I couldn’t seem to fall asleep, so I got up and exited my room.

In the lobby, I bought some juice from the vending machine and went back to the elevator.

“Hmm?”

The elevator was on the 7th floor. Feeling curious, I looked at the CCTV monitor of the inside of the elevator. It was Horikita in her school uniform.

“… Well, there’s no need to hide myself, but…”

I didn’t want to particularly face her, so I hid myself behind the vending machine. The elevator reached the first floor.

While being wary of her surroundings, Horikita exited the building. After she disappeared into the dark, I chased after her.

However, I involuntarily hid myself again after turning the corner.

Horikita stopped moving. There was another person’s figure.

“Suzune. I didn’t think you’d follow me all the way here.”

Did she leave at this hour to meet with a boy?

“Mou, I’m different from the useless me that you know. I’ve come here to catch up to you.”

“Catch up to me, huh.”

Nii-san? I couldn’t see the person she was talking to, but it looks like it’s Horikita’s older brother.

“I heard that you are in class D; it doesn’t seem like anything’s changed in the last 3 years. Because you’ve always been looking at my back, you’ve never been able to see your own flaws. Choosing to come to this school was another one of your mistakes.”

“That’s—that’s wrong. I’m going to rise up to class A. And then—”

“That’s impossible. You’ll never reach class A. Rather, your class will crumble before that. This school isn’t as easy as you think it is.”

“I will absolutely, absolutely reach class A…”

“I already said it’s impossible. You’re a really unreasonable younger sister.”

Horikita’s older brother takes a step forward. From my hiding spot, I could see his form more clearly.

It was the student council president.

There was no emotion in his expression, as if he was looking at an existence that didn’t interest him at all.

He grabbed his younger sister’s wrist and pushed her against the wall.

“No matter how much I avoided you, you are still my younger sister. If people start to learn about you, it is me who will be disgraced. Leave this school immediately.”

“N-no… tsu. I will, I will absolutely rise up to class A…!”

“Foolish, really. Do you want to relive the painful experiences of the past?”

“Nii-san—I will—”

“You have neither the power nor the qualifications to aim for class A. Understand that.”

Horikita’s body drew forward, as if he was about to take action. The situation looks dangerous.

Resigning myself to her anger, I stepped out from my corner and approached the older brother.

Before I realized, I grabbed his right arm.

“—What? Who are you?”

Looking at his own arm, he looked at me with a sharp glint in his eyes.

“A-ayanokouji-kun!?”

“You, you were trying to throw her to the ground, right? It’s concrete here, you know. Just because you’re siblings doesn’t mean you can do anything you want.”

“It’s not admirable to eavesdrop.”

“Just let go of her hand.”

“That’s what I should be saying.”

It was silent while we glared at each other.

“Stop, Ayanokouji-kun…”

She said with a strained voice. I’ve never seen her like that before.

Reluctantly, I let go of his arm. At that moment, he for my face with a quick backhand.

Feeling danger, I instinctively leaned backwards. A nasty attack with a thin body. Furthermore, he aimed for my vitals with a sharp kick.

“Ha!”

I understood that it had power to make me lose consciousness in one hit. With a confused look, he let out a breath and extended his right arm towards me.

If I grabbed his hand, he would probably throw me onto the ground. Instead, I slapped his arm away with left hand.

“Good reflexes. I didn’t think you would avoid every single one. You also understood what I was trying to do. Were you taught in some way?”

Finally stopping his attacks, he asked me a question.

“Yea, I did piano and calligraphy. In elementary school, I even got the championship in a music competition.”

“Are you also class D? What a unique boy. Suzune.”

Letting go of her arm, he slowly faced me.

“Suzune, you have a friend? I’m honestly surprised.”

“He’s… he’s not my friend. He’s only a classmate.”

Denying his words, she looked up to her brother.

“As always, you’re mistaking solitude with isolation. And you, Ayanokouji. With you, it looks like things are going to become interesting.”

Walking past me, he disappeared into the night. The confident student council president. It seems like Horikita was acting strange because she met her brother.

“I’m going to crawl my way to class A even if I die. That’s the only way.”

After he left, the night was engulfed in silence. Horikita sat down against the wall, her head hanging in shame. I wonder if I did anything unnecessary. As I turned to return to the dorms, Horikita called out to me.

“Did you hear everything…? Or was it coincidence?”

“No, it was like 50% luck. I saw you while I went to go buy juice from the vending machine. I followed you simply because I was curious. However, I really didn’t mean to intrude.”

Horikita sank into silence once again.

“Your older brother is quite strong. He didn’t hesitate to attack.”

“He’s… 5th dan in karate and 4th dan in aikido.”[1]

Oho, so he’s that strong. If I didn’t pull back it would’ve been a disaster.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you also do something, right? You’re also a rank holder.”

“I already said it, didn’t I? I played piano and performed tea ceremonies.”

“You said calligraphy before.”

“… I also did calligraphy.”

“You purposely got low scores on your test, and you say you did piano and calligraphy. I still don’t understand you very well.”

“Getting those scores were only a coincidence, and I really did piano, tea ceremony, and calligraphy.”

If there was a piano here, I could play Fur Elise at least.

“I let you see a strange side of me.”

“Rather, I always thought that you were a normal girl—not.”

She scowled at me.

“Let’s go back. If anyone sees us here, there will surely be a misunderstanding.”

Certainly. There would absolutely be strange rumors about a girl and a boy all by themselves in the dead of night.

Not to mention, our relationship was still iffy to begin with.

Slowly getting up, Horikita walked towards the entrance of the dorms.

“Hey… Are you really ok with how the study group went?”

Thinking that I wouldn’t get another chance, I called out to her resolutely.

“Why are you asking that? I proposed the study group in the first place. It’s not like you cared about it in the first place. Am I wrong?”

“I have a bad feeling. Or should I say, the other students seem to be planning something.”

“I don’t mind. I’m already used to it. Also, most of the students with red marks are with Hirata-kun. He’s good at studying, gets along with people, and can teach other people well, unlike me. This time, they should be able to barely clear the borderline. However, I judged it to be a waste of time to help them out myself. Until graduation, they’ll have to repeatedly try to not fail. It’d be really stupid to keep trying to cover for their failing marks every single time.”

“Sudou and his group took some distance from Hirata. I don’t think they’ll participate in his study group.”

“That’s what they decided to do; that has nothing to do with me. If they don’t approach Hirata-kun, they’ll just drop out soon enough. Of course, my goal is to get up to class A. However, that’s for my own sake, and not for anyone else. I don’t care what anyone else does. Rather, if cut down on people on this next midterm, only people who are necessary are left. It’ll be easier to get to class A. A win-win situation.”

I don’t think she’s wrong. In the first place, this crisis is bad for students who got red marks. However, I couldn’t help but continue the conversation with Horikita, who was strangely talkative.

“Horikita, isn’t that way of thinking incorrect?”

“Incorrect? Tell me which part is wrong. You’re not trying to say that there is no future for a person who abandons their classmates, right?”

“Calm down. I know you well enough that you wouldn’t understand what I’m saying.”

“Then why? There’s no merit in saving failures.”

“Certainly there isn’t much merit.However, it helps prevent demerits.”

“… Demerits?”

“Do you think that the school hasn’t already thought of that? They’re students who rack up negative points from talking during class or always being late. Say they drop out because no one helped them. How many negative points do you think we’ll get?”

“That’s—”

“Of course, before we get any information, nothing is certain. However, don’t you think that there’s a fairly high possibility? A hundred? A thousand? There’s even a chance that 10,000 or 100,000 points are deducted. If that’s the case, you’ll have a hard time getting to class A.”

“Our negative points from being late and talking during class can’t go below 0 right now. While we’re at 0 points, it’d be best to remove all the students who can’t study. Isn’t it the same as receiving no damage?”

“There’s no guarantee that that’ll be the case. There might be some negative points that we don’t know about yet. Do you really think it’s alright to ignore such a dangerous risk? Well… for someone as smart as you, there’s no way that you wouldn’t have thought of that. If that wasn’t the case, there’s no reason for you to do a study group. You would’ve abandoned them from the very start.”

I was starting to get worked up. That might be because I started to regard her as a friend. I didn’t want her to regret her decision.

“Even if there are unseen minuses, it’s better for the class if we get rid of the failures. When we start to increase our points, it’ll be bad if we regret not cutting them out. At this time, this is a risk that should be taken.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Yes, really. Rather, I am worried about you, who is trying to desperately save them.”

I grabbed Horikita’s wrist as she was about to get on the elevator.

“What? Do you have a rebuttal? This problem isn’t something that can be solved by the two of us. The only ones who know the answer are the school, so we’ll be left here arguing forever. I’ll interpret it as I like, and you’ll do the same. It’ll only amount to that, no?”

“You’re really talkative. I never thought you were the type of person to talk this much.”

“That’s… that’s because you’re being insistent.”

The normal Horikita would never listen to me.

If I stopped her like this, it wouldn’t be strange to receive a sharp blow. However, by not doing so, it’s evidence that Horikita also thinks the same way. That’s why she didn’t shake off my hand. Of course, she herself probably doesn’t notice.

“The day we met. Do you remember what happened on the bus?”

“You mean the time we refused to give our seat up to the old woman?”

“Yea. At that time, I thought of the meaning behind giving up my seat. To give up my seat, or not to give up my seat. Which one is the right answer?”

“I already gave my answer. I didn’t give up my seat because I felt it was useless. There’s no merit to giving her my seat, but rather a waste of time and effort.”

“Merit? All you think about is profit and loss to the very end.”

“Is that bad? Humans are calculating creatures. If you sell goods, you get money, and if you do someone a favor, it’ll be returned. I’ll receive this thing called ‘joy’ from my contribution to society if I give up my seat. No?”

“No, that’s not wrong. I also think that’s natural.”

“Then—”

“With that mindset, make sure to have a broad outlook on life. Right now, you’re too blinded by anger and unhappiness that you can’t see anything.”

“Are you someone important? Do you even have the ability to find faults about me?”

“Whatever my ability, I can only see one thing that you cannot see. This is the only fault in the otherwise perfect-looking person known as Horikita Suzune.”

She snorted, as if she was saying “Tell me if you have a bone to pick with me.”

“Let me tell me you your faults. You find other people a hindrance and you don’t let anyone come close to you. Aren’t you in class D because you always think of yourself as superior over everyone else?”

“… It seems like you’re trying to say that I’m equal to Sudou-kun and his group.”

“Then, are you trying to say that you’re superior to those guys?”

“It’s obvious if you look at the test scores. Those are clear evidence that they’re just heavy baggage for the class.”

“Certainly, if you measure by scores, they’re two, three times below your level. Even if they tried really hard, they wouldn’t be able to surpass you. However, that’s only true on top of the desk. The school doesn’t only look at intelligence. This time, if the school did some kind of physical examination, the results wouldn’t be the same. Is that wrong?”

“That’s—”

“Your physical ability is also good. After watching you swim, you’re definitely one of the better girls. However, both you and I know that Sudou’s physical abilities surpass yours. Ike has communication skills that you don’t have. If there was a test based on communication skills, Ike would certainly be helpful. Rather, you would’ve probably dragged down the class. Well then, are you incompetent? No, that’s not it. Everyone has their strong and weak points. That’s what a human is.”

Horikita tried to retort, but she wasn’t able to say anything.

“… You have no basis to your words. All of your words are just pure guesses.”

“If there is no foundation, then we have to come up with a guess from what we do have. Think about Chiyabashira-sensei’s words carefully. In the guidance room, she said, “Who decided that smart people are the ones who get into superior classes?”. So, the conclusion is that there is some factor other than academic ability that affects rankings.”

I swiftly cut off Horikita’s exit path as she looked left and right to weasel herself out of the argument. If I didn’t do that, our argument would’ve been ridiculous.

“You say that you wouldn’t regret abandoning the students who failed, but that’s not true. There will be plenty of days where you feel regret if they drop out.”

I looked straight into Horikita’s eyes. She was not only grasping the reality of the situation, but also tied it with her consciousness. I got that impression from her.

“You’re really talkative today too. Doesn’t suit your principle of avoiding trouble.”

“Yea, probably.”

“It’s really frustrating, but your words are right. You had enough persuasive power to make me think that. I’ll recognize that. However, I still can’t understand one thing. That is, your true intentions. What is this school to you? Why are you desperately trying to persuade me?”

“… I see, that’s what you’re thinking.”

“If someone doesn’t have any persuasive power, their theories won’t be believed.”

She wants to know why I’m trying to persuade her that letting Sudou and the others drop out is a bad thing.

“Without any facades, I want to know the true reason. For points? To rise up to class A? Or, to help your friends?”

“Because I want to know. What is ‘a person with merit’? What is equality?”

“Merit, equality…”

“I came to this school to seek out answers to these questions.”

Although it wasn’t well organized in my head, it came out clearly in words.

“Your hand, can you let go?”

“Ah, my bad.”

After I released my hand, Horikita turned around and looked at me.

“I couldn’t have fallen for your smooth talking, right?”

Saying that, Horikita extended her arm towards me.

“I will take care of Sudou-kun and the others for my own sake. From now on, I’ll make sure to make sure they don’t drop out as an investment for the future. Is that fine?”

“Don’t worry. I don’t think you’ll act differently. That’s the kind of person you are.”

“That’s a promise, then.”

I took Horikita’s hand.

However, it wasn’t until later that I learned that this was a contract with the devil.