Epilogue: The Seeds of Unrest

“What a bother…”

It was just past 7:00 AM on the seventh day of the exam, a time at which most groups would already be headed off to their first designated area. Ichinose Honami, however, simply let out a deep sigh as she stared down at the watch fastened onto her right wrist. Dark grey clouds lined the overcast skies above, threatening to drop their rain at a moment’s notice.

“Ichinose, is it really broken?”

Shibata S?, a fellow group member, asked as he peered down at her watch.

“Yeah, seems like it. I think it happened this morning when I fell by the river and hit it on a rock.”

She had already tried everything she could think of to fix it once she noticed that it wasn’t working properly.

But despite her best efforts, she hadn’t been able to get the GPS and heart rate monitor to function at all.

Nothing showed up on the map when she tried to confirm her current position on her tablet either.

With a broken watch, she wouldn’t be able to earn points from any designated areas or Tasks.

Absolutely nothing good would come from leaving it like this.

“I guess we should be grateful we’re not on the other side of the island, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s for sure.”

Ichinose and her fellow group members were currently in the southwest of area E6. While the walk back to the starting area would only take about two hours, it would be fairly dangerous for her to make the trip on her own with a broken GPS.

“For the time being, it looks like we’ll have no choice but to go back.”

Shibata sounded a bit peeved, but from the tone of his voice it was obvious that he wasn’t placing the blame on Ichinose.

“But?”

Their first designated area of the day was area D5.

In other words, they’d have to move in pretty much the opposite direction of the starting area.

So not only would she have to miss out on the valuable Arrival Bonus, but the entire group would lose out on the chance to earn any Early Bird Bonuses as well. Though Ichinose understood what she had to do, she instead looked back at the three people, Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Ninomiya, who were waiting to depart behind her.

“Well, since it’s busted I guess there’s no helping it, right Masumi-chan?”

“If you head out now, you might make it back in time for the third area.”

As Hashimoto and Kamuro chimed in, Ninomiya, a fellow classmate, also nodded along in agreement.

From what it sounded like, it didn’t seem like any of them held this against her.

Ichinose felt happy about this, but at the same time feelings of guilt began to well up inside her.

Two days earlier, on the fifth day of the exam, Ichinose’s group had taken first place in a Task that allowed groups to increase their maximum size, successfully earning the right to take on three more people. And on the sixth day, they used the GPS Searching feature to merge with Hashimoto’s group, only for trouble to strike the very next morning.

“Sorry you guys. I’ll definitely be back in time for the third designation.”

Now that a course of action had been decided on, every second mattered. She would need to move quickly in order to make her way back to her friends as soon as possible.

“Well, guess I’ll stick with Ichinose.”

After Shibata’s self-nomination, Ichinose buckled down and together, the two of them set off toward the south.

“Sorry Shibata-kun, for having to accompany me like this.”

“It’s not like there’s anything you could’ve done about it, so don’t sweat the apology.”

“Yeah, that’s fair I guess.”

Just like that, Ichinose and Shibata spent the next hour or so walking south along the river until they arrived at area E9.

By the time they stepped foot on the sandy beach, the starting area was close at hand.

“We’re going a lot faster than I expected. Good work.”

All they needed to do now was push westward and they’d eventually turn up near the port.

Even if they moved slowly, this final leg of the journey would only take less than half an hour.

However, that meant that the round trip would take around an hour, so time was still of the essence.

“Shibata-kun, why don’t you just head for the next designated area from here?”

“No way. Even though it’s close, isn’t it still dangerous for you to head back alone? The forest is like a maze, you know that. And yeah it’s still daytime and all, but it’s really cloudy today, so rain…”

Shibata looked up at the sky as he trailed off. It was currently 8:00 AM, and while it wasn’t raining yet, there was no telling when the weather would take a turn for the worse.

“Yeah, I know it’s dangerous, but I should be able to make it back to the port from here without getting lost. If we want to catch up to the top groups, we can’t afford to miss out on even a single point. Besides, if it does start raining, we might not be able to meet back up with the others.”

Though it was somewhat greedy, Ichinose felt strongly that they should go after as many points as possible.

“I just need to walk in a straight line. I’ll be fine.”

At the very least, she wanted to get Shibata back onto the field quickly so he could earn points for the group.

As the one holding everyone back, she simply wanted to minimize the burden.

“…Alright, but please don’t do anything foolish. If it starts raining, don’t try to force it, just wait until it stops, okay?”

“Yep, I definitely won’t overdo it. After all, it’d be no laughing matter if I got injured and was made to retire because of it.”

After promising to be careful, Ichinose waved her hand, urging Shibata to meet back up with Hashimoto and the others.

And then, with the general directions Shibata had given still fresh in her mind, she set foot into the forest. Even if she couldn’t make it in time for the next designated area, her resolve to get back in time for the third drove her to keep pushing forward.

Her feet moved even faster than her racing mind, eager to avoid wasting any time.

Given that she hadn’t spotted a single person since she split off from Shibata, there didn’t seem to be anyone else in the area. Originally, she thought that she’d be able to ask another group for help if the need arose, but as time went by, she realized just how naive that line of thinking had truly been.

After trudging forward for about ten minutes, the already-poor visibility of dimly-lit forest gradually began to deteriorate.

The cause for this was obvious: the grey clouds lining the sky had become even thicker and darker than before.

Though Ichinose had every intention of walking in a straight line, the dense thicket of trees standing in her way had other plans.

The path, if you could even call it that, was treacherous. The moment she worked her way around one tree, two more would already be lying in wait just ahead.

As time went by, she eventually began to lose confidence that she was walking straight at all.

“Why does it feel like everything’s gone terribly wrong for some reason…?”

A quiet laugh of self-derision crept past her lips. She had no choice but to keep pushing forward.

After all, the port should theoretically only be a couple hundred meters away.

She continued walking for twenty more minutes or so before finally coming to a stop, at a complete and utter loss for what to do.

If she hadn’t taken a wrong turn at some point, she definitely would’ve arrived at the port by now.

“What… What am I even doing…?”

She tried checking her tablet again, but just as before, her current location didn’t show on the map.

Even if she attempted to head back the way she came, there was no guaranteeing that she’d be able to do so.

Ichinose wasn’t usually the type to make rash decisions like this, but ever since her class fell down to Class C, she found herself acting more and more impatient.

But despite this impatience, she had successfully managed to form a formidable group at the request of Class A’s leader, Sakayanagi.

Therefore, in order to maintain parity with Class A, she needed now more than ever to demonstrate her competency.

She had no idea where she was or where she was going, but she had an obligation to push forward nonetheless.

Where should she go? Which direction?

So as to dispel the anxious questions running through her mind, Ichinose steeled herself and took a right step forward.

Just then, a noise, ever so faint, came from somewhere up ahead.

She momentarily deliberated over whether or not to shout out, excited by the prospect of running into somebody else, but she couldn’t discount the possibility that it had just been a wild animal of some sort.

Thinking that she might as well just go and take a look for herself, Ichinose quietly began to move toward the source of the sound.

Before long, the figures of two people came into view: Tsukishiro, the school’s Acting Director, and Shiba, the homeroom teacher of Class 1-D.

Upon seeing them, Ichinose let out a deep, prolonged sigh of relief since she could now ask for directions to the port.

However…

She quickly realized that was the same naive line of thinking that had gotten her into this situation in the first place. Even though this was an accident, that didn’t change the fact that she was currently in the middle of a special exam. Given that, it didn’t seem very likely that they would give her directions if she told them that she had lost her way.

And while it would be one thing if her watch had broken due to some technical issue, given that she was the one who had broken it, well… If they were to chalk it up as her own responsibility, this precious chance to get out of the forest would slip through her fingers.

Therefore, she wanted to find a way to hold onto the chance instead.

A thought came to mind: that it might be for the best to just follow after them.

They’d ideally just go back to the starting area from here, but if they ended up heading off to an upcoming Task site instead, other students would be bound to show up sooner or later. Either way, by following them she’d probably manage to avoid the worst-case scenario.

After thinking about it for a bit longer, she ultimately settled on tailing them from behind.

Since they seemed to be immersed in a conversation of some sort as they walked, she figured that she would be relatively hard to notice. And even in the off chance she did get caught, she didn’t think it’d be a very big deal as long as she feigned ignorance.

“I asked you to confirm whether or not we’re in the clear to freely take action. How about it?”

“It seems that will be difficult. I’ve found evidence to suggest that the teachers are keeping a keen eye on us. Among them, Mashima seems to be on particularly high alert…”

The sound of their voices traveled clearly throughout the quiet, tranquil forest, allowing Ichinose to make out most of what they were saying.

Though, she wasn’t very interested in the contents of their conversation, so she didn’t listen in very closely, choosing to focus primarily on staying concealed instead.

“Aside from him, there’s one other teacher of note: Chabashira, Class 2-D’s homeroom teacher. She’s been searching through all the logs and records.”

“It’s because dragging the teachers into this was one of the few viable options he had left. Be it Chabashira-sensei or Mashima-sensei, there’s no doubt in my mind that their actions link back to Ayanok?ji-kun. Since Ayanok?ji-kun happened to be at the scene back then, it’s only natural that he managed to figure out the truth.”

However, everything changed the moment a certain, unexpected name came up.

Ichinose held her breath with newfound interest.

Ayanok?ji.

A name that subconsciously made her heart throb whenever she heard it.

The two men came to a complete stop before continuing, perhaps due to the sudden mention of this very name.

“I’ve already altered the logs on our end, so I don’t believe they’ll be able to trace anything.”

“Thank you for that. However, they still might get their hands on something. If so, we’re not going to get another chance. We have to be sure to corner him this time.”

“Will it really be that simple to force his expulsion though? He’s the ??? of the White Room.”

“People are always so caught up with titles. He’s just a ???, that’s ???.”

White Room?

Despite straining her ears to try and comprehend what had been said, Ichinose couldn’t quite make out some of the words.

The wind had suddenly picked up strength, the sound of the gale drowning out their voices.

Ayanok?ji’s name together with the word ‘expulsion’ ceaselessly echoed throughout her mind. Of all people, why were the Acting Director and a first-year teacher talking about something like that? Desperate to make out just a little bit more of their conversation, Ichinose unconsciously began to close the distance, a distance she otherwise knew she ought to maintain.

“If he keeps ??? until the last day, let’s ??? him disappear in I2 ??? planned.”

Ichinose felt pretty certain that they wouldn’t be able to hear her, but just as she drew close enough to make out the gist of what was being said… At that very moment…

The Acting Director’s head snapped backward, staring on with a sharp, pointed gaze.

‘Danger’

Her intuition, or perhaps her instincts, cried out this one word, compelling her to turn her back and run off as fast as her legs could carry her.

However, her backpack weighed far too much, preventing her from picking up speed. As a snap judgment, she unbuckled the fasteners and hurled it into the thicket with as much strength as she could muster. If they were to pick it up, they’d be able to pin down her identity by looking at the tablet inside, but Ichinose was currently far too frantic to act with that level of foresight.

While she was pretty sure that they hadn’t seen her face, there wasn’t a doubt in her mind that they had realized that someone was eavesdropping on them. That alone, she was certain of.

Their entire conversation just now… was something she was never supposed to hear.

It was a premonition, one that chilled her down to her very bones as she continued to run.

She could definitely get away from them just fine, right?

And there was definitely no way that they, of all people, would come and chase her down, right?

Yeah, everything was definitely going to be fine… Right?

Definitely. Definitely. Definitely…

From behind, the sound of twigs breaking and leaves crumbling underfoot could be heard. While Ichinose wasn’t that confident in her physical capabilities, she was very proud of her speed.

Left, right, straight, the direction didn’t matter anymore.

She just kept running, completely lost within the forest, losing further control with every mindless step she took.

There was a strange, almost surreal feeling that came with bearing witness to something that shouldn’t be seen.

And it was that very feeling that drove her forward.

“!!!”

Ichinose’s eyes had been glued to the path ahead as she ran, sparing not even a single glance to where she had been placing her feet. So, in the midst of her delirium, her foot inevitably got caught on something, sending her toppling down to the forest floor. When she looked back, she saw the apparent culprit: a large tree root protruding up and out of the ground.

Although there was a sharp, biting pain in her knee due to her fall, she endured it, doing what she could to try and get back up on her feet again.

Just as she slowly began to put weight back into her legs, a large hand reached out and clamped down on her left shoulder from behind.

Ichinose immediately froze in place, surprised to the point where her heart nearly stopped, and fearfully looked over her shoulder.

“…If I’m not mistaken, you’re Ichinose Honami from Class 2-C, correct?”

Intimidated by Shiba’s strong gaze, Ichinose sank back down to the ground again.

“Ah- Uh- Y-yes, that’s correct…”

With her rear end now on the forest floor, she tried desperately to scramble backward, but there was simply no escaping his discerning gaze.

He stood, towering over Ichinose, his eyes filled with indecipherable emotion.

“Why are you here?”

“U-uhm, well, it seems that my watch is broken, so… I was going to get it looked at…”

“I see. So that’s why there aren’t any GPS signals nearby.”

After a brief pause, he continued.

“It doesn’t really matter how much you heard. Even if it was only a couple of words, for you to get yourself involved in this, well… it simply means you were unlucky.”

“Are… Are you saying that I’m going to be penalized for something?”

“It has nothing to do with the school’s rules or penalties. We’re just going to have to dispose of you. Immediately.”

At that, Shiba slowly began to reach for Ichinose.

“It’s a bit premature to resort to such violent methods, Shiba-sensei.”

Tsukishiro, having shown up slightly late with Ichinose’s backpack in hand, spoke up to rein Shiba back in.

“Yes, forgive me.”

At that, the Acting Director turned and looked at Ichinose with an ominous smile on his face.

“Let’s go about this formally. Did you happen to hear anything, Ichinose-san?”

“N-not at all. I didn’t hear anything…”

Of course, that was a lie.

While it had only been a few bits and pieces, Ichinose had indeed overheard their unsettling conversation.

But no matter what she chose to say in response, they probably weren’t going to believe her anyway.

“I’m not so naive as to trust those words of yours. As adults, we always have to assume the worst and act accordingly, so I have no choice but to proceed under the premise that you heard everything.”

Tsukishiro stood before Ichinose with an evaluative look in his eyes.

And then, he crouched down to match her gaze with his own.

“Accidental as it may have been, you still heard it all. Information that should’ve never reached your ears, and yet, here we are.”

Shiba simply stood back as he watched his superior, seemingly afraid of where it was headed.

“If our conversation earlier were to leak to the public, Shiba-sensei and I would be in a great deal of trouble.”

“I-I really didn’t hear anyth?”

“That’s not true. I’m speaking now under the firm premise that you did, remember?”

Being told this, Ichinose could only swallow her bated breath.

“Should we perhaps roughen you up a bit until you forget the memory, Ichinose-san? Your retirement would be soon to follow.”

Seeing her cower in fear, Tsukishiro smiled and stood back up.

“I say that jokingly, of course. As the one entrusted with protecting this school, I would never truly say something like that. I too would like to avoid a violent solution if at all possible. Therefore, I’ll offer you a proposal. If you tell a soul about any of this, I’ll personally see to it that a group composed entirely of Class 2-C students retires from the exam.”

“…!”

“Naturally, this would be a group that doesn’t have the private points they’d need to save themselves.”

This was a slightly nicer way of saying that they would be subject to ‘mandatory expulsion’.

“Do you perhaps think it’d be impossible for me to do such a thing? As the man in control of the rules, fabricating a justification would be trivial. There’s no telling what might happen, especially out here on such an unsupervised, vast deserted island.”

Tsukishiro narrowed his gaze, peering down at the terrified Ichinose.

It was his way of tacitly asking her if she understood.

“Acting Director Tsukishiro, rather than showing such leniency, wouldn’t it be better to exercise your authority here? If Ichinose were to disappear, I doubt that Chabashira and Mashima would notice. Those two are only cautious when it comes to matters regarding Ayanok?ji.”

“You have a point. Well then, what do you think should be done instead, Shiba-sensei?”

Without so much as a second thought, Shiba took out a pair of rubber gloves from his pocket.

“If you’re willing to leave it to me, I’ll handle her myself.”

Any and all hopes that Ichinose had of getting away were long gone by now, leaving her with no choice but to wait for her sentencing as the two men discussed how to deal with her.

From the mortified look on her face, it was clear that she couldn’t even begin to imagine what Shiba intended to do once he put on the gloves.

The sight caused Tsukishiro to let show a tender smile.

“Well, I’d rather not waste any more time on this.”

Saying that, Tsukishiro set down the backpack he was holding in front of Ichinose before stepping away again.

“The port is located about 150 meters straight ahead of us. Do get going, if you would.”

“Y-yes sir…!”

Overcome with a sense of panic, Ichinose hurriedly put on her backpack, desperate to get away as quickly as possible.

“It’s not your enemies that you should be protecting, but your own classmates. It would do you well to keep that in mind.”

Ichinose nodded in response before promptly setting off in the direction Tsukishiro had indicated.

Once she had disappeared into the forest, Shiba sent a look of confusion toward Tsukishiro.

“It’s fine. Just leave her be.”

“Are you sure? If she mentions this to Ayanok?ji, it’ll interfere with the plan.”

He simply couldn’t shake the thought that there were still loose ends that ought to be dealt with somehow.

“Unexpected setbacks happen all the time. That being the case, we’ll just have to adapt.”

Shiba still seemed visibly apprehensive about this, unable to perceive Tsukishiro’s true intentions.

“Are you really that worried? I thought I gave her a rather effective warning.”

If she were to go back on her word, several of her classmates would be expelled. Although it was just a threat, for someone like Ichinose who prioritized her classmates above all else, it would’ve seemed far more real.

“Regardless of her relationship with Ayanok?ji-kun, the elimination of a formidable enemy like him would be great for Class C. She herself will also come to terms with that as time passes, so let’s just stay calm and see what happens, shall we?”

A raindrop fell upon Tsukishiro’s cheek.

“I was 99% certain that Nanase-san would fail, but it seems that she’s finally taken action. If everything goes according to plan, Ayanok?ji-kun’s Emergency Alert should go off any time now.”

Tsukishiro was perfectly calm as he spoke, without even the slightest trace of uncertainty in his voice.

An outlook made possible thanks to his unwavering conviction.

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The pouring rain began to get stronger.

Having taken the time to cool her head and come to terms with her own feelings, Nanase spoke with a heavy tone.

“It’s my loss… Ayanok?ji-senpai.”

“Can I take that to mean you’re finally convinced?”

“Yes. It seems that, despite my best efforts, it truly isn’t possible for me to beat you Senpai.”

Having been seen through to her very core, she seemed resigned, as if all the spite and malice from earlier had been drained away.

Making her stand down without laying a finger on her had, in a way, been successful.

“If possible, how about you explain everything in detail? Why were you targeting me? If we don’t clear this up, there will be several issues later.”

“That’s fair. You have a right to know? No, I want you to know, Senpai.”

She sat down as she spoke, having lost the strength to stay standing any longer.

While her movements hadn’t been those of an ordinary person, it still didn’t seem like she was the White Room student.

Her strength was definitely praiseworthy. So much so that she probably wouldn’t lose out against an opponent like Horikita or Ibuki.

Compared to someone who hails from the White Room, however, she was far too rough around the edges.

Moreover, it would be strange for the White Room student to bring up Matsuo’s name, of all things.

So, in order to find out the truth, I patiently waited for her answer.

“I… I enrolled in this school because I wanted to avenge my childhood friend.”

“Your childhood friend? You mean?”

“Yes. Matsuo Eiichiro.”

I felt all but certain that she was referring to the son of the very butler who had taken care of me in the past.

“I hadn’t truly realized it before enrolling here, but since this school is completely isolated from the outside world, there’s no way you could’ve known what happened, is there?”

To her credit, Nanase wasn’t exactly wrong for thinking this. However, in this case, I happened to know at least a little bit about what had happened to the Matsuo family. After all, ‘that man’ had mentioned it back when he had shown up to take me back to the White Room.

At this point, Nanase calmly began to tell me everything.

How Eiichiro had been forcibly expelled from the high school he had worked so hard to get into due to my father’s relentless scheming.

How, no matter which school he tried to apply for afterward, he ended up suffering the exact same fate, eventually leading to him giving up on pursuing higher education altogether.

How, upon finding out about this, his father had committed suicide, burning himself to death.

And how, after his father’s death, he was left to do what he could to make ends meet by working a part-time job.

Even though ‘that man’ had already told me all of this, I simply chose to hold my tongue and listen.

“From kindergarten up until the day he graduated from middle school, I was always together with Eiichiro-kun. He was a year above me and better than me at just about anything, from studies to the games we played together… He was my inspiration, my role model.”

Nanase’s calm voice gradually began to grow heavier.

“Even after he was kicked out of his home, Eiichiro-kun said he wouldn’t give up until the very end, and that’s when he started working. While we weren’t able to see each other as often, I didn’t think the relationship between us would change.”

She continued without pause, speaking as though she was reliving the past.

“Even though he had given up on his education… Even though he had lost his father… He told me that he wouldn’t give up… That he’d look toward the future and try his best… He even smiled… And yet…”

Nanase’s voice began to shake, her fists clenched.

“Earlier this year, on the evening of February 14th, I paid a visit to Eiichiro-kun’s apartment. He was trying so hard, so I was hoping to at least make him feel a little bit better, but?”

Even without hearing the end of it, I could tell exactly where she was going with this:

That, despite all his hard work, Matsuo Eiichiro had ultimately chosen to give up on his own life.

“‘If you can never meet again, then you’ll never be able to tell them how you feel.’ You said it yourself.”

I was reminded of what she said back when she was consoling Ike on the second day of the exam.

In her case, she had been far too late for regrets. Heartfelt words would indeed be meaningless when said to a corpse.

“I didn’t know very much about you or your father at the time. In fact, I had only just sent out my application to another high school when… that person appeared before me.”

“You mean Tsukishiro?”

“Yes. Back then, Acting Director Tsukishiro told me why Eiichiro-kun’s life had been thrown into turmoil. He said that the root cause of all of it had been that someone named Ayanok?ji Kiyotaka had escaped from an establishment called ‘The White Room’ by enrolling at a school named ‘Advanced Nurturing High School’, and that he had made arrangements for me to enroll there myself.”

And so, she had taken him up on the offer in order to seek vengeance for the death of her childhood friend.

“If I could successfully get you expelled, he promised to let me meet your father, Senpai. Truth be told, I was going to ask your father to bow his head and apologize to Eiichiro-kun, but…”

Even if she somehow managed to get me expelled, there was simply no way ‘that man’ would ever choose to bow his head.

Her words would’ve never managed to get through to him. Of that, I was certain.

I was able to see the bigger picture at this point, but there were still several things that I didn’t understand.

“Tsukishiro told me that he had sent in a student from the White Room. Was that just a bluff?”

“Uhm, what do you mean by that, Senpai? I don’t really know much about this ‘White Room’ thing to begin with.”

It didn’t seem like she was lying when she said this, so with that being the case, there were only two possible explanations I could come up with.

The first was that the enforcer he had sent wasn’t Nanase, but someone entirely different, be they from the White Room or not.

While the other was that the very ‘enforcer’ he had mentioned really was Nanase, and he had just wanted me to think that she was from the White Room.

If it was the latter, then there wouldn’t be anyone else targeting me anymore.

However, that felt pretty hard to imagine.

When compared to the general public, Nanase was exceptionally talented, but her abilities fell short for an enforcer tasked with forcing my expulsion. Even Tsukishiro should’ve realized that it would end up like this.

“I knew that you weren’t the one at fault, Ayanok?ji-senpai, but… I wanted… no, needed someone to take it out on… all my pent-up anger and frustration…”

Upon hearing this, all sorts of things started to make sense. Her behavior ever since she first came here.

Throughout all her attempts to have me expelled, there had also been several occasions where she had stepped in to help me.

Contradictory behavior that had come about because Nanase herself didn’t truly believe that she was doing the right thing.

And today, convinced that she had Matsuo Eiichiro’s dying will at heart, she unleashed it all.

We were high up on the mountain and the falling rain had cooled down the ground beneath our feet, causing a thick fog to enshroud the area.

“I… I don’t know how I can face you anymore, Senpai… I’m so, so sorry…”

Ashamed of herself and what she had done, Nanase covered her face with her hands, unable to look at me.

Without saying a word, I waited patiently until she had calmed down.

“You don’t need to apologize. The anger you feel is perfectly justified.”

The fact of the matter was that ‘that man’ had committed such a grave crime just to bring me back.

A cold-hearted, calculating being who doesn’t even see others as human.

But, ironically enough, that was also a projection of myself.

“I’ve failed to carry out the Acting Director’s orders. There’s no point in me staying here anymore.”

“Will you drop out?”

“It’s the least I can do to atone for my actions.”

‘That man’ and I had always been similar.

As long as we could protect ourselves, our own existence, it didn’t matter what happened to others.

And neither of us believed in casually revealing our true nature to outsiders.

However, despite our similarities, there was still a key difference.

It all came down to whether or not we’d choose to discard the ignorant who stand in our way.

That is, whether or not we were even capable of extending our hands.

Extending his hand to an ignorant person was something ‘that man’ would absolutely never do, and that was the decisive difference between us.

I slowly reached out, extending my hand to Nanase.

“Senpai…?”

“If you’re really sorry, then please take back what you said just now.”

“What… do you mean…?”

“You have nothing to feel ashamed of. You simply tried your best to avenge your friend. But there’s a reason I can’t lose to you, since I believe that staying here at this school is the only way I have of going against ‘that man’, my father.”

While still unwilling to meet my gaze head-on, she lifted her head just enough to stare at my outstretched palm.

“If I could be a bit selfish here, I’d rather not hear about you leaving the school. Instead, I’d like you to cooperate with me. Even now, Tsukishiro is probably scheming to use this special exam to expel me and present me as a gift to my father. If that were to happen, all the painstaking efforts Matsuo Eiichiro went through to get me into this school would be for nothing.”

“Are you saying that… I should’ve been doing the opposite this entire time?”

“Can you lend me your hand?”

Her delicate, smooth hand took hold of my own.

“?It’s a promise.”

Though her hand was cold due to the rain, there was still a hint of warmth contained within.

Nanase, whose head had been down for a while now, finally looked me in the eyes.

This had nothing to do with whether she’d actually be able to help me or not.

I just needed to make good use of her so that she could, even if I ended up only using her once and throwing her away.

“You’ll catch a cold if you stay in the rain for too long, so let’s get going.”

“…Okay.”