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The narrow path, far from being paved, is nothing more than a dirt road. Despite the terrible terrain, I picked up my pace. If Kouenji’s also on foot then I reckon I can catch up to him in about 1 or 2 minutes. However, it looks like he’s also picked up his pace since there’s no sign of him.

“How troublesome…”

Him picking up his pace on its own is one thing but it’s just troublesome if he does it on a trackless path like this one.

While searching for any traces Kouenji might have left behind, I picked up my pace even further. And after another 100 meters, I spotted Kouenji’s back. Looking at his back, I remembered how a similar situation unfolded back on the uninhabited island. Of course, Airi had been with me back then and Kouenji ended up shaking us off his tail.

“Kouenji.”

I called his name and closed the distance between us as though rushing him.

“Well, if it isn’t Ayanokouji Boy. I don’t believe this is the proper route.”

“There’s still the matter of joint responsibility, after all. Why did you decide to take a detour like this?”

“I caught a glimpse of a wild boar. That caught my interest and so I chased it.”

That’s quite the unexpected reason. I chose to refrain from asking him what he intended to do with it if he found it.

“You may relax. In time, I shall return. If it’s me, it won’t even take 30 minutes.”

Looks like I’m just going to have to take his word for it.

“By the way, do you still have some business with me?”

Kouenji said.

Perhaps he’s noticed that I still haven’t said my piece since I haven’t left yet.

“It’s about the day of the exam. I want you to lend the group a hand.”

“That’s something I’m rather sick of hearing.”

No doubt Keisei and the others have been trying to persuade him as well behind my back. Still, Kouenji probably didn’t budge an inch.

“You don’t have to get spectacular scores. Just go about it normally.”

“You don’t get to decide that. I do. You know that, don’t you? If you’ll excuse me then.”

Kouenji said so and moved to leave, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him. Since he tried to take a step forward without acknowledging it, I had no other choice but to step up my game and hold my ground. I expected him to resist more strongly but for some reason, Kouenji relaxed instead.

“Fufufu. I see. So that’s how it is, Ayanokouji Boy.”

Kouenji, with his arm still in my grip, laughed quietly.

“What do you mean by ‘that’s how it is’?”

“I’m talking about the identity of the person who tamed Dragon Boy.”

“Dragon…what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the naughty boy named Ryuuen.”

“What do I have to do with that Ryuuen?”

“Seems like you’re pretty good at playing dumb. You don’t let anything slip through when you feign indifference.”

“I don’t really know how you got to that conclusion.”

“Right now, you’re touching my arm like this. I can tell from the heat transmitted from that contact.”

I had figured he’s far from ordinary, but it looks like Kouenji’s even more of an oddball than I am. So he’s telling me the grip I have on his arm is what led him to that conclusion, huh? “Sorry but this is a huge misunderstanding.”

“Really? From the way Delinquent-kun’s been looking at you, acting towards you and the way his surroundings react to that, I think this is a fact beyond all doubt.”

Kouenji doesn’t have any solid evidence but he seems to have overwhelming confidence in his own observations. More smoke and mirrors probably won’t help.

“Fufu. You may relax. I have no intention of revealing what you’re trying to keep secret. Even if you happen to be ‘relatively talented’, you’re still a childish existence as far as I’m concerned. Just one among many. In other words, whether this is the truth or a lie, it won’t matter as long as I don’t speak of it, right?”

“I do want to clear up this misunderstanding, but what would that do?”

“It’s unfortunate but you’ll just have to give up on that. Even if multiple third parties vouch for you, telling me Ayanokouji Boy had nothing to do with it, this answer won’t change as long as I am certain of it.”

“I see……then, shall we get back on topic?”

“I assume this is about trying to get me to work as part of the group?”

“Will you accept?”

“I’ve already said so over and over that I refuse.”

His answer didn’t change. He said so decisively.

“I will act however I please. That is my philosophy. Whether to take this exam or not, or what my score will be. All of these things will depend on my mood at that moment.”

“…I see.”

I had considered various means of persuasion, but clumsily trying them here could easily backfire on me. I’ll have to leave this one to chance. But ultimately, there’s a high possibility this could lead to the minimum amount of damage being sustained. It’s clear as day Kouenji wants to avoid the punishment known as expulsion. I’ll just have to bet on that. All I could do was bid farewell to Kouenji as he left to hunt the wild boar.

“Doesn’t seem like anyone can manipulate that man.”

It doesn’t matter if it’s the older Horikita or Nagumo or his comrades. That’s my honest opinion of the classmate I’ve spent roughly one year with.