like abusing my authority a little.

*“Hee-hee! So, there you go. Best of luck with that!”*

“Ah, wait—”

But the provost mercilessly cut off the call before I could protest, and I was left holding my device, staring into space. Then my head shot back up.

“...You both heard that, right?!”

“Y-yes...”

“Of course, Master.”

“All right! Himeji, you said you couldn’t decipher that blacked-out part, but would it be impossible even with the Company’s gear? Like if you had the tablet Kagaya brought in here, for example?!”

“Yes... Even with that, it would be a tough ask. I don’t have her technical skills, and if I wasn’t included in that group message, that probably makes me the ‘enemy’ in their eyes. I imagine the Company has frozen my account by now.”

“Ugh... Okay, Saionji! Can *you* do anything to help out?!”

“M-me? No way. Yuki knows a lot more about computers than I do.”

“Then what about using the Saionji family’s influence to figure out something?!”

“Oh, no way! I mean, if I lend you that much of a hand and you track her down, that’s nothing but bad for me, isn’t it? We’re coconspirators obligated to keep our lies going, right? And this could tear all of that apart.”

“What?! No, no, I’m not gonna stop holding up *my* part of the bargain just

because I finally get to see her!”

“Uh-huh. I don’t believe you. You’re a big liar, after all,” Saionji said, turning away from me.

I did get what she meant, though. Our conspiracy was based on the lies we told, and if I no longer had a reason to keep up my lie, our relationship would become uncertain. That was why she wasn’t at all eager to help me out with this, and honestly...

*She’s absolutely right...! I mean, if I were Saionji, I’d never lend a hand, either! Same with the provost! What the hell, man? Am I screwed...?!*

My brain was starting to freak out. I tried to keep it together as I brought a hand to my lips.

But just then, Himeji quietly interjected.

“Um, Master...don’t you think it best to give up on it this time?”

“...! Give up? After I’ve come this far?”

“Yes. You’ve already achieved your objective of obtaining the Unique Star, so pulling out now doesn’t mean your work went to waste. And I’ll say this again... but I adore you from the bottom of my heart. Normally, if you were in a big rush to meet your beloved, I’d offer my full support, never giving up until the very end...but do you mind if I say something rather strange?”

“Strange...?”

“Yes. Something I’ve been wondering about from the beginning. Do you think the gamemaster running DearScript really *is* your childhood friend? She’s been running this enormous operation, sending out order after order that seemed perfectly timed for every situation you were in... There’s simply no way a regular teenage girl could do all of that. I find it rather frightening, in fact. So...I apologize, Master, but I must speak out against this.”

Her clear blue eyes were staring straight at me as she made her earnest appeal. And, honestly...I had also found that kind of creepy as well. Your average teenage girl could have never pulled off something like that. We were dealing with an unknown, almost ominous presence, and I fully understood why



Himeji might not want me to see her.

*But if I just gave up here, it'd leave the absolute worst taste in my mouth...!*

That was what I'd thought...but after the provost laughed in my face, Saionji turned away from me, and Himeji bowed and made her appeal, I was left completely alone. I was normally touted as the Seven Star, the best in the Academy, but bluffing my way out of trouble was the only thing I could do myself. That was it—I'd never overcome this adversity unless I had somebody's help.

But who out there had Company-level skills, wouldn't lose anything if they helped me, and would in fact be glad to lend me their aid? Was there really someone that convenient—

"...Oh?"

*Wait. There might be.*

I silently sank deep into my thoughts as Himeji and Saionji gave each other odd looks.

#

The next morning, Himeji and I visited the provost's office at the Eimei School. There, sitting on a sofa on the other side of the glass table, Provost Ichinose was elegantly enjoying a glass of wine.

"Hee-hee... Hey, you two. Glad to see you. Have a seat, and I'll get some extra glasses."

"...You're drinking in the middle of the day, Ms. Evil Vixen? I'm glad to see *you've* got it good."

"Hmm? No, you've got it wrong, Shirayuki. I'm not *day* drinking. I'm still drinking from last night."

"That's...rather serious, isn't it? Ugh... Did something good happen to you?"

"Well, I'm celebrating your master's exploits, of course," said the provost, turning to me with a big smile on her face. She had her usual office attire on, but her eyes were a little glassy from the alcohol, and she was a lot more physically expressive than usual. It was, honestly, pretty alluring.

“Shinohara, you took on Sarasa Saionji, the Empress of the Third Ward’s Ohga School, and won. You’ve obtained your fourth Unique Star—which, as you know, is used for copying data. You’ll find that *very* useful, I’ll wager.”

“I’m sure I will. Could I copy other Unique Stars, for example?”

“Of course not... Listen, Shinohara. Out of all the systems on the Academy, the ones related to stars boast the toughest protection of all. If your purple star could break that, every provost on this island would be busting their asses searching for it. It’d be the only thing you’d needed to conquer this whole place.”

“Yeah, true...”

I’d just wanted to be sure—I hadn’t actually planned on trying it. But as I shook my head, the provost looked at me and smiled cheerfully.

“You’ve surpassed even my wildest dreams! You are full of surprises. Actually, you mind if I tell you a little story? The last time Eimei produced a Seven Star was ten years ago, back when I was a student here. In those days, Eimei was the top-ranked school three years in a row; it was the dominant contender on the island. Ohga, Shinra, Suisei—they were nothing.”

“Wow, Eimei in its heyday, huh...?”

“Yeah, it was a real golden age. You could even say we used to rule the entire Academy. Eimei had eighty percent of the Six Stars and more than half of all the color stars, and it was all thanks to the Seven Star they called the ‘Devil of Eimei.’ But you know, Shinohara...I think we could make a huge leap this year, big enough to take us back to those glory days. You might be nothing but a good liar right now, but if you collect three more Unique Stars, you actually *will* be a Seven Star. And the Devil didn’t make it there, but if you could become an *Eight* Star; that’d completely rewrite the history of this island.”

“...Wow, you’re pretty drunk, Provost.”

“Drunk on more than just wine!”

She chuckled at this as she put her glass back on the table. Then she looked at me with those bleary eyes.

“But enough teasing you. You’re here to talk about DearScript, aren’t you? The Company abandoned you, and now you’ve come crying to me.”

With some annoyance, I braced myself for more teasing and kept my eyes on her.

“...I didn’t think the Company would boycott me like that.”

“Hey, don’t yell at *me* for it. They carried out their duty, so I don’t see any reason for you to resent them. And if you don’t know where the gamemaster is, just comb the island until you find her.”

“I’d need more than a whole day to do that... Ugh.”

I let out a sigh as I turned down the provost’s suggestion. But she raised her eyebrows at me, as if something I said had piqued her interest.

“...Hmm. You seem pretty calm, Shinohara, given your situation. I thought you’d be more agitated, after being given that impossible order.”

“I hate to agree with you, Ms. Evil Vixen, but I thought the same thing myself. Do you have some sort of plan in mind, Master? A breakthrough of some kind?”

“Yeah.” I nodded at the two doubtful women, one in front of me and one standing at my side, then smiled. “It’s just like the last part of the final quest. DearScript has never given me an order that was physically impossible to carry out. You called it impossible just now, Provost, but that can’t be the case.”

“Oh? Glad you sound so confident, but what basis do you have for that? Don’t tell me you found someone to help you out.”

“Of course I did. Over in *that* room.”

With that revelation, I stood up from the sofa. Behind me, I could hear Himeji say “Oh... So that’s your plan?” as I stood by the other door in the office and turned the knob. On the other side was a room much smaller than the provost’s chamber, and while it was outfitted in much the same way, it looked quite a bit more *lived* in. On a sofa in the middle of this room was a black-haired girl. She was curled up into a ball and sleeping soundly in a frilly negligee like some kind of angel.

“Ugh... She’s still sleeping in this late? Hey! Shiina!”

Yes, Tsumugi Shiina. The innocent monster who crafted the Academy's first fake identity from scratch. The girl Mikado Kurahashi attempted to have do his dirty work for him. I last saw her on the first day of DearScript, but I'd sent her a message last night to check if she was still here, and she confirmed that she hadn't moved out yet. That was how I'd known where to find her—this solo genius who might outclass the best the Company had to offer.

"Hey, Shiina, how long're you gonna sleep? It's gonna be noon shortly."

"Mmh... Hmnh... Two more days..."

"You're talking *days*?" I sighed. "If you don't get up, I'm gonna have to use force, all right?"

I approached the sofa Shiina was slumbering on. Quietly bending over, I took a look at her totally defenseless face and ever-so-slightly poked her in the cheek.

"Hnnh? ...Mrmm... Hngh..."

"Shaking your head isn't gonna get rid of me. Please, Shiina, wake up."

"Wake up...? Wa...wake... Hrm?"

She moaned and groaned a bit at my relentless attack, but slowly, by fits and starts, she awakened, her heavy eyelids gradually pushing themselves up to reveal one jet-black and one bright red eye underneath.

"Fweh? ...Ah! *You*?!"

She propped herself up on the sofa at once, hugging her Cerberus doll to her chest as her eyes shone.

"You came for me! Hey, can you play something with me today? Can you?"

"Um, calm down one sec, Shiina. Also, real talk for a second—you *really* shouldn't go to sleep with your contacts on. What if you mess up your eyes?"

"Ooh, sorry, I was up real late, so... Wait, no! I appreciate your concern, but these are for real! I forged a contract with a dark dragon to obtain these eerie alien eyes, so my eyesight's twenty-twenty times, like, a thousand! ...But I'll be more careful of that from now on!"

“Great. Thanks.”

I didn’t know what she was getting so defensive about, but it’d be impolite of me to ask. Anyway, once she was sufficiently chilled out, I took my device out of my pocket.

“So, Shiina... I came here to ask you a favor.”

“A favor? Me...? W-well, what is it? Did you want a piece of my dark power?!”

“No, unfortunately, it’s not that. So I’ve got this app on my device called DearScript, but I was hoping you could poke around inside it a little for me. It’s got this annoying security on it, so it won’t display this line of text that I really need to see.”

“Mmm? Where’s that?”

“Right here... Uh, for various reasons, I can’t let anyone else touch my device...but I should be able to use my purple star to create a replica of this app and send it to you.”

I wasn’t keeping up a very good cover here, I knew. The “various reasons” were all the fake and illegal Abilities I had crammed into this thing, so there was no way I could lend it to anyone else.

Regardless, Shiina fixed her oddly colored eyes on my device as I held it up. Not that I was really expecting a lot—asking a middle schooler to remove the protection from some unknown application for me was really just too much.

“...Um, is *that* all you need?” But the puzzled Shiina decided to shock me. “Because if that’s all, I don’t think it’ll take too much time...but will you play something with me if I do it?”

“S-sure. I’m kind of busy today, but I could hang with you this entire weekend if you like. But...can you really do that?”

“Oh, yeah, no problem! Can you copy it to this device for me?”

I took the device Shiina gave me and sent a copy of DearScript I’d made with my purple star over to her. Then I placed the device back on Shiina’s palm, and she promptly hopped back on the sofa, humming to herself as she got to work. She didn’t break out any specialist hardware at all—just let her fingers dance

across the multiple screens she projected out.

“Put this over here...and that links up just right. Then you just massage it a bit...get that round piece out, then pull in hard!”

“ ...”

“Then you just mix the whole thing up, put it back in the box... All done!”

“...Are you serious?”

I could barely keep it together as I looked at her... It was done? Had she really said she was finished? It hadn't even been half a minute since she'd begun working on it...

“Uhhh... Hey, Shiina, I don't really have time for jokes right now—”

“I-I'm not joking! Ugggh... Here, look at this.”

She puffed up her cheeks as she thrust her device toward me. When I looked at it, I saw that she hadn't been joking one bit—the meetup location, blacked out before, was now fully visible.

“...That's all you needed, right?”

“Yeah... Great work, Shiina. This is perfect.”

“Waaah?! Wh-why are you petting me? ...Mmmh...eh-heh-heh...”

The way the proud look on Shiina's face had clouded over just a little bit was so cute I hadn't been able to stop myself from reaching out to stroke her shiny black hair. The moment I touched her hair, her entire body had twitched, but she'd relaxed almost immediately after. Now she was letting me pet her, completely comfortable, like a cat craving human attention. She'd occasionally kick her legs, too, only strengthening the resemblance to an adorable small animal.

*...Ah, no, no, now's no time for this!*

Finally regaining control of myself, I shook my head and stood up from the sofa. I would've loved to keep petting her for a little while, but my hands were tied.

“...Fweh? You're going already...?”

“...Yeah. Sorry. Like I said, I’ve gotta do something today.”

“Ohhh... All right. But we’re gonna have a *lot* of fun this weekend!”

“We sure are... Thanks, Shiina. You really saved me this time.”

With those words of appreciation, I went back to the provost’s office, only to be greeted by two people who were showing the exact opposite body language that Shiina had just now. One was Himeji, waiting for me with a mixture of surprise, admiration, and a whole lot of other emotions across her face. The other was Provost Ichinose, slyly grinning at me across from Himeji.

“Hee-hee... Very impressive, Shinohara. That was undoubtedly the right answer to this riddle. I can’t think of anyone else who’s not invested in this but still has Company-level skills.”

“...Yeah, thanks.”

The provost might have been applauding me...literally...but I just rolled my eyes at her. I didn’t know if Himeji or Saionji had thought about Shiina before now, but if the provost has been living with her for so long, this approach *must* have occurred to her yesterday. She hadn’t moved Shiina anywhere, no, but she certainly didn’t point me in her direction, either. Very fair, or neutral, of her...I guess. Things never go easy between her and me.

“Now,” she said, bringing a finger to her glasses, “you’ve obtained the right to fully complete DearScript. Now that we’re at this point, Shirayuki, I assume you have no objections?”

“...No, Ms. Evil Vixen. I would never object to my master’s decisions. But I’d like to know one thing: Who *is* the gamemaster of DearScript? Is it really the childhood friend my master’s looking for...?”

“Oh? You make it sound like I know everything but have just decided to keep quiet about it.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m suggesting. When DearScript was first revealed to you, you reacted very much like you knew what it was already. Is this gamemaster an acquaintance of yours?”

“Well, who can say? Maybe I’ll tell you if you drop the ‘Ms. Evil Vixen’ thing

and call me your auntie Natsume instead.”

“ ... ”

“Hee-hee! Oh, don’t look at me like that, Shirayuki. You’ll make me awaken to all new types of after-dark play.”

“Ugh...”

Himeji sighed, her silvery hair swaying as she scowled at the provost who loved playing with her so much.

“If that’s what you want, Ms. Evil Vixen, then fine... I’ll find out for myself.”

“Sounds great to me.”

The provost nodded eagerly and checked her watch. Then, as ferocious and sadistic as always, she grabbed her wine glass, took another sip, and grinned.

“All right, you two. It’s just about time, so you better get ready. I don’t think you’ll need to bring a gift...but say hi to her for me, won’t you?”



## Extra Stage

“...Well, Shinohara, you’re here.”

Just before the appointed time, Himeji and I met up with Saionji in her school uniform at Union Park, the site of our pretend date earlier. The Unique Star competition was over, but she and I were here together in public without any disguises on...although I didn’t think it was a problem. Union Park, after all, was closed for the afternoon for equipment maintenance. No passers-by would be around to see us together.

“But I wonder what the point of all this is...? Why did you ask me and Himeji to join you anyway?”

She ran a hand through her luxuriant red hair and gave me a puzzled look. She was right to be confused. Thanks to Shiina, I’d managed to figure out where the gamemaster wanted to meet me...but a scant few minutes later, the DearScript app had given me yet another order.

*Additional Order: Bring Shirayuki Himeji and Sarasa Saionji with you to the site.*

It was a total mystery.

“Good question, Rina,” Himeji said, her own silver hair swaying. “I can think of three possibilities. First, the gamemaster’s decided to give you and me a bonus reward. Second, she’s going to launch part two of DearScript with all of us here.”

“Mm... Yeah, both scenarios seem plausible... So what’s the third one, Yuki? I’m sure that’s the one you’re most confident about.”

“You’re very sharp, Rina. The third and most likely possibility in my mind is that this is all for show, in a way. Assuming my master really *will* be reunited with his childhood friend—well, they haven’t seen each other in years, have

they? There's every chance that this woman absolutely hates us, the two girls closest to him. Perhaps she would even want to kill us if she could."

"Y-you think she *hates* us? Enough to *kill* us?!"

"...Himeji, I really doubt that she'd—"

"No, Master, you don't understand. As I've learned rather recently, feelings of love can often throw women off-kilter a little bit. Perhaps 'hate' would be too strong of a word, but it wouldn't be strange at all if she's plotting a little revenge against us. For example...well, maybe she'd hug my master in front of you, Rina, or forcibly steal a kiss."

"...! She'd...kiss Shinohara...?" Saionji brought a hand up to her face as she blushed, her ruby eyes glancing toward me. Then she squeezed them tight. "That... That's crazy! What are you *talking* about, Yuki?! And why would Shinohara being hugged in front of me be 'revenge'?!"

"...? Don't you know, Rina? Having one's lover stolen out from under them is all too common a—"

"S-stolen...? I have *no* idea what you mean! I'm not even *like* that with Shinohara!"

Himeji was cool as a cucumber, but (for some reason) Saionji pointed her finger at me, red-faced, before turning away. As they kept carrying on, I secretly thought to myself.

*Well...looking at the quality behind the DearScript app, there's little to no chance I'll see my childhood friend here. If it really is her, though, I'm not sure how I'd react, either.*

The person I was searching for—my childhood friend, my first love, and the reason why I came to this island... I *did* want to meet her, of course, but it had been years since we'd seen each other face-to-face. I didn't remember her name, and I had almost no recollection of what she looked like. Maybe being reunited with her would jog my memory, but I couldn't even imagine what sort of emotion that might lead to.

Then...it was time.

“Ah...”

Our meeting place was in front of the Ferris wheel, and there, across the square, I saw a lone figure. She had flowing, shoulder-length brown hair, and although I couldn't clearly see what she looked like, since her back was turned to me, I took in the mature, chic-looking outfit she had on. How could I put it...? She was the sort of girl you could tell was a beauty even looking at her from behind. No other parkgoers were here, so it had to be her.

“All right. Let's get going—”

With a nervous gulp, I took my first step toward her...

“...?! Whoa... W-wait, Shinohara!”

“...Wha?!”

My arm was being pulled back by Saionji, which forced me to a stop. I stared at her, partly confused and partly in protest, but she kept her grip on my arm, her face looking a little panicked.

“Wh, wh-wh, why are you just gonna *talk* to her out of nowhere, Shinohara?! W-we need a strategy meeting! You haven't even decided what you'll *do* yet!”

“Huh? A strategy...? For what?”

“For what? I mean...you know...”

“Yes, I understand, Rina. If the girl standing there is the kind of predator out to take my master's chastity, we'll need to discuss how to dispatch her, certainly.”

“Exactly! ...Wait, no, *not* exactly! I—I mean, she might really be your childhood friend, right? So how should me and Yuki act around—”

“...Hiroto?”

There it was.

I guess the lack of guests had made it pretty easy for her to hear our bickering all the way from across the square, because the girl was now turned around. Her hair, dyed a dark shade of brown, fluttered in the breeze, and her orange eyes were opened slightly, looking at me.

“Hiroto...!”

The next moment she ran over to us with a smile that seemed to well up from deep inside her heart. Then, not stopping for a moment, she flew right into my chest.

“Huh?!”

“Wha—”

“...”

“...I’ve missed you!”

She hugged me hard, not minding how perplexed we were, rubbing her cheek against my shirt as she spoke. The fragrance that reached my nose was clean, but not sweet, and the soft sensation pressed against my body made me feel like I was going to lose my mind. She was literally at point-blank range, her hands going around my head and back, her pretty face totally close enough for a kiss if I wasn’t careful... Wait...

Huh?

“...Hey, um... Wait a second.”

I had just barely managed to hold on to my senses long enough to say that. She relented a little, and now I had three women all looking at me—Himeji, the color in her cheeks unchanged but her eyes slightly averted; Saionji, bright red and staring at me from between her fingers; and the third girl, still bright and cheerful as she hugged me.

“What is it, Hiroto? Something wrong?”

“Not wrong, no...um, what are you doing?”

“What? Can’t you tell? We’re finally reunited, so I’m hugging you. I’ve been waiting for this for who knows how many years... Or don’t you like this kind of thing?”

“It’s not that I don’t like it...”

“So you’re happy?”

“No, I mean... Hey!”

She flashed a light, chiding smile, then squeezed me even harder, almost as if she was physically trying to block any attempt at protest. Her right hand behind me was now stroking my hair, a habit that I definitely *did* have a memory of, and I instinctively looked up at the sky. Ahhh... So *this* is how it is. Yes, she *is* that important to me, no doubt. Maybe it really wasn't any exaggeration to say that she was someone I loved, who I'd finally been reunited with after so long.

After all, she was—

“Look, enough! I’m just asking you to explain all this for me...*Sis!*”

I closed my eyes tight as I forced out those words. After all, if I hadn't, my older sister would've rubbed her cheek against my chest all day.

We decided to move into a car in the Ferris wheel to gather ourselves. The DearScript gamemaster was seated on my right, with Himeji and Saionji facing us in the seat opposite. The other two, particularly Saionji, had been beside themselves for a little while, wondering if they should introduce themselves to my sister or not, but they'd calmed down a bit by now. My big sister had chosen this location for us, by the way. She knew I was afraid of heights, too—and even worse, apparently they were going to give us a spin around the wheel (despite it being closed for the day), which was so mean of her.

“Well, now that we're all settled...”

Anyway, as soon as the car began moving, my sister decided to break the ice.

“My name is Yuzuha Shinohara. I’m the owner of the Meetia account, the gamemaster of DearScript, the person behind the scenes for all of this, and most of all, Hiroto’s sister. Age-wise, I think I’m around ten years older than all of you.”

“Master’s sister...? So what was that message at the very beginning of DearScript?”

“Oh, sorry, that was a fib. I wanted Hiroto to seriously search for me, and I kind of got carried away.”

“*Kind of...?*”

She wasn't the least bit timid about saying that, which made me let out a

quiet sigh.



Yuzuha Shinohara, as she said herself, was my actual sister. She had moved to the Academy for her high school education and wound up pursuing a career here after school. I'd never suspected for a moment that she was behind this because she had always been the type to hardly ever contact her family. I had sent her a message just before coming to this island, but she'd never even read it, as usual. I knew she must have a good reason for that, though, so I didn't pursue it any further.

Now my sister—or Yuzu, as I usually called her—was stretching out on her seat.

"I really love Hiroto, you know, which is why I just got the sudden urge to tease him... Or at least that's how it went this time. I figured if I wrote something like *that* for him, then there was no way he'd throw in the towel before the end, right? He'd be constantly thinking about me instead, and, you know, I thought that'd be nice..."

"...So if I failed to complete an order at some point, what were you gonna do then?"

"Oh, come on, Hiroto! I knew you could clear those easy."

Yuzu snickered. Maybe she'd meant it as a joke, but if she *had* meant it, then she really was one scary woman. Still, she kept on smiling, not realizing what was running through my mind.

"Anyway, that was one reason I launched the whole DearScript thing. We haven't met in a long time, so I wanted our reunion to have a little drama."

"...And that's why you organized this grandiose Game? I feel like it'd be better if you just got in touch with your family a little more often..., " said Himeji.

"Umm, well, about that," I said, answering the completely valid comment before Yuzu could. "Yuzu's got a job where she has to deal with a lot of classified information. I guess she can only contact her family on limited occasions, so sometimes it takes her months to answer my messages. You're in the Academy Administration, right...?"

"Administration?! Are you serious, Shinohara?"



“Huh? Well, yeah, but... What, is it that surprising?”

“O-of course it is! The Academy Administration is home to all the top elites on the island! They’re at the very center of the whole star system! It’s run by a tight core of incredibly talented people, and they’ve got the highest class of access to every database in the Academy! They don’t let just *anyone* in, you know!”

“Yeah... It’s said that being Six Star at the time of your high school graduation is a bare minimum requirement. That, and it’s the most strictly regulated department on the island, because of all the top-secret data they work with... Now I understand why you can’t get in contact with her too often, Master.”

“Right, yeah! It’s been three years since we last met. And I *still* had to file all these requests just so I could be here for today.”

Yuzu smiled, all but begging for me to thank her. And, yeah...hearing all that, I couldn’t really be *that* cold-hearted to her.

“So, getting back on topic... The second reason why I devised DearScript was because it worked out perfectly timing-wise.”

“Timing-wise?”

“Yeah. It’s almost summer, right? And as I think you know by now, summer’s when the Academy holds its biggest event of the year. It’s as big as the May Interschools—actually, way bigger in fact. And it’s starting up real soon.”

“...? So...what’s your point?”

“What’s my point? That *is* the point.”

She smiled a bit, and I began to suspect that her brain ran several levels above mine.

“Listen, Hiroto, I love playing these Games. I love battles between strong opponents. I love seeing two sides go all out against each other. But this year’s May Interschools kind of ended on me before I’d had enough...so I thought, wow, it’d be so nice if the summer event could be even *more* exciting.”

“...What’s that got to do with DearScript?”

“Oh, a lot! For example, Keiya Fujishiro, the Six Star from Ohga that Mano

tried to recruit as her boyfriend in the first quest, he acts like a lone wolf all the time, but actually, he's a *lot* stronger when he has someone to protect. Now that he's got that in Mano, I think he'll become a *huge* threat at the summer event."

"Uh..."

"And look at Shinji Enomoto and Nanase Asamiya, the Six Star duo from Eimei who went on a date in the second round. People pegged them as incompatible with one another, but that conventional wisdom got thrown out the window during ASTRAL. Once they're on the same page, they've clearly got this explosive synergy going on, you know? And to bring more of that out, I really need them to get along more."

"...This extends to the final quest, too, doesn't it?"

"Oh, of course! I mean, Minami's the type of girl who'd never strut her stuff at all if she's working beneath someone. I'd much rather see her compete against a *real* opponent, like you or the Empress, and hope that wakes up something in her. I'm not expecting that to happen overnight with her, admittedly, but hopefully this is a good incentive for her, right? It *did* work a little, I think... Not to mention that this has been a great source of frustration for both Toya Kirigaya *and* Seiran Kugasaki, too. I mean, it all went really great, don't you think?"

"""" ... """"

We all sat there silently, dumbfounded by these revelations coming from Yuzu. But she was right; from start to finish, this Game had been set up as a "love advice quest," but over the course of it, several Six Star-class players had all come out of their shells...and they probably hadn't even realized it, either.

"And you planned all this yourself...? You moved me and Saionji around with your orders and requests, all so you could get the results you wanted?"

"I sure did. I mean, I've been doing similar things ever since I was in high school. You know, getting other people fired up so they go all out and really liven things up, and then still being number one ahead of them. I like that kind of setup. Like, didn't Natsume tell you?"

“Natsume? ...Oh, you mean Provost Ichinose?”

“Right, *that* Natsume. We were actually in all the same classes. I tell you, Eimei was a school to be feared back then! That said, there *is* one thing I regret. Eimei got so dominant that every single event would wrap up pretty much instantly. There wasn’t even any point to holding them! ...But not this year, right? Eimei’s getting stronger, but so’s Ohga, and Otowa, and Shinra... Even St. Rosalia!”

“...”

“Ooh, I can’t *wait* for summer! Don’t you agree, Hiroto?”

Yuzu smiled, waiting for my response. There was something bold, bewitching, almost supernatural to that smile, like everything in the world was fascinating to her. The smile of the truly powerful—someone who pushes everyone else down a rung simply by going up against her.

And then it struck me... Maybe, if she went to school with the provost, they were both there right in the middle of that “golden era” when Eimei was ranked number one for three years straight. Hearing what Yuzu had said just now, they must have been key players back then, and if she got a job as an Administrator, she must’ve been a Six Star...or better.

*Actually, I remember when Yuzu was back in high school and she used to tell me all these stories of her battles that sounded like they were straight out of manga. I just treated them as fun little tales at the time...but was that all her...?*

“By the way, Master...”

Just as I reached that huge revelation, Himeji carefully interjected from across the car. Her clear blue eyes looked at me as she slowly chose her words.

“I guess...this might be a disappointing ending for you, right? I’m delighted to see you reunited with your sister, but this had nothing to do with your childhood friend, in the end.”

“Ah, yeah... I guess you’re right.”

I nodded subtly, mentally changing gears. I guess finding *her* would take a lot more grunt work than this. The only real way was to become a *real* Seven Star.

Still, I finally had my fourth after this Game, so I was more than halfway there.

“Hey, Hiroto...”

I turned toward Yuzu, who was beckoning me with a finger. I put my face a little closer to hers, and she smiled and whispered softly in my ear.

“Since you worked so hard to find me, let me tell you something real good... Your reward, I mean. I’m in the Administration—I know a lot of things. I can’t tell you all of them, and even if I could, I like being mean to the people I love, so I wouldn’t give you the whole story anyway... Ready?

“Hiroto, that first love from childhood you’ve been looking for? You’ve been reunited with her for a while now, you know.”

b b

“...Yo. You wanted to see me? I’m sure you sniffed me out from that whole business with Mikado Kurahashi, but I’m busy, all right? If this is just some regular crap, I’m not interested. I ain’t the type to join up with someone else anyway.”

“Well, if you wanna talk, sure. I’ll hear you out, at least.”

“Huh? Look, let’s just cut to the chase. You want me to team up with you so we can crush Shinohara? What the hell’re you talking about, [REDACTED]?”

b b

Shizuku Minami was in a bind.

Ever since she’d lost that Game with the Academy’s top student and the Empress, a deep fog had enshrouded her mind. She was no longer as annoyingly popular as she had been, but that didn’t improve her mood at all.

Of course, that hadn’t been her first taste of defeat. She’d lost lots of times before, just to ensure her rank stayed where she wanted it. But—as trivial and pointless as that Game had been—she’d been in it to *win*. She’d *wanted* to win but had ended up losing—probably the first time in her life that had happened to her before.

Perhaps that was why her desire not to stand out had finally been outclassed by her hatred of losing, and there, in her room, she flopped onto her bed.

“I hate this so much... It’s so frustrating... I want to *win*.”

## AFTERWORD

Hello, good afternoon, or good evening. This is Haruki Kuou. Thank you very much for picking up *Liar, Liar 5: The Lying Transfer Student Is Tested by His Childhood Friend!*

This volume kicked off a large-scale Game and was heavy on the rom-com aspect of this series, but what did you think...?! I feel like it offers an entertaining mix of cute characters and Game-oriented strategy, so if you enjoyed it, then that'd make me really happy!

I don't have much space left, so I'll get straight to my thank-yous. First, to konomi, my illustrator. Shirayuki and Sarasa in their date outfits were just *amazing*...! The first appearance of *that* girl, plus the first color illustration of that *other* girl, were also faves of mine!

Thanks to my editor and everyone else at MF Bunko J editorial. We toed the deadline pretty hard once again this time, but many thanks for your support right up to the end!

Finally, the greatest thanks of all must go to all the people who read this book. I'm gonna work as hard as I can on Volume 6, so keep an eye out for it!

***Haruki Kuou***

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