Although the designated area had been fairly close to the campsite, it still took me around an hour and a half to get there. Needless to say, when I finally stepped foot in the area, my watch didn’t indicate that I had earned the Early Bird Bonus, leaving me with just a one-point Arrival Bonus instead. Of course, I wasn’t dissatisfied with this since I had participated in a Task along the way.

Area E4 was located at a fairly high altitude atop a cliff, so the view was decent enough that I could survey a good part of the island.

“You sure took your sweet time getting here, Ayanokōji.”

In my peripheral vision, I spotted Kiryūin. She spoke to me without so much as looking in my direction, her eyes trained down at the base of the cliff.

Back when I ran a GPS Search this morning, she was the formidable opponent who shared a table with me that I felt would be the most troublesome to compete against.

“So, Ayanokōji, are you the one who’s been making me work for all the Early Bird Bonuses?”

“I wonder. People can end up in the same area sometimes despite being a part of different tables. More importantly, I thought you weren’t interested in making it to the top ten, Kiryūin-senpai.”

Earlier this morning, Kiryūin had shot up from below 10th place all the way to 9th.

“Well, this exam’s been more interesting than I expected. It’s kinda unbecoming of my age, but I’ve been really hyped up recently.”

She said it was ‘unbecoming of her age’, and yet she was only one year older than me.

“I figure I’ll keep going at my current pace, at least for the time being.”

“So you don’t want to get first place, Senpai?”

“Everyone’s foaming at the mouth over the top spot. If I got mixed up in that, I wouldn’t get to chill out and enjoy myself. Though, if Nagumo and Kōenji collapse, then that might change things a bit.”

“Collapse? Honestly, that doesn’t seem very likely at the moment.”

“Do you really think that Nagumo’ll leave Kōenji free to his own devices?”

Apparently, Kiryūin had also foreseen how things would play out moving forward, at least to a certain extent.

“With the current stalemate, it’s hard to say that Nagumo’s guaranteed to come out on top. It seems he’s been patiently watching things so far, but he’ll make his move sooner or later. Or more specifically, make his move on Kōenji. Depending on the situation, it’s possible that both of ‘em will start slowing down on earning points.”

Alternatively, it was possible that one of them would get crushed and plummet down through the ranks.

“That’s true. Kicking one’s opponent down is important, after all.”

Although there was no way to tell exactly when it would happen, they would definitely clash with each other here at some point.

Or, at very least, it felt safe to say that Nagumo would stop Kōenji.

“How about you? Are you aiming for the top spots, Ayanokōji?”

“Unfortunately, I really can’t see myself getting into the top ten.”

“That so? I thought you’d have just about the same number of points as me.”

She seemed awfully interested in me and how well I was doing.

Well, to be exact, it probably wasn’t just me that she was interested in.

She was surely looking to analyze the strategies of each and every student in the school.

“As a word of advice: most groups are probably gonna start slowing down soon, so don’t give up and keep on doing your best.”

Even though I hadn’t known Kiryūin for very long, it was clear to me that she was quite an influential character.

She was by all means an exceptional student when it came to both the depth of her insight and the breadth of her intuition, qualities that even the OAA system failed to account for.

“To change the subject, from what I’ve seen on my tablet, it doesn’t look like any groups have retired yet. What do you think of that?”

“It just means that I can’t afford to get careless, not even for a moment. That’s all.”

“Hmm… I found out something interesting when I stopped by the starting area yesterday. Apparently, some of the groups that have been running out of food and water have been taking up a new last-ditch strategy of sorts. They’ve started cutting loose some of their members in order to conserve resources.”

“That’s a wise decision.”

No matter how many points your group racks up, if the whole group retires, you’d be disqualified and your expulsion would be all but set in stone. That being the case, it would be safer to send one or two people back to the starting area instead, even if it meant taking an overall drop in terms of efficiency. There, not only could they drink an unlimited amount of fresh water, but they’d also be able to maintain their personal hygiene, therefore making it easier to avoid getting sick.

“The bottom ten groups probably have their fingers crossed right about now, praying that some other group will retire first.”

“There’s no telling what someone who’s been pushed into a corner might do. Don’t be negligent, okay?”

“Is that really something a lone girl like you ought to be worried about, Kiryūin-senpai?”

“Oh? Hmm… Well, it’s true that, as a young, dainty maiden, it may be best for me to be more cautious.”

Even though I said what I had in jest, surprisingly, she had taken it seriously.

“If it comes down to it, then yeah… I’ll just have to get through it by force.”

Saying that, Kiryūin clenched her fist.

Honestly, her response wasn’t very maiden-like, not by any stretch of the imagination.

“I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not.”

“Fufu, sorry for taking up so much of your time. After all, for the likes of us, every single second is precious.”

With that, she lightly lifted up her hand and began to walk away.

Based on the direction she went in, she was probably headed toward a nearby Task.

“You’re not gonna come along? There might be space for you as well if you hurry.”

“I’ll pass. I don’t think I’d be able to beat you, Senpai.”

By now, there were probably at most two spots left for the Task in question. Additionally, there were already more than three other groups in the nearby area, so with Kiryūin also heading over to it, my odds of being able to participate were already shaky at best.

As I watched her leave, she suddenly stopped and, despite the fact that she was pressed for time, looked back to say one last thing.

“Ah, I get it now─ It seems I’ll have to go check up on this Task on myself, just in case.”

Speaking as though she had connected the dots and seen through my strategy, Kiryūin left it at that and set off toward the Task once more.