Chapter 19.1: Step 2 of My Strategy.

“Uh, Aiko, I’m not saying you are, but I can’t help but think you are trying to stop me from going to class?”
Aiya-chan noticed my intention.
Of course, Aiya-chan was smart like that. Now what was I going to do? I didn’t have a single clue about what to do next, yet I had to do something.
I didn’t want her to see Nakamura; I had to think of something now!
“...I uh—”
Ring, ring, ring.
Already?!
“Uh, like, I was saying I wasn’t trying to stop you. Let’s just head back, ‘kay?”
I kept Aiya-chan for as long as possible, but when it was time for class, we had to leave.
However, on our way back, we saw blood on the road.
“...Blood?” Aiya-chan was shocked, and so was I.
Wait…!
I had an idea, so I hurriedly ran back to class just to be sure, and then I saw it.
“Aiko!” Aiya-chan called. “Wait up!”
Unfortunately, I couldn’t do that because I had a wild hunch and was scared that I was right.
The trail of blood started from our class; it started from Aiya-chan’s desk.
“Wait, don’t tell…”
“What’s going on?”

Nakamura was nowhere to be seen; he was supposed to be here—he told me to stall. If he weren't here, it only meant one thing.

Honochi!

I turned around to glare at Honochi's seat before quickly calming down—if I said something when she came back, she could harm Nakamura even further.

I'm sympathising with him, huh? You know, if you really know his story, he doesn't seem that bad—it's not that I doubt Aiya-chan, though… but what if she isn't right?

"Aiko, let's call a teach—"

"Please don't."

"How come?"

"Just don't, Aiya-chan."

"...Well, if you're sure."

With that done, I helped clean the mess with the alarmed Aiya-chan. Anyway, after the mess was cleaned, class went on normally.

And before the class ended, Nakamura came back.

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"Eugh," I sighed. "Where am I?

"Don't pull that with me, mister—there was no brain damage; you know where you are."

"Worth a try."

Yup, I was bombarded with questions by the nurse. I, of course, told a false story that said I wanted to open the window but fell and injured my nose.

Well, I *did* fall and hit my nose, even though it was intentional.

Anyway, I made sure to sleep for a short while because of my plan, but as I was about to go back to class, the nurse refused.
“You want to go back? No, you can’t. I won’t allow it; you need to rest.”
I didn’t have the time to argue or do too much; I had to quickly lie and get out of here.
“Ma’am, I’m sorry, but I need to go to class, or else I might fail. I’m in Class Epsilon,” I looked down.
“So you want to prepare for a test?”
“Yes, so can you overlook it this once?” I held her hands tightly with an expression that showed my perseverance—my fake perseverance.
“I-I can’t. It’s not up to me.”
You literally just said that ‘you’ *wouldn’t let me go.*
“Couldn’t you overlook it this once?”
“I really can’t—”
“Please, ma’am!” I bowed my head.
Please just work; I really need to go.
“Fine, but remember to watch your step from now on.”
I nodded and hurriedly ran.
“Don’t run!”
“Sorry, ma’am.”
It seems my lie worked.
I quickly ran back to class as fast as possible, just before maths ended. As I burst into class, I noticed Jackson’s cold eyes in contrast with her niece’s, whose eyes lit up.

Seems she's becoming more favourable towards me. Good.
"And where were you?" Jackson-sensei asked, her voice as robotic as always—well, maybe not as always since I had seen that voice quiver twice.
"I, uh, hurt my nose."
She looked disappointed but didn't pry any further.
So she's less antagonistic towards me, huh. Well, then again, maybe not, since she questioned when she didn't really need to.
After all, attendance wasn't important in this school.
Anyway, I went to my seat, and before I knew it, it was time for lunch break.
To which Suzuki frantically looked in her bag for something before noticing a strange piece of paper under her desk and turning her attention to me, so I stood up and left the class.
I headed to the school rooftop with Suzuki's phone in my pocket.
The note I left under her desk read:
"Look right. Now. I'm with your phone. Come to the school rooftop alone, and lock the door behind you as you come, or else I'll throw your phone from the roof after I finish drowning it in water.
Come quickly, or else."
The handwriting wasn't unique and was my usual handwriting, though the message had no recipient.
However, I left the class immediately after she saw the paper and looked over at me.

You might ask why she would come for such a threat. After all, it's just a phone.
You would have been right in most cases; however, in this school, you are dead wrong.
In this school, your phone is your lifeline—it handles transactions and your student ID.
Without your phone, you'd effectively lose everything and starve to death.
You might say that you could tough it out with someone, and while yes, you could, you would have to be totally dependent on them, and you'd only hinder them; otherwise, you'd lose all the luxuries you once had.
And eventually that person would be forced to abandon you.
You could say that you could just get a new phone, but unfortunately, phones aren't sold on campus.
(Before anyone thinks that's BS, read chapter 0.1.)
So she was screwed.
Anyway, before I knew it, she was there.
"Heyo!" I waved.
She walked closer.
She didn't lock the door?
She dashed at me at very high speed; she was even faster than Takemine.
She was so fast that I had to seriously dodge her.
As she rushed forward, I swayed to the right, but she dashed there too, so I had to move back, my back resting on the railing.

“Hey,” I said, bringing out her phone—my back still touching the railing of the rooftop. “Do that again, and I’ll throw it down from here.”
I emphasised my point by using his left hand to hold the phone and using my right index finger to point at it; my expression probably looked a little angry.
She nodded and silently went to lock the door.
“...What do you want, Nakamura?”
“I want a deal.”
“A deal?”
Though now that I think about it, I may be making too many deals. Let’s switch it up.
“Scratch that. I want you to do two things for me.”
“Is that so?” She slowly walked closer to me. “What do you want done?”
“First, I want to know about the assets.”
Her steps suddenly halted before she gave a grin.
“So you know about us?”
She revealed that she’s an asset? Isn’t that a bad move?
“Yes,” I replied.
“What do you want to know?”
“Why are you guys trying to expel me?”
“It’s a little complicated,” she said, very close to me now. She was trying to come close enough to snatch the phone—she learned that she wasn’t faster than me, so she planned on using reflexes.
She’s learning fairly quickly. Wait a minute.

“Fine, then let me make it simple,” I brought the hand with her phone to the edge of the railing. If I let go, it would fall. “Why did *you* expel me? Simple, right?”
“You’re really terrible, you know that, right?”
“Resorting to insults?”
“...”
Despite my stopping three of her plans, she didn’t show a sign of frustration. Like what I was doing barely even mattered.
Wait, wait, wait. It can’t be, can it? Don’t tell me.
“So then just answer this. Are you from ***there***?” I asked, my voice a bit unsteady—I was scared, really scared. This wasn’t an act or anything; I was dead serious right now.
“No, we never met each other before now. Think about it. Wouldn’t *you* remember me? So if I were a survivor, you’d notice me from a mile away.”
Yes, she’s right. What am I doing, losing my nerve? However, she—
“So, but the way you said that… how do you know me?” I asked; my expression was serious—if she even said a word wrong, her phone would be gone.
I wouldn’t let it fall—I would break it with my bare hand because I wouldn’t want to take a risk if she were really what I expected.
“To put it simply, we—the assets—were made to be like you.”
“Hmm…?”
“Ever heard of the NE Project?”

Shit, of course it's that.
The NE Project—it stood for the Nakamura Eiya Project; it meant that they were trained to be a replica of me.
So the government even resorted to this? Damn.
However, this meant that they could be on my side since we were both subjected to similar conditions.
"Then why are you against me? We should work together to—"
"Escape? *You* don't even believe that. I mean, you're still holding my phone," she scoffed.
In truth, I couldn't trust her because, indeed, if I did, she would betray me instantly.
"Because I know what you'll do."
"You'd do the same. How can I work with you when I can't even trust you?"
"Why can't you trust me?"
"Trust you? You expect me to trust someone as evil as you? Nakamura Eiya, I know everything about you. I know what you did in the Friendless Game."
So she knows that, too.
This seemed bad, right? You're probably thinking this: Can't you lead this in a way that would favour me, perhaps by appealing to Suzuki's emotions like this:
"I didn't have a choice!" I screamed, my voice cracking a bit. "If I didn't do that, then who would have done it? None of us had the guts to kill, and if we stayed like that, then we would have died of hunger and thirst."
I hated that she was bringing this memory back to my remembrance.

“Then why did you shoot your own brother?”
“...It wasn’t fatal; moreover, if I hadn’t, we wouldn’t have survived, but why blame me? Haven’t you done questionable things before? Think about the people you’ve lost. You were trained to be like me; this is what it means to be like me. I-I-I don’t even want to be like me—” or something like that.
Yeah, it might have played out like that, but I personally doubted that such would happen—appealing to her emotions would be counterproductive; it would put her on high alert, and I definitely didn’t need that. After all, I needed her for my plan.
Heugh. Why couldn’t she just be a normal girl?
“Suzuki,” I said slowly. “If that’s the case, isn’t it more reason to keep me around? You’re probably wondering about me, aren’t you?”
“Wondering? I *know* you.”
“Yet you needed reconnaissance to expel me.”
When this conversation started, I also began reanalysing Suzuki’s plan, and I realised why it took her a while to expel me.
Her plan was solely based on reconnaissance—perhaps she had a contingency or two; I couldn’t be sure, but I knew it was a reconnaissance-heavy plan.
“...” She kept quiet, staring blankly at me.
Don’t stare at me like that. Weirdo.
Suzuki continued staring at me without saying a word; perhaps she was actively coming up with a plan—it meant I had to work faster.

No backlog…? Maybe she's trying to throw me off. Let's just go with my plan.
"...Aren't you the least bit curious about me?" I asked.
"Like I said, I—"
"Be real. You don't know anything about me," I cut her off. "All you know is all your instructors taught you about me, which I'm sure is barely enough. To be frank, they were barely scratching the surface because if you truly knew about me, your reconnaissance would have been useless."
"I just needed to be sure."
There's no pause, but I know you're lying.
"What if I expelled you before then or something? What would you have done then? The reason why you didn't expel me before Monday was that you simply didn't know what I was capable of and what my weaknesses were."
She, of course, still didn't know. That was why she told me about the assets in an attempt to unnerve me.
That being said, this was not enough to move her.
"...So?" Suzuki appeared uninterested.
For a fact, Suzuki could simply expel me again and again with the same strategy (or something different) or perhaps even come up with something that could let the entire student body know, making my expulsion permanent.
That being said, she wouldn't do that… Yet.
"Basically, what I'm trying to say is, why don't you try to learn about me?"

“I don’t want to learn about a devil.”
“A devil?”
“Yes, a devil. I mean, who else attempts to kill their own biological brother?”
“...”
“I don’t want to interact with such a person, so if you’re going to blackmail, just get on with it.”
I came here trying to get an ally, but now I’m working overtime—sucks to be me.
“You know, I didn’t really want to do it.”
“Tha—”
“Of course, I doubt you’ll believe me; after all, even you won’t believe me, but I can assure you it’s very true, even if my words carry no weight,” I rest my back on the railing, looking at the sky—perhaps this was the only way to convince her. “You know, Suzuki… Sometimes I don’t want to be me.”
“Is that supposed to be your excuse?”
“...Yes.”
“Hmm… I thought Nakamura Eiya wouldn’t make excuses.”
“Everyone does. It’s part of being human.”
“Is that so?” Suzuki asked rhetorically before falling into deep silence.
She walked over to the railing and put her hand on it, letting the wind move her hair, partially covering her face.
She looks very beautiful.
“What was your past like?” I asked.

“I’m sure you can guess.”
“Yeah, but let’s say I couldn’t.”
“Alright then. It was quite similar to yours. However, we started late; unlike you, we started at 9.”
I wanted to hear the specifics about how they crammed all I learnt into a measly 7 years, but I knew it would ruin this moment.
“...”
“So did you really care about them?” She turned and looked at me.
I knew who she was referring to by ‘them’; she meant the other students.
“...Perhaps, I’d say probably not, but who knows?”
“...”
“Disappointed that I don’t have an answer.”
“No, this will suffice for now,” she said. “Nakamura.”
“What?”
“I’m ready to hear your proposition.”
Perfect.
“Alright,” I nodded. “I want you to help me with something. After that’s done, feel free to expel me whenever.”
“Hmm?” Suzuki paused to think, or so it seemed, but she actually wasn’t actively thinking.
The clear weakness of those from ***there*** was that we had boundless curiosity—we had to, or else we wouldn’t survive.
I have already completely understood her psyche because it’s similar to mine.

Since she had a similar upbringing, my plan had a certain surety of working—it was a plan where I capitalised on the collective weakness.
“I’m willing to cooperate. I mean, after all, you might have a hidden recording or something similar.”
Perhaps a part of her believed that, but she was definitely being moved by curiosity. Of course, she also knew this because she referred to it on our aquarium date—mentioning that it was in me instead, though.
She’s really self-aware for noticing that.
“Mhm,” I grinned at the thought. “Hey, so is Hayashi Nanase an asset?” I asked.
“No, she’s not.”
Yeah, from her self-image and her lack of knowledge on ***there***, it was pretty obvious that she was probably just a normal person.
Probably.
“Anyway, I’ll be on my way.”
“Hey, wait.”
“I haven’t told you what exactly I want you to do.”
“Just send it to me on Koda,” she said as she left, her face still indifferent.
“Heugh,” I let out a sigh of relief.
It didn’t go on without a hitch, but Step 2 of my plan had ended.
So this is the true Suzuki. It seems I’ve made a new ally and learnt a lot.

I gained a lot of information about Suzuki, while she didn’t know much about me, and luckily, the information was sparse.
That being said, she made me remember the Friendless Game again. Not that I hated the experience, but it wasn’t exactly the best experience.
I still remember it as clear as day.
After all, I was the first to shoot in the Friendless Game.
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Author’s Note:
Anyway, remember to comment, share, and leave a review. Thanks for reading the chapter, and see you in the next one.