8.3

The sound of the harsh wind resounded throughout the forest as I struggled to follow the tracks of two specific people.

Just how hard did I have to work to make it to area D3 this morning…?

It should only be a little longer… Or at least, that’s what I kept telling myself as I pushed forward, my legs trembling with every step I took.

If they were to find out that I was following after them, then everything I’ve gone through, all my efforts so far, would be meaningless.

Normally, when tailing after someone, it was necessary to keep them in your sights at all times so as not to lose track of them.

That, of course, meant that the other party would be able to see you as well. There were certain inevitable risks that came along with doing something like this.

But, no matter who the other party may be, there was absolutely no way they’d catch onto what I was doing.

After all, even I wasn’t able to see Ayanok?ji, my target, from where I was right now.

The key to this was a walkie-talkie hidden in the pocket of my jersey.

Thanks to this walkie-talkie, I had been able to keep in touch with a certain someone who was helping me constantly pinpoint Ayanok?ji’s exact location.

Ever since the sixth day, the entire student body had been given permission to use their points on the ‘GPS Search’ feature on our tablets.

As such, it was possible for my accomplice and me to get a rough idea of Ayanok?ji’s location.

Even if worse came to worst, I’d gladly exhaust my own supply of points in order to track him down.

No matter the method, there was something I absolutely had to get my hands on:

Decisive, conclusive evidence.

One way or another, I needed to get my hands on enough definitive proof to get Ayanok?ji expelled.

I didn’t have any other options anymore. Horikita’s expulsion wasn’t what I should’ve been prioritizing all this time.

I felt truly ashamed that, despite having always been vaguely aware of his true potential, I had always chosen to look the other way.

In retrospect, I should’ve been more suspicious back when Ry?en stopped searching for ‘X’ in Class D.

Ayanok?ji had been involved in everything that had happened back then. Even after having my eyes opened to the truth, there was still a part of me that found it hard to believe. After all, he never seemed like anything more than your average, unremarkable, run-of-the-mill high school boy.

My walkie-talkie sounded off from within my pocket. I was wearing a wireless earpiece, so I could listen in without having to stop.

[Please hold on for a moment, Kushida-senpai. It seems the two of them have stopped not too far ahead of your current location.]

“Haa, haa… really? They’re finally taking a break…?”

Following the instructions I had received, I gratefully eased to a stop. With this, I could finally rest for a moment.

[I know you must be tired, but please hang in there for just a little longer. The moment of truth should come along soon enough, and when it does, there won’t be anything left standing in your way.]

My accomplice shouldn’t have been able to hear what I said since I hadn’t been holding down the transmission button, but from what it sounded like, they had a perfect understanding of my current situation.

“I get it, I get it…”

At this point, I was just flat-out irritated. It felt like a carrot was dangling just before my eyes, ever so slightly out of reach.

I’d been out here risking my ass all on my own since the moment the sun came up, and there was still a ton of other stuff I had to get done after this too…

My well-earned break only lasted for five short minutes, interrupted by further instructions coming through over the walkie-talkie.

[There’s no sign of movement. It appears that they’ve stopped altogether. Do your best to conceal your presence and slowly make your way northwest. Also, don’t forget to take a recording with your tablet.]

My accomplices’ polite, dumbed-down way of explaining things pissed me off, but at this point, I honestly just wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

Suppressing the urge to run, I took my tablet out of my backpack and began heading northwest. Not too long afterward, I caught sight of two people off in the distance ahead of me.

I watched as Nanase, frozen in place, suddenly looked over her shoulder and said something to Ayanok?ji.

Given that neither of them seemed to be wearing a backpack, I wondered if they really were taking a break after all.

I launched the camera app on my tablet and switched it over to recording mode.

And then, I slowly inched as close as possible without revealing myself, carefully hiding among the trees, but no matter how hard I concentrated, the wind was so frustratingly loud that I couldn’t properly make out what they were saying.

A surge of impatience coursed through my veins.

My blood was boiling over with the gnawing desire to see them start hitting each other already.

I might’ve been able to get a better idea of what their situation was like if I could just hear what they were talking about, but it was too dangerous.

If I tried getting any closer than this, I’d run the risk of getting spotted by Nanase now that she had her head turned.

For the time being, I needed to rein in my emotions. It’d be a little dicey, but my only choice at this point was to calm down and work my way around in search of a better, safer angle.

I held my breath as I quietly began to move.

After distancing myself from them a bit, my plan was to skirt around the perimeter and???

“W?!?!”

Even though I should’ve been completely alone, a hand suddenly came out of nowhere and grabbed my shoulder.

And just as I was about to raise my voice in shock, another hand immediately reached to cover up my mouth.

Faced with such an unexpected turn of events, I quickly began to panic.

As I did, a pair of glossy, alluring lips crept close to my ear.

“Shh~ I get you’re surprised but you’ve like, gotta be quiet, Kushida-senpai. It’d be waaay bad if Ayanok?ji-senpai and Nanase-chan caught onto you, yeah?”

From those sultry lips came a knowing voice that seemed as if it could pierce straight through my very soul.

It was none other than Amasawa Ichika from Class 1-A, a girl who I had never had a formal conversation with before. In fact, you could even say that this was effectively our first time meeting each other.

And yet, Amasawa clearly knew me, given that she knew my name.

After being effectively dragged away from where Ayanok?ji and Nanase were, Amasawa finally let go of me.

“Uhm… Why are you here, Amasawa-san?”

I managed to somewhat regain my composure as I addressed her, eager to get her to fuck off.

If the fight were to break out while I was wasting time with her, then everything would be ruined.

I could feel my blood pressure rising, but even so, I couldn’t afford to lose my cool here.

“I just happened to be passing through when I saw you acting all sneaky-sneaky, Senpai.”

“I wasn’t ‘acting sneaky’. I was just… well, taking a walk on my own, that’s all.”

I knew that this was a poor excuse. After all, I was acting independently, separated from my group.

Anyone with eyes could see that this was a strange situation.

Moreover, Amasawa herself had already said that it would be bad if Ayanok?ji and Nanase caught on to what I was doing.

As such, it’d make sense that she somehow knew about what I was really up to.

Though, from what I’d been told, a select portion of the first-years already knew about me anyway.

“Hmmm… That so?”

Amasawa approached me with a somewhat suspicious look in her eyes.

Come to think of it, how’d this Amasawa chick manage to get all the way out here without so much as a tablet or even a backpa???

SMACK!!!

A dry, out-of-place sound echoed throughout the forest. It, of course, was no doubt drowned out by the overbearing sound of the wind.

Just as I began to wonder where the sound had come from, I felt a sharp, stinging pain well up in my right cheek and covered it up with my hand.

“W-what!?”

“You came poking your nose around in the mountains all on your own, so like, what are you really trynna get at, Senpai?”

“W-what do you mean? What are you talking about Amasawa-san!?”

“Oh? I’m real excited to see how long you can keep hiding behind that mask of yours~.”

She drew closer once again as I feigned a sense of terror and fear over the fact that she had suddenly slapped me across the face.

“S-stop!”

“No way I’m gonna stop now, silly~”

Saying that, she raised an open palm up in the air.

I immediately tried to cower back and protect myself, but she forced her way past nonetheless.

SMACK!!!

This time, she hit my other cheek and she hit hard.

Despite my best attempt to block it, I simply couldn’t keep up with her overwhelming speed.

“D-do you even understand what you’re doing!? You can’t do this!”

“I know it may not seem like it, but I’m being pretty gentle with you. It totally shouldn’t hurt that bad.”

“Why though!? None of this makes any sense!”

“So you don’t get it, huh~? Well alrighty then. I wonder if you’ll start connecting the dots if I start smacking you with my fist instead~?”

“What?”

My brain was still in the middle of processing her words when my vision suddenly began to warp and distort.

I only registered the sound of something being struck a little afterward, and before I knew it, I was already on the ground looking up at the cloudy, overcast sky.

Did… Did I get punched just now…?

I felt an increasingly warm sensation on the side of my face, as if blood was slowly pooling up underneath the skin.

My cheek began to burn and swell, aching with pain.

“…wha, ah… Ah!!”

“I’ll betcha that one hurt a lil’ didn’t it? Gotta say, you don’t usually get to experience getting beaten up like this, do ya?”

I couldn’t make sense of it. This chick had come flying out of nowhere and started picking a fight with me, but why???

And the fact that she was being so excessively violent made it all make even less sense.

“So, how about I go for your other cheek next?”

With that, Amasawa started approaching me all over again.

Right now, the only thing I knew for sure was that this wasn’t just some sick joke of hers.

I wanted to avoid being beaten senseless any more than I already had, no matter the cost.

I did my best to ward off Amasawa’s outstretched hand, pushing her arm away.

“Ah, uh, I-I’m sorry for pushing you, but you just hit me so suddenly…”

“Still acting like a goody two shoes are you? You see, I know you real, reeeal well Kushida-senpai. You’re a nasty, vile woman who’s totally caught up in that cute lil’ face of yours. You feast off other people’s deepest darkest secrets, and if you ever get into trouble, you’ll gladly self-destruct just to drag everyone else down along with you. A real piece of work through and through, ain’tcha?”

“I don’t really understand what you’re talking about Amasawa-san… B-but, violence isn’t… allowed, right?”

“Then why don’tcha go and cry to school about it? You might even be able to get me expelled. But just know that if you do that I’ll have to leave behind a parting gift, okay? Just for you, I’ll expose a~l~l of the dark, dirty middle school secrets you’ve been trying so hard to keep hidden and take away your status.”

“How…?”

Amasawa’s sudden appearance without so much as a bottle of water in hand wasn’t just some mere coincidence. No… Something was very wrong here.

“How do I know your secret? From the look on your face, it seems you’re thinking I heard it from Ayanok?ji-senpai?”

She looked at me with eyes that seemed to see through everything.

“But, that would be in~correct. Nothing in this world gets past me. I’m a special existence, after all.”

“Nothing in this world…”

“How about I give you an example? Ah, what about that time you tried to cozy up to Student Council President Nagumo, but got turned away at the door? Well, honestly, even if that ended up working out for you, I doubt he’d be willing to support your cause now that Horikita-senpai’s joined the student council.”

“How… How do you even know about tha?!”

“Oh dear oh dear, how indeed~?”

Amasawa smiled down at me as if I was just some toy for her to play with, and just like that, I had reached the very limit of my patience.

“Who… Who fucking told you!?!?”

“Ooo, you’ve finally shown your true colors! That said, you really need to shush, yeah? I get that the island is real huge so it may seem like there’s no one around right now, but there’s no telling when someone else might show up.”

Amasawa crouched down and playfully tapped me on the nose, giving me a gentle, patronizing warning.

That rotten, smug, condescending attitude of hers pissed me off to no end.

“Stop it, you shitty bitch!”

In a fit of uncontrollable rage, a voice burst forth from the bottom of my heart.

If you had only ever seen the outward mask of the girl named ‘Kushida Kiky?’, then my words just now would probably seem surprising.

But Amasawa didn’t seem surprised at all. Rather, she let out a giddy laugh.

“Ahahahaha! Mmm, now this suits you much, much better Kushida-senpai~!”

Sure enough, this chick knew all about me, about the things I’d done.

In fact, she seemed to know far, far more than the likes of Ayanok?ji and Horikita…

“What… What the hell are you!?”

“I’m not sure how to respond to a question like that. I’m just… well, I’m just here to save Ayanok?ji-senpai.”

“Save? Huh?”

“Don’t try and hide it, Kushida-senpai. I can see through your every move. You were planning on finding some dirt on Ayanok?ji-senpai with that tablet you dropped over there to try and get him expelled, right?”

“I don’t understand what you mean. Find dirt on him with my tablet? Huh?”

Shit. This chick had already seen through everything… Some small part of me knew that it was pointless to try and resist any longer, but even so, I felt that I had no choice but to continue to do so, denying the truth until the bitter end.

“You’ve been in a class together with him for over a year already, and yet you still don’t understand anything, do ya Senpai? There’s like, no way Ayanok?ji-senpai would feel threatened by such a shallow display of thinking.”

Amasawa turned her gaze toward where Ayanok?ji and Nanase should be.

“Aaah, I really wanted to sit back and watch from a front-row seat. I’m sure he’ll defeat Nanase-chan without even hurting her. I reeeally wanted to see it~.”

After mumbling a few words to herself, she turned back to face me again.

“I don’t know who put you up to this, but you’re really letting yourself get used, huh Kushida-senpai? No matter what things are like over there with Nanase-chan, I’m fairly certain that Ayanok?ji-senpai’s already noticed what you’ve been up to. There’s no way he wouldn’t, given like, how much of a silly amateur you are.”

“B-but I’ve put plenty of distance between us…!”

“Eh? Plenty of distance, hmmm? Did I just hear you admit that you’ve been stalking him?”

“W-well… I-I just thought those two being together was kinda weird is all…”

“So you followed them out of curiosity? Headed up this rough mountain trail all on your own?”

I felt like I should stop making excuses and answer her honestly, but my habitual impulse to try and escape won out in the end. I had no choice but to recognize Amasawa as a formidable enemy.

“It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Yes yes, I had a hunch you’d still be uncooperative. But, the thing is, it actually has quite a lot to do with me. After all, Ayanok?ji-senpai is a very special person to me.”

“Huh? What the heck…? Do you like him?”

“I’d rather you not come to such a vulgar conclusion~. It’s not that I ‘like’ him romantically or anything, it’s more that I ‘love’ him…? No, I suppose it’s much, much more than that… A feeling that goes far beyond the likes of love.”

“What?”

“I said what I said. Anyway, I’ve gone outta my way to tell you a lot, so how about you head down the mountain and go back to your group like a good girl. The weather’s gonna turn bad any time now. This’ll prolly be your last chance to turn back.”

“…Don’t fuck with me!”

I took a clump of wet soil in hand and threw it at Amasawa as a means of rejection.

“I’m going to get dirt on Ayanok?ji and get him kicked outta here, no matter what it takes…!”

“Even if you get him expelled, that’s not going to solve anything. You do know that right?”

I had come all this way, desperate to see my ambitions fulfilled.

For all that, there was no way I’d back down to an underclassman like her and leave empty-handed.

“I’ll say it again. Ayanok?ji-senpai is a very special person to me. I’ll never allow him to get expelled by an outsider like you.”

Amasawa reached out and mercilessly grabbed hold of my bangs, wrenching up my head to draw my eyes level with her own.

“Ah!!! Let go of me!”

“Now why would I do that~?”

Amasawa’s colorful eyes seemed like hollow, empty voids; The eyes of a person who had lost touch with reality.

My body began to tremble as my instincts told me to escape, pleading for me to run away.

“You freak! You’re not normal…!”

“How curious~! To think you’d start shaking in fear of a girl younger than you. But, well, I think it’s best you cherish that wonderful feeling, Kushida-senpai~.”

Amasawa spoke highly of me in a strange, almost insulting way.

She continued on, clearly uninterested in hearing what I had to say in response to this.

“You think you’re cuter than everyone, smarter than everyone, better than everyone… In short, you’re just hopelessly in love with yourself, aren’t you Kushida-senpai? Your mouth waters at the thought of asserting your dominance, always eager to take hold of other people’s secrets. Nonetheless, you hate the thought of losing that control you crave, forever unable to forgive those that know your secrets. Personally, I don’t mind this messed-up personality of yours.”

I held back the urge to talk back and instead looked to process the situation.

Clearly, this chick… this bitch already knew everything there was to know about me.

For the time being, I had to cast aside questions like ‘how’ and ‘why’.

With that in mind, I calmed my racing heart and stood up.

“Earlier… What exactly were you trying to say?”

I sorted out the rest of my thoughts, finally regaining my composure.

The more I let my emotions get the better of me, the more I’d get caught up in her pace.

“You know, it’s really quite amazing you made it this far on your own. Sure you’ve got your tablet and someone helping you, but like, that doesn’t change the fact that you walked here with your own two legs. You must’ve had quite a hard time lying to your fellow group members too. After all, breaking away from your group comes with quite a bit of risk, now doesn’t it? You toe the line of expulsion more and more by cutting back on the points you earn?”

Once again, Amasawa knocked me off my feet and proceeded to look down on me from above.

“However, cute lil’ Kushida-senpai wouldn’t overlook something so simple, now would she? Even if your actions put your group’s position at risk and you sank to the bottom of the leaderboards, I assume you’ve at least saved up the private points needed to ensure your own survival, yes?”

Needless to say, her assumption hit right on the money.

I was only acting so recklessly because I had secured the two million points necessary to stay out of danger.

1.3 million of which had come from my own pocket, with ‘that guy’ having supplied me the rest.

“I’ll never lose… No matter what, I’ll never give up until the very end…”

“Well then~, just how do you plan on doing that~? Seems to me like you’re putty in my hands right now, Senpai.”

What Amasawa was saying was true, but…

“?So what? Sure you’ve been able to mess with me, but when exactly did I lose?”

The flames of determination burning within me would never be extinguished because of something so trivial.

Instead of feeling shaken, I gradually began to regain a hold over my emotions.

There was no need to panic. This just meant that I’d have to get rid of Amasawa as well. I’d get rid of anyone and everyone that got in my way.

But, that wasn’t the only thing.

“Oh…? This is far more than I imagined. You sure are one nasty bitch, Kushida-senpai, but there’s still one thing I admire about you. Your strength, strength in a mental sense that is, is quite praiseworthy. Rather than fear, it’s more like you’re overflowing with hatred. And it’s not just directed at me, but at anyone who finds out the truth about your past.”

Without so much as brushing the dirt and mud off my jersey, I stood back up again, just as I would no matter how many times it would take.

If I had to, I’d even knock Amasawa off her feet right here, right now.

“Don’t bother. You wouldn’t stand a chance against me even if I had my hands tied. Toodles~, Kushida-senpai~”

She spoke as if she knew exactly what I was planning and proceeded to turn her back to me, giving me a perfect opportunity to throw myself at her.

There was nothing going through my mind other than the tantalizing thought of pushing her over and pinning her down against the ground.

However, she had apparently predicted that I’d do this as she effortlessly sidestepped my strike just in the nick of time.

Not even a second later, my legs were swept out from under me as I found myself crashing down yet again. This had happened so many times now that I had lost count.

“G-gah…! Shit!”

“We don’t get along very well, do we Senpai? I know you treat other people’s secrets like weapons to get what you want, but I don’t have any you can use against me. Even if you try to threaten me with violence, I’m stronger than most boys are. I’m also not particularly close with anyone, so taking a hostage won’t work either. If I had to come up with something, I suppose Ayanok?ji-senpai could be considered somewhat of a weakness, but… for someone like you, beating him would be just about as difficult as beating me. Are we on the same page?”

She prattled on and on with the same kind of condescendingly casual tone that a shitty teacher would use.

“Well, how about you, like, give up now? I’ve still gotta go see Ayanok?ji-senpai.”

“…What are you gonna do? Tell him I’ve been stalking him?”

“No no, I already told you there’s no point in doing that, silly. He already knows. But, who knows, maybe things’ll play out exactly how you want them to, Kushida-senpai. Maybe this little spat with Nanase will end up with Ayanok?ji-senpai getting kicked out of school. Sounds like your dream come true.”

“…After Ayank?ji’s out of here, it’ll be your turn… I’ll crush you for sure.”

“Aww, Kushida-senpai~. That’s cute, but the outcome of our match was decided before it even began. I get that having those who know your secret expelled is your only way of protecting yourself, but that really only works with gentlemen like Ayanok?ji-senpai who don’t go around telling everybody the truth. If it were me, I’d do everything in my power to make sure your secret gets out before leaving the school, you do know that right?”

“Hah…! Don’t make me laugh. It’s true a shitty brat like you’d probably go and run their mouth about it, but it’s not like anyone would believe you. Most would probably pass it off as nonsense from someone who’s about to be expelled.”

“Well, sure? I doubt that very many would believe everything I say. However, it’d still manage to put a crack in the superficially flawless persona of ‘Kushida Kiky?’ you’ve created for yourself. Isn’t that more than enough?”

Having apparently said all that she felt necessary, Amasawa disappeared into the forest, headed toward where Ayanok?ji and Nanase were.

It wouldn’t be impossible for me to chase after her, but if I did… there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that she’d respond mercilessly.

She’d probably choose to spread the secrets I hold without the slightest hesitation.

And that would spell my complete and utter defeat.

I sat in the forest alone, paralyzed, staring up at the sky.

Ever so faintly, raindrops began to fall through the gaps of the dense foliage above.

They landed on my cheeks and proceeded to trickle down the back of my neck.

“I… What am I even doing…?”

I voiced my spiritless words to myself. Everything felt hollow. So much so that I couldn’t even find it in me to feel angry.

First Ayanok?ji and now Amasawa… people threatening to disturb my calm, peaceful life kept showing up one after the other.

No… It wasn’t just those two.

They weren’t the only reasons why I had been forced to grovel with my knees down in the mud here today.

I began to recall where all of this had started… The reason why it had ended up like this in the first place.