The sun had set on the tenth day of the exam and it was now just past 9:00 PM.

I was in the middle of going over the final rankings for the day and the GPS screenshots I had taken when a bright light flickered against the side of my tent from somewhere outside.

“Is someone really traveling this late at night…?”

Albeit somewhat dangerous, there were groups out there who’d look to make up for lost ground by traveling to their final designated area in the dead of night.

Reflexively, I began to track the light from within my tent. Whoever it was, it didn’t seem like they were deliberately pointing their flashlight in my direction. Instead, given the light’s erratic movements, it seemed like they were scouring the general area, as if they were frantically searching for something.

With my curiosity piqued, I decided to leave my tent and find out what was going on.

In the distance, I could see the light of a flashlight sparsely illuminating the dark forest as it gradually moved further and further away from my campsite.

Sure enough, it looked like someone was desperately searching for something… or someone.

Was it Amasawa, searching for me in order to lure me into a trap of some sort?

No, if it were her, I didn’t think she’d use her flashlight so brazenly like this.

It’d make more sense for her to confirm my location with a GPS Search and close in secretly, hidden under the veil of darkness.

“…Yume-chaaan…?”

I could just barely hear a feeble, timid voice coming from the flashlight’s direction. I didn’t recognize whose voice it was, but I did know that, nicknames aside, there was only one person at this school with the name Yume.

It was most likely Kobashi Yume from Class 2-C. So, with that being the case, it was probably safe to assume that the voice belonged to someone involved with that class. And, if I recalled correctly, there was a girl named Shiranami Chihiro in Kobashi’s group.

In any case, she sounded like she might burst into tears any second now. It was possible to just turn the other cheek and act like I hadn’t seen anything, but that would be hard given that she was a student of Class 2-C. After all, Class 2-C had recently begun to collaborate with Sakayanagi and the rest of Class 2-A.

I fetched my tablet from inside my tent and turned on the external light that came with it.

It was a bit dim when compared to the more traditional flashlight, but it should be enough to get her to notice my presence.

Not long thereafter, the beam of her flashlight pointed in my direction.

“Yume-chan!?”

She shouted out, her voice filled with a mixture of panic and excitement as she quickly made her way over to me.

After being momentarily blinded by the light of her flashlight, the girl slowly began to come into view.

“Yume-chan!”

“Sorry, but I’m not Yume.”

“Oh…”

The person who emerged from the thicket of trees was none other than Shiranami, just as I had suspected.

“Uhm, Ayanokōji-kun… Good evening.”

Although she and I weren’t at all close with each other, she seemed somewhat relieved to see me.

Was that a testament to just how hopeless of a situation she was in?

“It’s pretty dangerous to be wandering around at night all on your own. Where are Kobashi and Takemoto?”

“I, uhm… I don’t know… I was in a hurry to meet with them, but before I knew it, I couldn’t really tell where I was anymore…”

I shouldn’t have asked a question with such an obvious answer.

The forest’s landscape often looked the same no matter which direction you were facing. It would only take a single wrong turn to lose your sense of direction.

With that in mind, it was probably safe to assume that Shiranami had drifted far away from the rest of her group.

“How long has it been since you last saw them?”

“I’m not sure… maybe around fifteen, twenty minutes…?”

In which case, she probably wasn’t so lost that she’d never be able to find her way back, but she was definitely far enough away that her group wouldn’t be able to hear her calling out to them.

“In any case, wandering around aimlessly will only get you even more lost.”

“Y-yeah.”

For now, I decided to take charge and lead her back to my tent, using my tablet to light the way. It would be troublesome if I were to get lost as well, after all.

I couldn’t just leave my things unattended and head off to help her find her group.

So far, for the most part, a good number of students had probably found themselves lost just like Shiranami.

Eventually, they’d all make their way back. It’d just be a matter of whether or not they’d get lucky and do it quickly, or if it would take them a while.

However, if it took too long, they’d have to spend the night lost in the forest all on their own, which would be challenging, to say the least.

Even though it might not be very taxing physically, mentally, it would be exhausting.

We arrived at my campsite before long, whereupon I turned around and spoke to the restless Shiranami.

“There are a lot of bugs, so you can hole up in my tent for now to avoid them if you’d like.”

“Ehh!?”

Rather than sound surprised, it was more like her voice contained a subtle tinge of fear.

“I won’t go in, so you don’t need to worry.”

While she and I clearly weren’t on the same page and there were a few small issues with my reasoning, I shooed Shiranami into my tent and zipped up the entrance between us.

“I-I’m sorry for intruding… on your resting place…”

“It’s fine. More importantly, are Kobashi and Takemoto doing well?”

“Yeah.”

In which case, they were probably getting worried that Shiranami hadn’t returned yet.

They were most likely discussing whether or not they should go out and search for her or stay and wait at their campsite.

“Did your group make a contingency plan for when one of you gets lost?”

I asked, but Shiranami simply shook her head from side to side, so I just continued to speak.

“It’s possible that Takemoto might go out to look for you on his own, but there’s a chance that he’ll get lost. Having said that, if Takemoto and Kobashi were to search for you together and leave their tents and bags unattended, that would be pretty risky too.”

It wouldn’t be very practical for them to pack up their tents and take their things with them either, given that it was possible that Shiranami might make her way back to their own campsite all on her own, only to find it completely deserted.

If they wanted to play it as safe as possible, then they shouldn’t wander out of sight of their tents, but instead patrol the surrounding area, keeping their lights on as they call out to Shiranami in hopes that she would notice them. However, since they hadn’t even discussed beforehand what they would do in a situation like this, there was no telling whether or not they’d be able to keep calm and make a level-headed decision.

There was a good chance that they had gone out to try and search for her without so much as a second thought.

“What now…?”

She posed a question, but rather than ask me, it felt more so like it had been meant for herself. It could be said that she had just made a silly mistake, but in another light, it could also be said that she had made a grave one. It was understandable that she felt anxious.

The problem now was trying to figure out what Kobashi and Takemoto would do. No, depending on the circumstances, it could very well be even more complex than that.

“Is your group still just the three of you? Or have you taken on more members?”

“That…”

Shiranami, who had previously been perfectly fine with telling everything she knew, was now suddenly at a loss for words.

Since she’d definitely be aware of what went on within her own group, there had to be some other reason for her hesitation.

Currently, Ichinose’s class was in a tight-knit alliance with Sakayanagi’s class.

Of course, there were a handful of groups in Class 2-C that had been made between close friends, but the vast majority had been made in consideration of the Class 2-A alliance. Therefore, telling me if her group had merged or other such internal details would be no different from leaking private information. In that sense, Shiranami’s decision to say nothing had certainly been the right thing to do.

“I get it. You don’t have to tell me anything in detail. Just hear me out first.”

With that as a preface, I continued.

“If I were a member of your group, I would’ve almost certainly noticed what happened by now. I’d probably come to the conclusion that you had gotten lost, left to putter about the dark forest all on your own.”

Shiranami nodded meekly.

“Of course, I wouldn’t just give up on you. I’d start out by trying to call out to you. But as I said not too long ago, if that didn’t work, I’d have to try something else. Suppose Kobashi was the one who had gotten lost, what would you and Takemoto do next if calling out to her wasn’t working?”

“…I’m not sure… maybe we’d go looking for Yume-chan together…?”

“Even if it puts you both at risk of getting hurt and retiring from the exam should things go south?”

“She’s my friend. There’s no way I could just leave her to fend for herself.”

Her response was truly befitting the unity of her class; it didn’t matter whether or not it was the right strategic choice. As a student of Class 2-A, Takemoto may be a bit reluctant to leave the campsite at first, but in the end, he would probably fold and decide to help all the same.

That being said, the most reliable plan moving forward would be to sit back and wait for them to come looking for her.

And if push came to shove, they might even spend a point on the GPS Search to try and find us.

However, with how dark it was, there was no telling if they’d be successful even with one or two searches of the nearby area.

“Does your group have points to spare? Would spending two or three on GPS Searches put your rank at risk?”

“That─ I wonder. I don’t think it’d be very good.”

It seemed as though they weren’t ranked very high, at least not to the point where she felt comfortable spending a couple of points. Would doing so cost them everything, or would it not matter in the end? There was no way to tell what impact it would truly have until the exam was over.

Shiranami probably didn’t like the thought of her fellow group members using up their points to come searching for her either.

As expected, the best option she had right now was to wait on standby here at my campsite after all, but… I couldn’t discount the possibility that Takemoto and Kobashi might not come looking for her, or that they give up after they aren’t able to find her. If that were to happen, I’d be forced to spend the night outside given that Shiranami would be using my tent, which, in turn, would probably end up slowing me down tomorrow.

Therefore, if there was ever a time to take action, it would be now.

“How are you?”

“Eh?”

“I’m asking if you have enough energy to walk?”

“Y-yeah. That should be fine, it’s just…”

I unzipped the entrance to my tent and motioned for Shiranami to come back out.

“Come, I’ll take you to your group.”

“But… how?”

“Well, it’s not like aimlessly wandering around the forest is going to solve anything, so  we’ll use this.”

I showed her the tablet I had in my hand.

“If I do a GPS Search, we’ll know which direction to go and approximately how far we’ll need to move.”

However, even with this, it probably wouldn’t be easy to meet up with them.

It would be exceptionally difficult to properly navigate the forest with how dark it was.

For an ordinary student like Shiranami, it would be basically impossible without the repeated use of the GPS Search.

“Why… Why are you helping me…?”

“Why? This special exam pretty much comes down to a battle between the different school years. That’s why.”

“But, for you to go so far as to use a GPS Search…”

For me, spending one or two points wasn’t all that much of a burden.

I could always earn more points as long as I didn’t get enough to go above 11th place on the leaderboards.

However, it wouldn’t do me any good to tell her about that, so I figured I’d just make up a reason that she’d believe.

“If I had to say… I guess it’s because you’re one of Ichinose’s classmates.”

Just as the words crossed my lips, the look on Shiranami’s face stiffened ever so slightly.

“…Are you…”

Seeing her reaction made me wonder if I had said something distasteful.

“Hm?”

“Are you and Honami-chan…”

Shiranami trailed off again before shutting her mouth as though she had nothing left to add.

Somehow, I managed to understand what she was getting at, albeit after a delay of sorts.

I had been reminded of everything that Ichinose’s other classmates told me back when I crossed paths with them a few days ago.

“There’s nothing going on between us.”

I quickly attempted to correct her misunderstanding, but it only served to make her already stiff expression that much more pronounced.

I decided to drop the topic for the time being and proceeded with the GPS Search. After a moment, I looked at the results. Since Kobashi and Takemoto’s GPS signals were right on top of each other, it was clear that they at least hadn’t separated. We immediately began to walk, headed off in search of Shiranami’s group.

And then, after about ten minutes of walking in the direction of their GPS signals…

“Chihiro-chan!!!”

Kobashi called out, having spotted us as we emerged from a gap in the trees.

Her backpack was strapped to her back, and beside her stood their third group member, Takemoto, who also had his backpack on. And from the fact that Takemoto was carrying another backpack in his hands, it seemed like they had set off for Shiranami with all their belongings in tow.

Considering that they had been heading straight toward us, it seemed highly likely that they had also used the GPS Search.

In the end, we all decided to go to where I had set up camp.

“Thanks a bunch for helping out Chihiro-chan, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“No, I’m sure you guys would’ve found her eventually. There’s no need to thank me.”

“No need to thank you? She could’ve gotten injured if she had gone much further, not to mention how much harder it would’ve been for us to track her down.”

Despite being from another class, even Takemoto was relieved that Shiranami had been found so quickly.

If they had to chase after her as she wandered around in the forest, this might have cost them more than just a point or two.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking but, do you guys have a walkie-talkie?”

Having found a good opportunity to change the topic, I looked to Takemoto and asked about something I had been curious about.

“Huh? Walkie-talkie? I have one but─”

Since I had done them a favor, they’d most likely be willing to lend it to me for a bit.

“If it’s alright with you, could I have a word with Sakayanagi? I’m worried about some of my classmates, so I’d like to ask her if any of them have returned to the starting area.”

“If that’s all it is then sure. Hold on a sec.”

Takemoto didn’t seem to mind my request. In fact, he seemed happy to pay back the favor, seeing as he quickly took out his walkie-talkie and started fiddling with it.

As a product provided by the school, the walkie-talkies were naturally digital rather than analog. Additionally, they came with full support for privacy codes. Put briefly, privacy codes allow you to have private conversations with anyone who has the same code in a particular channel, thus eliminating the risk of having your communications intercepted by a third party. The groups that chose to purchase walkie-talkies for this exam should’ve each been given a privacy code to use in order to prevent any information leaks.

Soon enough, Takemoto spoke into the walkie-talkie to see if Sakayanagi was there to pick up.

She responded not too long afterward, at which point he passed the walkie-talkie over to me.

“I’d like to speak with her privately, if that’s alright.”

Seeing the three of them nod in response, I politely distanced myself from the campsite. Of course, I made sure to stay where they could see me so that they didn’t think that I was up to something nefarious. Then, after speaking with Sakayanagi for a short while, I went back to the group and handed the walkie-talkie back to Takemoto at Sakayanagi’s request.

“That’s everything Sakayanagi. Sorry to bother you so late.”

Takemoto spoke, Sakayanagi said a few short words in response, and with that, the call was over.

Based on their brief exchange, it seemed that everything had gone by without a hitch.

“That really helped, I was able to get all the information I needed from Sakayanagi.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Also, Sakayanagi asked me to give this to you permanently.”

“Ah, thank you.”

Takemoto handed the walkie-talkie back to me.

“We’re the ones who should be thanking you~ Right Chihiro-chan~?”

“Yeah, thank you for helping me tonight Ayanokōji-kun.”

The three of them, Shiranami included, expressed their thanks once again, and just like that, they began to set up their tents.

That night, I drifted off to sleep listening to them tell stories about Class A and Class C, stories that I’d usually never be able to hear.