The city skyline glittered above, a distant constellation of ambition and wealth. But down on the streets, a different story unfolded. Here, in the gridlocked canyons of glass and steel, a river of faces flowed past, each one a testament to a different struggle. The sleek, black car was an island of silence in the river of noise, its window rolled down to let in the thick, city air.

I peered out, my gaze analytical, dissecting the world outside. I watched the stream of pedestrians, noting the scarcity of crisp suits and purposeful strides.

*The number of people who move through the streets with suits and purpose has been dwindling for a while now.*

My attention shifted to a construction site as the car crept forward. Muscled men, their skin tanned and clothes dusted with concrete, swarmed the steel skeleton of a new tower.

*And the number of those engaged in hard labour has increased just as drastically*.

I rested my jaw on my knuckles, a habit of deep thought.

*Education is the most prized possession in the world today. It's the key that unlocks the gilded doors. And yet, so few manage to turn the lock. It's strange, isn't it? Everyone is given a chance at it, but most fail. A relative of mine, a boy who was practically canonized as a genius by our family, failed so spectacularly it was almost a work of art.*

A flicker of something, not quite amusement, but a detached curiosity, passed through me.

*It intrigued me. To what end?*

The car fell silent again, the only sound the distant blare of a horn. I closed my eyes, and the memory surfaced, as crisp and clear as the day it happened.

---

The vast, dark-wood dining table was a sea of silence. At its head, blurred figures loomed, the architects of the Klein name, their gazes sharp and critical, fixed on the teenager who sat with his head bowed.

Shame radiated from my cousin in palpable waves, thick enough to choke the room.

At the far end of the table, I watched. I didn't feel the shame; I only recorded it. To me, my cousin wasn't a brother or a failure. He was a fascinating, collapsing structure.

Suddenly, a figure detached from the shadows. My mother. She moved with a silent, predatory grace, her perfume arriving seconds before she did, a cloying, floral cloud that felt like a physical weight.

She scooped me up, her touch soft but her grip unyielding, and carried me out into the cool air of the courtyard.

She whispered into my ear. At the time, the words were just sounds, melodic, sorrowful noises meant to soothe. I hadn't understood the vocabulary then, but I had understood the frequency.

*Looking back*, I thought as the car bumped over a pothole in the present, *I realize what she was doing. She wasn't comforting a child; she was rehearsing. She used guilt the way a painter uses color, layering the blues and greys of disappointment until the canvas of my mind was exactly the shade she wanted*.

In the memory, I had looked at the gathering storm clouds instead of her face. I had offered her a look of confusion, a mask I had learned to wear before I could even tie my own shoes. It was my first successful experiment.

A moment later, the teenager from the dining room, my cousin, walked past me. His face was a thundercloud of dark emotion, his eyes fixed on some distant point. He didn't see me. He walked with a heavy, defeated gait toward his art space on the other side of the manor, his world shattered.

---

I opened my eyes, the memory dissolving like morning mist. I shifted in my seat, crossing my arms.

*Ever since then, I've been curious. If my cousin, with all his supposed genius, could fail so utterly, how would I fare against such a system? Was his good nature his downfall? Perhaps. It'll be a valuable experiment. A good experience for me in this new school.*

I stared out the window, the buildings giving way to more manicured lawns and imposing gates.

*Failing your era of education is a death sentence in today's society. It's a slow, social death.*

"We're here, Mr. Merlio."

The voice pulled me from my thoughts. What had felt like an eternity in the traffic jam had finally ended. I found myself in a vast parking lot, dotted with other sleek, expensive vehicles. I stepped out, briefcase in hand. A subtle, yet insistent, sun blazed down, and I raised a hand to shield my eyes.

"Mr. Merlio…?"

I turned to the elderly driver. "Yes?"

"Your luggage will be brought up shortly. That is, if the interview goes well." The old man, Wells, gave a small, knowing smile.

I nodded, my expression blank. "It'll be fine." I paused, a rare moment of hesitation. "Say, you can take a break now."

Wells raised a questioning eyebrow.

I clarified, my voice softer than usual. "Your retirement, Sir Wells. I can look after myself now."

The old man's eyes widened, first in shock, then in a wave of warm surprise. A genuine, crinkling smile spread across his face. "Not yet. You're still a young lad." He chuckled. "But thank you for the thought."

I didn't object. I held my stoic pose, but a small, almost imperceptible smile touched my lips. "Thank you."

---

The reception hall of the Children of Gambit's Academy was a cathedral of ambition. Sunlight streamed through towering windows, illuminating polished marble floors and the anxious faces of new students. I walked through, a solitary figure in the crowd.

Near a towering pillar, I noticed a boy about my age standing rigidly beside a stern-faced man, his father, by the looks of it. The father was straightening the boy's tie with sharp, irritated movements.

"You have to look sharp," the father hissed, his voice a low, venomous whisper that carried in the vast space. "You don't want anyone thinking you're the son of a farmer."

I paused, observing from the periphery.

"Remember what you're here for," the father continued, tucking the tie with a final, decisive yank. "No unnecessary relationships. No distractions. Focus on the prize."

The boy hardened his face, his expression becoming a perfect mask of determination.

"Yes, sir."

As they turned, the father caught my gaze. His eyes narrowed, a clear dismissal. The son followed his father's lead, his glare just as cold. Caught in the act of observation, I quickly dropped my eyes to my own polished shoes. They walked past, a unit of shared ambition.

*A son forged in his father's image. Will he break when the pressure becomes too great? Or will he become something new*?

"Number 206!" a woman's voice called from the reception counter.

I stepped forward, placing my numbered slip on the cool surface.

"Administrative Block 5, Room 15."

I nodded and turned to leave but stopped short before a large, ornate mirror on the wall. I stood before it, my reflection staring back. I reached up and gave my already-perfect tie a slight, final adjustment. I examined myself, the crisp lines of my suit, the controlled composure on my face. I nodded in satisfaction.

Then my eyes flickered to the other students milling about. Their outfits were more relaxed, comfortable. A sweater here, a pair of casual trousers there.

*Did I overdress*?

The thought flickered, unwelcome. I pushed it away with a slight shrug. It was a calculated choice. I would be remembered. I turned and walked toward my next destination.

---

The room was sterile. Cold. The only sound was the metronomic tick-tock of a clock on the wall, each second a small hammer blow against the silence. I sat perfectly still in a chair facing a wide desk. Behind it, a man sat ramrod straight, his chest puffed out, his expression as blank and unyielding as the white walls. On his desk, a small plaque declared him the "Screening Officer."

The seconds stretched into minutes. The man simply stared, as if dissecting me with his eyes. Finally, he spoke, his voice flat. "Merlio Klein, yes?"

"Yes."

He wrote something on his notepad, then slowly scanned the files before him. He looked up at me, then back at the files. "A thorough arrangement of your documents."

"Thank yo—"

"But that's not what I'm here for." He cut me off, his voice devoid of warmth. "You will answer one question."

I gave a slow, deliberate nod. He loosened his tie, a small crack in his rigid facade. He leaned forward slightly. "Is everyone equal?"

The question hung in the sterile air, heavy and profound. I didn't flinch. I sat in silence for several long seconds, letting it settle.

He pressed. "Is everyone equ—"

"Yes."

My voice cut through his, clear and unwavering. My face remained a mask, devoid of any emotion, any hint of doubt.

The screening officer stared, his eyes narrowing as if trying to peer behind my calm facade. After an age, he leaned back, picked up his stamp, and began methodically pounding it onto the documents, the birth certificate, the middle school results, the application form. Each *thump* was a final, irrevocable judgment.

When he was done, he slid the stack of papers back across the desk.

"Welcome to the Children of Gambit's Academy."

I gathered the documents, stood, and walked toward the door.

*Is everyone equal?* The question echoed in my mind as my hand touched the cold metal of the handle.

I knew the answer I had given. I knew the answer the school expected. But the truth?

The truth was far more complicated.

And I intended to discover exactly how complicated it could be.

—

The fresh morning dew lent the air a clean, crisp scent, a brief illusion of purity before the day's chaos began. Golden rays of sunlight slanted through the window, painting warm stripes across the otherwise sterile room.

I moved with quiet efficiency as I dressed. My deep blue blazer hung over one shoulder, the grey inner shirt already tucked in perfectly. I glanced at my watch: 6:40 AM. My eyes swept the small space, barely furnished, with only a simple table and a single chair. The kitchen section was minimalist to the point of austerity: just the necessary utensils, a few pots, basic cookware. The living area held a portable student bed, and the air conditioner hummed its constant, monotonous drone.

Quite a blank space, I thought, adjusting my collar. I'll have to add a few items to make it feel like home.

I slung my handbag across my shoulder and stepped out.

---

The corridor stretched long and impersonal, lined with identical doors. I punched my password into the keypad beside my door, waited for the confirming beep, and made my way toward the elevator. The student housing complex consisted of three towering seven-story buildings, each housing different facilities. Some wings were tailored to specific positions within the school's rigid hierarchy, a constant reminder that even rest was stratified.

I pressed the button for the ground floor and waited. As the elevator doors began their slow slide closed, a hand shot through the gap. The sensors triggered, and the doors jerked back open with a soft chime.

My eyebrows rose slightly as a girl stepped into view.

She was striking in an austere way. Shoulder-length jet-black hair, ironed straight with military precision. Her blazer was immaculate, the brilliant white of her inner shirt almost glowing against her very pale skin. She carried a cold gaze that swept over me briefly, a sharp contrast to my own warmer light brown complexion.

"Good morning," she offered, her voice neutral.

"Morning."

The elevator descended in comfortable silence, the floors ticking by steadily. Just as we approached the ground level, she spoke without looking at me.

"Aren't you going to ask?"

I remained silent as we stepped out together, walking beside each other toward the reception counter. I could feel her gaze furrowing into the side of my face, but I kept my expression stoic.

Finally, I replied, "Ask?"

Her lips twitched. "...?"

"Now you're the one keeping me silent."

She turned her attention to the receptionist at the counter. My eyes drifted to the bag she carried, the class label matched my own. I also noticed a food flask and several thick books from niche academic authors, their spines unfamiliar.

We reached the counter and placed our student IDs down. My voice carried a note of bored curiosity. "Why are you in the boys' hostel?"

"It's none of your business," she replied coldly.

What...?

I stiffened slightly as the receptionist took my ID and scribbled in her notepad. I kept my tone even. "None of my business, yeah? Then why ask me why I didn't ask?"

A soft chuckle escaped her. "Hehehe."

Quite an eccentric character, I noted.

The receptionist finished, and we headed outside. The sun hit us from a new angle, warming the cool morning air. I tucked my hands in my pockets and stood at the edge of the sidewalk, waiting for the campus bus. The girl followed suit, humming a melodious tune under her breath.

I didn't mind. In fact, I found myself subtly bobbing my head to the rhythm. After a moment, I said, "You came to give your brother food, didn't you?"

She stiffened, turning to look at me slowly. "And what told you that?"

"So I'm right, then." I loosened my tie in a fluid motion, a habit when I was thinking aloud. "It can't be a boyfriend. The school's placement of classes is rigorous, plus, information about hostels and class assignments isn't given out until the first day. Also..." I glanced at her. "It's very early."

She raised her eyebrows in mock admiration. "A bit close. I'm here early because he doesn't want others getting the wrong idea about a girl visiting him. And if it's me..." She shrugged. "They won't stop teasing him."

I shrugged nonchalantly. "Eh, that makes sense."

The bus pulled up with a hydraulic sigh, and we both stepped on.

---

The ride was quiet but far from silent. I observed, as I always did. Students sat in clusters or alone, each revealing visible tells. Some slumped with tired expressions, already defeated by a day that hadn't truly begun. Others sat with proud postures, chests puffed out, chins raised, first-years staking their claim.

It was a normal visual spectrum in any place with people of different backgrounds, but here, the contrasts were sharp enough to cut.

Near the front, a student with exaggeratedly long hair and sharp, angular features sat utterly still. His face was devoid of any emotion, but he radiated a dominant air of confidence and calm, as if the bus and everyone on it existed merely as his audience.

He's definitely the 'your highness' type, I classified silently.

I looked to the other side. A girl with chestnut brown hair and a lean figure animatedly communicated with those around her. Her section of the bus was the only one booming with laughter and giggles, a pocket of warmth in the otherwise chilly morning.

I rested my chin on my palm thoughtfully. Beside me, Gertrude, I'd decided to think of her that way for now, muttered, "What a try-hard."

I glanced at her with a questioning gaze, but before I could respond, the bus arrived at its destination: the lecture sector.

We descended last, having sat at the back. I stood still for a moment as my feet touched the ground, gathering myself.

"You know..." I still didn't look at her. "What's your name, anyway?"

A pause. "... Gertrude Hildegard."

"So, Hildegard?"

"I'd prefer you refer to me as Gertrude."

"I see..."

Gertrude and I made our way toward our respective classes, our paths diverging only slightly.

---

I stopped before a door marked Class B. I pulled it open and stepped inside. Gertrude followed, walking past me without acknowledgment and taking a seat in the third row, where her name was plastered on the back of the chair.

Following suit, I checked each empty desk until I found my own. Also in the third row, but positioned against the wall, where a glass window offered a view of the corridor beyond. I sat, still and observant, my eyes sweeping the room.

Okay. There's 'your highness.' The long-haired boy sat near the window, already projecting that same imperious calm. The social butterfly girl... The chestnut-haired girl from the bus was there, still radiating energy.

I looked behind me. A girl dressed in prep fashion sat with a sweater layered over her long sleeves, chatting with a small clique of friends who seemed to orbit her like planets around a sun.

So there are two social architects? I muttered quietly to myself.

As if on cue, one of the orbiting girls said something that made the leader shoot her a sharp, warning look. The girl immediately fell silent.

I quickly reevaluated. Not just any social butterfly. A mean one.

I turned back to the front just as the lean, friendly girl from the bus, Mia, apparently, was pushing her friend toward the mean girls' clique. Her friend looked hesitant, almost terrified.

"Just go talk to them," Mia urged, nudging her friend forward. "They won't bite."

"I don't know!" her friend whispered desperately. "What should I say? Whatever I say, I'll look uncool!"

Suddenly, Mia's eyes beamed with brilliance. She had an idea.

"Oh, I know!" She stood up and called for the class's attention, her voice bright and carrying. "Good morning, everyone! Since we're still waiting for homeroom to start, why don't we introduce ourselves?"

Her friend hid her face in embarrassment.

I observed with interest. So she's creating an opportunity for everyone to converse and get to know each other. This gives her friend an excuse to talk to the mean girls without it being obvious.

"I'll go first," Mia continued, undeterred. "My name is David Mia. You can call me Mia or Mimi." She beamed.

We will not be calling you that, I thought dryly.

As soon as she finished, the class erupted into motion. Students eagerly took the opportunity to expand their social circles, voices overlapping in a symphony of nervous introductions and forced laughter.

I sighed inwardly. Should I be socializing? It's necessary, I know. But just from the brief interaction I've had today with Gertrude, I'm already a bit exhausted.

I watched as Mia's friend, Pamela, I'd learn, mustered her courage and walked toward the mean girls' clique. She stopped at their desk, her posture awkward.

"Um, yo, what's up!" Pamela raised her hand for what looked like a high-five. "I'm Pamela Williams."

The mean girls stared at her. One of them smirked, a slow, cruel curl of the lips. They exchanged a glance, then turned back to their conversation, completely ignoring Pamela as if she'd never spoken.

"Sheesh," someone muttered from across the room.

A few giggles erupted. Pamela's face crumpled. She bowed her head and retreated as Mia rushed to console her.

I watched the exchange and shook my head slightly. Turns out she did, indeed, bite.

An amused look crept onto my face, not cruel, simply observational. Fascinating. The social order establishes itself before the first lesson even begins.

The door swung open with a sharp click.

A man walked in, dressed in a formal coat, his gaze sharp as a blade as it swept across the room. The chatter died instantly.

"Good morning, everyone. Settle down."

His presence commanded immediate attention. He walked to the front of the class, placed a leather folder on the teacher's desk, and turned to face us.

"My name is Mr. Ashworth. I'll be your homeroom teacher for this year." His eyes scanned the room, lingering for a fraction of a second on certain students, I noticed it lingered on 'your highness,' on the mean girls' leader, and briefly, on me. "Before we begin, I have two announcements."

The room was utterly silent.

"First, welcome to Children of Gambit's Academy. You've survived the entrance screenings. That means nothing. What matters is what you do now." He paused, letting the weight of his words settle. "Second, there will be a placement assessment in three weeks. Your performance will determine your class stratification for the remainder of the semester. Study accordingly."

A ripple of unease passed through the room. I kept my expression neutral, but internally, I was already calculating.

'Three weeks. A placement assessment?' I thought to myself.

I glanced toward Gertrude, who sat perfectly still, her pale face revealing nothing. Then toward 'your highness,' who seemed almost bored by the announcement. Then toward the mean girls, who exchanged confident smirks.

I turned my gaze to the window, watching students hurry past in the corridor beyond. As I fell into a deeper level of thought

The classroom had fallen so quiet that one could hear the soft whisper of their own breathing. I glanced around and noted the skeptical expressions on my classmates' faces, a mixture of suspicion, curiosity, and guarded interest. Mr. Ashworth stood at the front, marker in hand, commanding attention without effort.

"First, I shall explain to you what this is." He wrote on the clean whiteboard in bold, decisive strokes: **CREDITS**.

My eyebrow rose slightly. Beside me, a boy leaned forward in his chair, curiosity evident in his posture.

"The credit system is very simple. Put simply, it is the school's own form of currency. One credit point equals one euro." Mr. Ashworth paused, letting that sink in. "With your student card, you can purchase items. If it has a price, it can be bought."

The effect was immediate. Students who had been slumped in their chairs straightened. Eyes that had been glazed over sharpened with interest. I spun my pen slowly between my fingers, an idle motion that helped me think.

"Right now, you each currently have 10,000 credits in your accounts. Furthermore, credits will be deposited into your student accounts at the end of every month."

My pen stopped mid-spin. From my peripheral vision, I noticed the boy beside me jotting down figures in a small notebook. I filed that observation away and returned my attention to the front.

Mr. Ashworth gestured to a stack of manuals on the desk. "Pass these to the back." Mia, at the front, took one and passed the stack along. As the manuals reached my row, Mr. Ashworth added, his tone shifting slightly.

"By graduation, your accumulated credits can be carried forward to your next college. The credit system is recognized and used worldwide." He paused, and his expression darkened almost imperceptibly. "However, you cannot transfer credits to a personal bank account. They operate only within the confines of the education system."

His eyes swept the room, sharp as flint. "In other words, credits cannot be used outside of schooling. Some universities even outright refuse to accept credits from other institutions. So be careful."

I squinted slightly, my mind turning over the words. His phrasing is carefully chosen. A bit vague upon closer inspection. There's something he's not saying directly.

"Any questions?" Mr. Ashworth asked.

Silence stretched for several seconds. Then the boy beside me raised his hand.

I took the opportunity to study him properly. I haven't actually taken a good look at this guy yet. But upon closer inspection... He had dark brown hair, neatly combed and well-kept. His eyes were sharp, intelligent. He carried himself with the quiet confidence of someone accustomed to academic success. A model student, by the looks of it.

"Go on... Flint Woods?" Mr. Ashworth consulted his roster.

"Yes, sir." Flint stood as he spoke, a gesture of respect that felt almost formal. "I'm bothered by the whole idea of this system."

"Why is that?"

Flint straightened further. "It seems as if we're being paid to perform better as students. That's a harmful type of motivation—extrinsic. It undermines genuine curiosity and the love of learning for its own sake."

Mr. Ashworth chuckled slowly, a dry, knowing sound. "A rather basic question. However, that's not the case. If you look clearly at things, you'll find the answer to your question."

I furrowed my brows at the teacher's response. He didn't really answer. He deflected.

"Okay, then. Class dismissed." Mr. Ashworth walked toward the door, then paused with his hand on the handle. "And have a wonderful day." His expression was utterly robotic as he said it, a performative pleasantry with no warmth behind it. The door clicked shut behind him.

Silence reigned for a moment longer. Then, almost imperceptibly, murmurs began to ripple through the room.

Some groups were already leaving. The mean girls' clique departed first, their leader casting a dismissive glance back at the room. A few other students followed. Those who remained were scattered, isolated, or deep in conversation with the one or two people they'd already latched onto.

I shook my head with a soft sigh. Somehow, we're already at a disadvantage as a class. Not a single formal introduction from one to another. No class representative. No cohesion. Islands forming before we've even mapped the archipelago.

I stood, tucking my sketchpad away, and walked toward the door. As my hand closed around the handle, I felt a light touch on my shoulder.

I turned. Gertrude stood there, her pale face expressionless but her eyes holding a question.

"Mind if I come with?" she asked.

Examining her for some seconds before I shrugged nonchalantly. "Sure. Why not?"

---

We emerged from the lecture building into the mid-morning light. The sun had climbed higher, warming the concrete pathways and glinting off the windows of distant buildings. We stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, waiting for the next campus bus.

Gertrude glanced at me sidelong. "You seem disappointed."

"Not particularly..."

She stared at me, waiting. I kept my gaze fixed forward, watching students stream past.

After a long moment, I muttered, "...Not yet."

A faint smirk touched Gertrude's lips. "First class session, and every student is already in groups. Cliques. Friend circles."

I nodded slowly. "Which is bad, because islands can't form a large mass of land. Even when you pull them together, it's still just a cluster of separate islands."

Gertrude shifted her weight, considering my words. "Yes. So you understand that with the environment of this school, which is extremely competitive, we're at a disadvantage."

I squinted against the sun but said nothing.

Gertrude's eyes dropped to my hand. "Are you going shopping?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well..." She pointed. "You're holding your credit card rather firmly."

I looked down. I'd been gripping it unconsciously, the plastic warm from my palm.

"Or maybe I just don't want to lose it," I offered. "I'm a bit careless."

"Wouldn't it be better to place it in your pocket? Your bag, even?"

I tilted my head, a rare flicker of dry humor in my voice. "Okay. You got me."

Gertrude's teasing smile widened. "Don't feel bad. I also want to buy a few necessities."

"You mean you want to see how feasible the credit system is?"

"Touché."

The bus arrived with a gentle hiss of brakes, and we stepped aboard together.

---

The Commerce Hub sector was a world unto itself. As the bus rolled to a stop, Gertrude and I stepped off onto a plaza that could have been transplanted from a small city. Towering buildings rose on all sides, their ground floors lined with shops, cafes, and services. Students flowed through the space in a constant current.

"The school is absurdly large," I murmured. "Good thing it has a transportation system."

The campus, I'd learned from the orientation materials, spanned 800,000 square meters. Four sectors: Education, Commerce Hub, Events, and Residential. Each had its own purpose, its own ecosystem. And at the heart of the Commerce Hub stood the largest structure I had yet seen.

**The Oval Plaza Mall**.

I read the name silently, committing it to memory. Gertrude walked past me without waiting, and after a moment, I tucked my hands in my pockets and followed.

---

Inside, the mall was overwhelming. Light streamed through a massive glass ceiling, illuminating multiple levels of stores, restaurants, and walkways. Escalators crisscrossed the open atrium. The hum of conversation, the beep of register scanners, the distant murmur of music from a store, it all blended into an urban symphony.

I let my gaze wander, momentarily dropping my guard. It feels like a city in here. How many stores are there, anyway? I caught myself staring and quickly reasserted my usual mechanical expression.

Beside me, Gertrude walked like a child in a dream world, her head swiveling, her eyes wide.

"You want to go eat first?" she offered.

I opened my mouth to reply, but Gertrude raised a hand abruptly.

"No! Essentials first!" She snapped her fingers and pivoted, marching in the opposite direction.

I rolled my eyes slowly and followed.

We found a shop that sold home amenities, everything from bedding to kitchenware to toiletries. Gertrude grabbed a basket and dove into the aisles with purpose. I watched her for a moment, noting how naturally she moved through the space, picking up items, examining them, placing some in her basket and others back on shelves.

I looked down at my own empty hands, then at the rows of products stretching before me.

"I'm not sure how to shop," I muttered.

After observing Gertrude a while longer, I grabbed a basket of my own and chose an aisle at random.

So this is shopping, huh?

At first, I simply reached for anything my hands could grasp, a pack of sponges, a bottle of shampoo, a set of utensils, a small lamp. But after a few items, I stopped and looked down at my basket.

That's not right. I should probably get only what I need. I began replacing items, methodically selecting toothpaste, a toothbrush, a small towel, a notebook. I was reaching for a pack of pens when I felt eyes on me.

"You cook?" Gertrude's voice came from directly behind me.

I turned. She stood there, basket in hand, expression blank.

I looked at the shelf, then back at her. "I could learn."

"So, no?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

I deflected. "Are you done with your shopping?"

"Not quite." She gestured at her basket with a frustrated wave. "Things are too expensive here."

I raised an eyebrow. I picked up the pack of spoons I'd been considering and checked the price tag. My eyes widened slightly. "Yeah... I wasn't even paying attention to the prices."

"Be more careful. Let's find another store."

We both began returning items to their proper places, weaving through the aisles. As I reached for a shelf to replace a box, I noticed another section I'd missed before. I walked over and examined the products.

Stacked neatly were home goods, each bearing a distinctive label: the school's logo, printed prominently on the packaging. And beneath the logo, in bold red text: **FREE**.

I picked up a duster. The box was pristine, sealed, with the school's crest embossed on the corner. What's this?

I scanned the shelf. Some items were marked free. Others were fifty percent off. Others still were discounted by varying percentages, but all bore the school's branding.

Gertrude appeared beside me. "What are you doing?"

"...Nothing. Just curious about the existence of these."

She took a product off the shelf and examined it. "Free?"

I nodded. "Not all, though. This one's fifty percent off. Some are just—"

"Free," she completed.

"Mhmm. And the school's logo is on each package."

Gertrude rubbed her chin thoughtfully, her brow furrowing. "Maybe the school partners with certain brands to offset inflated pricing?" She was thinking aloud now, working through it. "Shop owners could inflate prices and disrupt the school's economic balance. So as a countermeasure, the school buys products in bulk and sells them for half the price—or gives them away free for essentials."

I watched her reason it out, saying nothing. I found myself impressed by the speed of her deductions.

After a moment, I carefully placed the products back on the shelf and arranged them neatly, as if they'd never been touched.

"The day's running out," I said. "How about that meal now?"

Gertrude looked up from her thoughts, meeting my monotonous expression with one of her own. "Sure. Why not."

---

We found a small cafe on the second level, tucked between a bookstore and an electronics shop. The interior was warm, smelling of fresh bread and roasted coffee beans. We ordered simply, sandwiches and bottled water, and sat at a small table by the window.

For a while, we ate in comfortable silence, watching students pass by below.

Finally, Gertrude spoke. "You're not what I expected."

I looked up from my sandwich. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Someone more... eager? You seem like you're observing rather than participating."

I considered this. "Isn't that a form of participation?"

She tilted her head, acknowledging the point. "Maybe. But at some point, you have to stop watching and start acting."

I took a slow bite of my sandwich, chewing thoughtfully. When I swallowed, I said, "I'm aware."

Gertrude studied me for a long moment, then returned to her meal. The silence between us was different now, not awkward, but charged with unspoken understanding.

Outside the window, the sun continued its arc across the sky. Students came and went, laughing, arguing, studying, living. And somewhere in the depths of the mall, the credit system hummed along, tracking every purchase, every transaction, every choice.

I finished my sandwich and wiped my hands on a napkin. Islands, I thought. We're all islands. But maybe... maybe some islands can form archipelagos.

I glanced at Gertrude, who was staring out the window with an unreadable expression.

Maybe.

The day had turned gloomy, the sky a heavy canvas of grey that threatened to release its burden at any moment. I walked through the hallway with my usual calm expression, footsteps echoing softly against the linoleum. I paused at the window of my classroom, peered inside at the near-empty rows of desks, and simply turned away.

The first week was designated for orientation, time to familiarize ourselves with the campus, its systems, its rhythms. Lectures would begin officially in the second week. For now, students were left to their own devices, scattered across the sprawling grounds like seeds waiting to see where they might take root.

I made my way toward the education sector's library. It was the second largest on campus, I'd learned. The largest was reserved for ceremonies and dedicated to some founding figure whose name I'd already forgotten. This one would do.

---

The library was vast, a cathedral of knowledge with soaring ceilings and rows upon rows of shelves stretching into the distance. The atmosphere was clandestine yet pristine: hushed voices, the soft rustle of pages, the occasional creak of a chair. Students were scattered throughout: some seated at long tables, heads bent over textbooks; others consulting with librarians at information desks; a few wandering the aisles in search of particular titles.

I approached the circulation counter, presented my student ID, and completed the brief registration process. The librarian directed me toward the west wing, and I walked, letting my feet carry me through the maze of knowledge.

I found myself in the psychology section. My fingers trailed along spines until they stopped at one. I pulled the book free and read the title aloud in a whisper.

"Nadja, by André Breton."

I turned it over in my hands, examined the cover, then slid it back into place. My gaze drifted left, then right, along the endless shelves, then returned to the books before me.

"Are you confused?"

The feminine voice came from beside me. I turned to find a girl with glasses and her hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. Recognition flickered, I'd seen her before, though we hadn't spoken.

"...Not really," I replied. "It's just that most of these look a bit boring."

The girl giggled softly, a pleasant sound in the quiet library. "Well, you are standing in the psychology section."

I stared at her blankly as she continued to chuckle.

"Hey," she offered, her smile warm, "I could give you some recommendations!"

My first chance at socializing apart from Gertrude. I nodded. "Yeah."

She led me through the library with the confidence of someone who knew its secrets. We wandered through different sections, literature, philosophy, history, science, and with each stop, she pulled books and held them out for my inspection. I rejected most, finding the subjects too dense, the titles too imposing.

After nearly an hour, I found myself holding a stack of five books. I adjusted my grip with a soft grunt.

"This is a bit much, don't you think?"

"A bit much?" She raised an eyebrow. "It's only five books."

I looked down at the stack, then back at her. "I don't read that much."

"I could tell," she said, a teasing lilt in her voice. "From the way you rejected anything remotely deep. And how you claimed they were 'boring.'"

"..."

We reached the circulation counter, and as I shifted the stack to retrieve my ID, my foot caught on the edge of a chair. I stumbled, the books flying from my arms and scattering across the floor with a series of thuds that echoed embarrassingly through the quiet space.

The girl immediately knelt, helping me gather them. I paused, watching her for a moment as she stacked them neatly.

"What's your name, by the way?" I asked. "You look familiar."

She looked up, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Oh, me? I'm Flora Hans. First year, Class B."

Same class. I squinted slightly, filing the information away. I extended a hand as we both stood. "Merlio Klein. Also Class B."

Flora's face lit up. "We're in the same class! That's great."

I studied her for a moment longer, the genuine smile, the easy warmth. Then I spoke carefully. "I have trouble understanding some terms in books. I could use your... wider knowledge."

I left the words hanging, an invitation.

Flora tilted her head, then nodded. "Hmm... I could give you my number. I'll walk you through anything you need."

We exchanged contacts, me entering her information with methodical precision. As I bid her farewell and left with my stack of books, a single thought circled in my mind.

Making friends with one of the girls from the mean girls' clique wasn't something I expected.

---

The Commerce Hub sector buzzed with afternoon activity. I had stopped at a fast-food joint on the edge of the plaza, ordered a simple meal, and paid with my student card. I stepped back outside, hands in my pockets, ready to head home, when the scene before me made me stop.

A group of students in black blazers surrounded a single student in deep blue. The color contrast was stark: black for upperclassmen, blue for first-years. I quickly positioned myself near the building's entrance, half-hidden by a support pillar, and observed.

A first year? What's a first year done to warrant this?

I studied the trapped student. He wore the standard uniform but with deliberate carelessness, shirt unbuttoned at the collar, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, dirty blonde hair disheveled in a way that suggested rebellion rather than neglect.

A delinquent, I concluded.

"So what's it gonna be?" The lead senior, tall, broad-shouldered, with a sneer permanently etched on his face, stepped forward. "Apologize to my friend here for spilling his sauce."

The delinquent sighed, the sound heavy with exhaustion. "I didn't do anything, damn it. Are you sure your friend here isn't just an idiot?"

The seniors erupted in laughter, harsh and mocking.

"These first years, man!"

"So naive."

"Dumb first years."

Their leader twirled a finger in the air. "Look around."

As he said this, I pressed myself deeper into the shadows, avoiding exposure.

The delinquent glanced around, uncomprehending. "What about it?"

"Look closely." The senior's tone turned mocking, each word dripping with condescension. "There. Are. No. Cameras."

"So what?" The delinquent's ignorance was either genuine or a deliberate provocation.

The senior chuckled loudly and snapped his fingers. One of his companions pulled out a small camera, held it up, and stepped back, framing the shot.

"I'm having a tough day," the leader continued, his voice dropping to something darker. "My credits are shit right now. So I might as well take it out on an arrogant first year. The excuse? You spilled my friend's dish."

"You're damn right about that." The friend grinned, teeth bared.

I watched, mind racing through the implications. The absence of cameras gives them freedom. But isn't bullying the highest form of non-tolerable activity? Unless...

I narrowed my eyes. The school operates on a laissez-faire model. Minimal direct intervention. They only act on reports with evidence. No cameras here means no evidence, unless they bring their own.

My gaze shifted to the senior holding the camera. They're recording. That's a headlock. If the first year fights back, they control the footage. They can edit, manipulate, frame. Either way, he loses.

I watched the delinquent, curious how he'd respond.

After a long beat, the first year spoke, his voice dropping to something dark and dangerous. "I'm beating you all to pulp. You think I'm some weakling?"

I rubbed my chin. Either way, you're at a disadvantage. I began to turn away, this wasn't my fight, wasn't my problem. But the delinquent's next words stopped me cold.

"The rest of the first years might be cowards. Maybe a few from my class, too." He cracked his knuckles, a slow, deliberate sound. "I don't care about the 'Class B' label."

The seniors laughed hysterically.

"This dumbass thinks he can take all three of us!"

"Yeah, for real." One of them stepped forward, getting in the delinquent's face. "Come on. Hit me."

I turned back. My hand moved to my pocket, retrieving my phone. I raised it just as the delinquent's fist began to rise.

Click.

The sound was small, almost insignificant, but it cut through the tension like a blade.

Every head swiveled toward me.

I stood like a statue, phone held steady, face utterly blank.

The leader's sneer faltered. "What...?"

My voice was calm, measured. "My friend here is sorry for spilling your food."

The senior with the stained shirt glared. "Back off, freshman. We've only got business with this little punk."

I waved my hand dismissively, the gesture almost bored. "That would be stupid. Didn't you see? I just took a picture. Any attempt to fight him and spin the footage your way will be invalidated once another party presents the full context."

The seniors exchanged glances, uncertainty flickering in their eyes.

Finally, the leader spoke, his voice cautious. "What class are you?"

I was silent for a beat, then exchanged a glance with the delinquent. "Class A."

"Then how do you know this guy? Different classes."

I didn't miss a beat. "He threatened to beat me up last week. But we're all good now. Right... Dylan?"

The delinquent's eyebrow rose, but he caught on quickly. "Yeah. We're good."

Of course Dylan wasn't his actual name.

I turned back to the seniors. "See?"

The leader studied us both, jaw working. Finally, he pointed at the delinquent. "You're damn lucky, you little punk." Then his finger shifted to me. "And see you later, chump."

The seniors retreated, their bravado deflating as they disappeared around a corner.

I lowered my phone and turned to address the delinquent, but he was already walking away in the opposite direction, hands in his pockets, as if nothing had happened.

I watched him go, a faint sigh escaping my lips.

So not even a thank you, huh?

I tucked my phone away and continued on my path, the encounter already filed away for future reference. The delinquent from Class B. The seniors and their camera. The absence of surveillance and the power it granted.

This school, I thought, is a bit more fascinating than it appears.

The first raindrops began to fall as I walked, gentle at first, then steadily building. By the time I reached my hostel, the sky had opened fully, washing the campus in a cold, cleansing rain.

Inside my room, I placed the library books on my small table and sat in the single chair, staring at nothing.

"What a hassle."

I said to myself

Orientation week had ended, faster than I expected. Now, on Tuesday morning, the classroom air was thick with tension. Monday's test scores would be announced today, and every student sat with varying degrees of anxiety etched across their faces. Murmurs rippled through the room like wind through wheat.

I sighed and rubbed my sore neck, the memory of yesterday's unexpected assessment surfacing unbidden.

That test was almost too easy, I thought. Is the school really assessing our academic abilities with such mediocre questions? Definitely not. There has to be more to it.

the memory of yesterday's unexpected assessment surfacing unbidden

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**Flashback**

Mr. Ashworth had strode into the classroom on the first day of the week with a disciplined, almost military stride. Without greeting, without preamble, he turned to the board and wrote a single word in bold, decisive strokes: TEST.

He turned back to face us, his gaze cold and assessing. As expected, students swallowed hard. The test had come without warning, on the very first day of lectures.

"We'll be having a test today," Mr. Ashworth announced, his voice flat. "Please take out a sheet of paper and write the following questions."

He wrote on one side of the board: simultaneous equations, algebraic expressions, calculus basics. On the other side, he scrawled history questions, dates, names, significant events. Each question was labeled with a letter: A, B, C, and so on.

By the time he reached question C, several students had already folded their papers in defeat, their expressions a mixture of frustration and resignation.

"You may begin."

Most students hesitated, pens hovering uncertainly. I wrote steadily, methodically working through each question. I noticed others doing the same—'your highness' (Hanman Durant, I'd since learned), Gertrude, Mia, Flora, Flint Woods, and a handful of others.

Mr. Ashworth's voice cut through the tense silence. "Don't be so pressed. This is merely an assessment. Your scores will not reflect on your official academic record."

The announcement calmed some students, who exhaled with visible relief. Others remained tense but reluctantly attempted the questions, if only to avoid the shame of submitting a blank paper.

**End Flashback**

---

My fingers tapped rhythmically against my desk. Although most people didn't expect our scores to be announced out loud. That creates immediate segregation. Everyone will know who actually has brains. Relationships will shift. Dynamics will change.

The door swung open, cutting my thoughts short. Mr. Ashworth walked in, his expression grave, a stack of papers clutched in his hand.

"Good morning, class." He set the papers on his desk and adjusted his coat with deliberate slowness. "Shall we begin with your mock test scores?"

Without waiting for a response, he turned to the board and began writing.

1. Hanman Durant
2. Flint Woods
3. Gertrude Hildegard
4. Flora Hans
5. Emilia Honor

He continued down the list. I found myself at number eight, still in the top ten, but barely.

"There were twenty questions across two subjects: mathematics and history." Mr. Ashworth's voice was cold, clinical. "As you can see, fifteen students scored below ten points. Despite the questions being very simple."

Several students couldn't lift their heads from their desks. Others smacked their lips in frustration or grumbled under their breath.

A ratio of fifteen to ten, I calculated silently. That's actually baffling, considering how relatively easy the questions were.

Mr. Ashworth's silence drew everyone's attention. When he spoke again, his tone had risen, sharp as a blade.

"I wonder how any of you will survive this landscape if you can't answer questions as easy as these!" He swept his gaze across the room, disappointment radiating from every word. "Do you realize that if this were a real test, those scoring below five would be expelled?"

I processed this. He's referring to the lower boundary threshold. Some schools have strict policies, once crossed, students are eliminated from the program. Forced to return to middle school under the guise of "reinforcing basic knowledge." In practice, it's just expulsion with extra humiliation.

The classroom was silent. Mr. Ashworth's disappointment was so palpable that even students who'd passed felt its weight. Those who'd failed sat in shame, imagining what would have happened had this been an actual examination.

I felt a gaze on me. I glanced left. Gertrude was staring, her expression unreadable. She mouthed several words slowly.

She wants to see me after school?

---

The cafeteria during break was chaos organized, students weaving between tables, trays balanced precariously, conversations colliding into a wall of sound. I had claimed a small table near the window and sat observing the flow of bodies.

My attention was drawn to the serving counters. Two distinct sections. The left served basic food at cheap prices, from overheard conversations, the taste was bland, the portions modest. The right, however, offered premium dishes: shrimp glistening with butter, lobster claws cracking under pressure, spaghetti twirled expertly, steaks sizzling on plates.

Economic stratification, literally served on trays.

Gertrude appeared, sliding into the seat across from me. She placed her plate on the table, mashed potatoes and sausages, unappealing in its simplicity, and fixed me with an unreadable gaze.

"I could have some dishes served to you, you know," she said, her eyes still scanning the passing crowd.

"Is that so?" I glanced at her plate, then back at the premium counter. "Can I have some lobster and spaghetti, then?"

Her attention snapped to me. "Pfft. You'd be crazy to ask for that. It's ridiculously expensive!"

"I know."

"You ought to be grateful, Klein."

Did she just call me Klein? That's strange being referred to as my family name. It does make sense as we aren't that close… But it does perplexe me since she asked me to call her by her name.

"But that's not what I'm here for." She leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping. "We need to discuss something."

I leaned back, matching her seriousness. "Sure. What's on your mind?"

Gertrude was quiet for a moment, choosing her words carefully. "What's your take on the credit system?"

My eyebrow rose a fraction. "...I don't know."

She narrowed her eyes, catching the slight pause before my response. Suspicion flickered across her face.

"...I'm not sure," I added.

"So you do have an idea! Let's hear it."

I waved a hand dismissively. "What I meant by 'I'm not sure' is that the system is very capable. Students are rewarded for academic endeavors, so they work extra hard, yes?"

Gertrude frowned at my anticlimactic answer. She'd expected more. "The credit system is something I've been pondering since the day we were told about it. What influences it? How is it gained? And lost?"

I sighed and picked up my spoon, spinning it absently between my fingers. "Remember the day Mr. Ashworth explained the credit system?"

Gertrude nodded.

"That explanation created more questions than answers. It was too vague. And the term 'credit system' is broad, almost intentionally so." I paused, the spoon stilling. "From what I've noticed over the past few days, I think there are two types of credit that make up the system as a whole."

Gertrude tilted her head. "Which are?"

"First, our own individual credit. I call it personal credit, or private credit, whichever you prefer. Only the student knows how much they have. Mr. Ashworth revealed we started with 10,000 this month."

I leaned forward, my voice dropping conspiratorially. "But here's the question: why 10,000 as a baseline for new intakes? A group of teenagers? Ten thousand credit equals ten thousand euros. That's a significant amount of money, don't you think?"

Gertrude nodded slowly. "For teenagers? Yes, it's substantial."

"Exactly." My voice was flat but intense. "It's as if the school assumes we're peak students and acknowledges that by granting us this amount."

"Peak students?" Gertrude frowned. "What does that mean? That the school assumes we're all well-behaved, active in both academics and sports?"

I was silent for several seconds, then leaned back. "Not quite the all-rounder students you're imagining. Look at the test results, many of our classmates failed miserably. What does that tell you?"

Gertrude's brow furrowed in thought. "If not all-rounders... then specialists?"

I snapped my fingers, a rare display of approval. "Correct." My voice remained flat, but something flickered in my eyes. "How was your entrance exam to this school?"

Gertrude considered. "Difficult. Why?"

"I'm painting a picture. If students who failed such an easy test passed the entrance exam, what conclusion can we draw?"

Gertrude's eyes lit up as the pieces clicked together. "That means the school rates students based on other qualities beyond pure academics."

"Reinforcing the notion of the specialist-type peak student," I confirmed.

Gertrude continued the thread, excitement building in her voice. "If that's the case, then academics and other factors, like physical activities, are viewed equally. That would explain the baseline 10,000 credit."

"Physical prowess is probably linked to sports," I added. "But also discipline. Behavior. Maybe even social contributions."

Gertrude stared at me, genuinely impressed by how seamlessly I connected the dots.

I continued, unfazed by her attention. "With that established, we can infer the probability of a second type of credit."

She muttered under her breath, "What do you think the second type is?"

"What's the opposite of personal?"

Gertrude's eyes widened. "Public? Wait... class credit?"

"Mhmm." I nodded. "Something like that. Like I said, I'm not certain."

"No, it makes sense." Gertrude was already running with the idea. "I've noticed this school functions as a simulation of a micro-society. And the seniors here..."

"Are very entitled," I finished flatly. "But the possibility of class credit means we'll be judged as a collective based on our performance as a group."

"So a collective effort?"

"Likely."

We sat in silence, the weight of our deductions settling between us. Gertrude studied me with new eyes, recognizing an analytical mind that matched, or exceeded, her own.

I, for my part, had begun poking at her sausages with the butt of my spoon.

"Stop poking at my food, you idiot," Gertrude snapped, swatting my hand away.

I withdrew my hand, expression unchanged. But somewhere beneath the stoic facade, something almost resembling satisfaction stirred.

Two types of credit. Individual and collective. A micro-society with its own economy, its own rules, its own hierarchies.

I glanced around the cafeteria, at the students lining up at the cheap counter, at the few enjoying premium meals, at the seniors who moved through the space with casual authority.

'I'm not a fan of making incomplete deductions.' I thought to myself

The campus was cool in the aftermath of last night's heavy rain. Humid air clung to everything, and the morning sun, though bright, offered no warmth, its rays diffused by the lingering moisture into a pale, watery light.

Inside Classroom B, the first years were lively, though not in the way any educator might have hoped.

I sat with my head buried between my arms, my eyes half-lidded with barely concealed boredom. At the front, a woman, Miss Sierra, according to the schedule, stood at the board explaining basic economic terms with the enthusiasm of someone reading a phone book. Her voice droned on, a monotone accompaniment to the complete lack of attention from her students.

And she didn't seem to care.

I observed this with quiet fascination. Students scrolled through their phones beneath their desks. Others chatted in hushed whispers. A few didn't even bother facing the board, their chairs turned to face friends instead. Miss Sierra continued her lecture as if addressing a full audience of engaged scholars, oblivious or indifferent to the reality before her.

I felt a gaze on me and looked toward Gertrude's seat. She caught my eye and gave me a knowing look, you see this too, right?

Just behind her, the delinquent from the confrontation days ago sat with his legs propped up on his desk, his expression a mix of defiance and boredom. He hadn't acknowledged me since that incident, and I hadn't pushed.

"We'll end here today." Miss Sierra's voice cut through my thoughts. "Please review this chapter on your own time. Certain keywords are essential for defining fundamental economic concepts." She gathered her materials and departed without a backward glance, the door clicking shut behind her.

The class scattered instantly. Conversations erupted. Chairs scraped against the floor. Groups formed and dissolved with the fluidity of water finding its level.

Break period had begun.

I reclined in my chair, rubbing my temple as Flora and her friend group walked past. One of them, not Flora, but one of the mean girls from the clique, glanced at me sidelong and offered a small wave, her expression carefully neutral.

I narrowed my eyes at the gesture but offered no response. I gathered my bag and headed for the door.

Gertrude fell into step beside me and nudged my shoulder.

"Ow," I said dryly, not breaking stride.

"Cafeteria, right?"

"Obviously. Where else would I be going?"

Gertrude's lips curled into a smirk. "I don't know. You don't seem like the type to socialize."

I said nothing.

"And as you know," she continued, "the cafeteria is buzzing with life."

I kept walking. "And by 'life,' you mean pointless conversation?"

"What better way to socialize than sharing trivial information or whimsical opinions?"

"Too much effort." My voice was flat. "Besides, I'm hungry. Is your offer to treat me still on the table?"

Gertrude sighed dramatically. "No. It was either then or never."

I stopped abruptly and turned to face her.

"You didn't say that, Gertrude."

"I didn't say it then, but I'm saying it now." She crossed her arms, matter-of-fact.

"Quite the liar, aren't you?" My tone carried a hint of sarcasm, rare for me.

"This conversation is pointless, wouldn't you say?" Gertrude snapped her fingers triumphantly. "See that? Socializing!" She grinned, clearly pleased with herself.

I waved her off dismissively and resumed walking.

Gertrude called after me, her voice carrying a teasing lilt. "Don. Don Introvert."

From further down the hallway, my monotone response drifted back: "Don't call me that!"

---

The cafeteria was a wall of sound, hundreds of conversations colliding, trays clattering, chairs scraping, laughter erupting in unpredictable bursts. The space was vast enough to accommodate the entire first-year class, yet it felt crowded, alive, overwhelming.

I sat without my blazer, sleeves rolled up, focused entirely on a bowl of hot, spicy soup. I ate with methodical precision, each spoonful measured, as if the act itself required concentration.

Gertrude sat across from me, watching with an expression caught between amusement and impatience.

"Ahh..." I exhaled as I finished, setting down my spoon. "Thanks for the meal."

"Yes, yes." Gertrude leaned forward, sliding a colorful flyer across the table toward me. Her expression turned sly. "What do you make of this?"

I glanced at the flyer briefly, then back at her. "Not just a liar, but also a politician."

I picked up the flyer and scanned its contents. My eyes narrowed slightly as I read:

**STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTIONS**

- Student Council Positions
- Year President (First Year, Second Year, Third Year)
- Class Representative (Per Class)

After a few seconds, I slid it back. "So. School politics."

Gertrude nodded, her expression serious now. "I've been thinking about your theory. Specifically, the factors that influence personal credit."

I shifted in my seat, giving her my full attention.

"If our assumption is correct, that academics aren't the only factor, then physical attributes and social capabilities must also play a role. Think of them as subcategories."

I closed my eyes briefly, listening. When I opened them, I shook my head. "Except that's not exactly how it works."

Gertrude frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Think back to the special products in the shop. The ones marked 'free' or heavily discounted." My voice was calm, measured. "If those exist, it implies students can reduce their credit to zero and still access necessities. But here's the thing—"

I leaned forward. "Ten thousand euros sounds like a lot. But it's not our true amount. Not yet. That will be revealed after the school assesses us. Determines our worth." I paused. "Meritocracy."

Gertrude raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that obvious?"

"Of course. But we have to understand how that merit is calculated." I held up three fingers. "Three main factors. **Academics**. **Social abilities**. **Physical capabilities**. These determine credit value. And interestingly, these same three factors describe how we evaluate people in the real world, just on a different scale."

Gertrude rubbed her chin thoughtfully as I continued.

"Now. Politics." I tapped the flyer. "You might think it's a subcategory of socializing. It's not."

"Then what is it?"

I raised my hands, framing an analogy. "Imagine a father and his grown son. Both are about to die. You can only save one. Who do you choose?"

Gertrude considered. "The father. He's lived a life, but his son has barely started."

"My answer is different." My eyes were intense now. "The father represents socializing, the ability to connect, to build relationships. The son represents politics, the structured application of those connections to organize and govern. One gives birth to the other. But in terms of societal value?"

I leaned back. "Politics is socializing expanded. Refined. Structured. Socializing determines if an individual can connect with others. Politics determines how a nation connects within itself. They're not hierarchical, they're evolutionary."

Gertrude narrowed her gaze, processing. "So academics are their own factor. Social abilities are their own. But what about physical prowess? That still feels... broad."

I was quiet for a long moment. "Physical, in this context, probably determines expertise. Craftsmanship. Athletic ability." I rubbed my head, a rare gesture of uncertainty. "Club activities might cover this, or it might be its own separate factor. I'm not entirely sure. I could be reaching."

Gertrude nodded slowly. "Your reasoning is solid so far. But that's not what's bothering me."

I glanced at the flyer, then back at her. Understanding dawned. "That's not going to end well."

Gertrude's expression hardened. "What does that mean?"

"I don't think getting into the dirty game of politics is a great idea."

Gertrude's voice dropped, dark and determined. "I can try."

I studied her for a moment, the set of her jaw, the fire in her eyes. Then I shrugged and stood, reaching for my empty bowl. Second servings called.

But as I shifted my chair, a sharp squeal of feedback cut through the cafeteria's noise.

Tzzzzzz!

Every head turned. Every conversation stuttered to a halt.

At the center of the hall stood a short girl, her black blazer marking her as a senior. Behind her, a line of students stood at attention, each wearing a badge emblazoned with the letters **AJW**.

"Good morning, everyone!" Her voice carried effortlessly through the sudden silence. "I'm Krish Isnove. I'm here to remind all students about club activities being held at the Event Sector. If you're interested, please attend promptly at 4:00 PM."

Without another word, she turned and led her procession out of the cafeteria. The silence stretched for a heartbeat longer, then erupted into murmurs and speculation.

I watched them go, then felt Gertrude's gaze on me.

"Klein."

I turned. My eyes widened slightly, again with the surname, but I recovered quickly.

"What?"

"Wanna join a club?"

I stared at her for a long, flat moment.

‘Hell. No.’

But even as the thought formed, something else stirred, a flicker of curiosity, of calculation. Club activities. Physical capabilities. Expertise and craftsmanship. If my theories were correct...

I picked up my bowl. "I'll think about it."

Gertrude's eyebrows rose. That wasn't the refusal she'd expected.

I walked toward the serving counter, leaving her sitting alone with the flyer and her thoughts.

---

The lower floor of the lecture building was quiet, a pocket of stillness in the otherwise bustling campus. In an empty classroom, a young man sat alone, his straight hair framing a stern, relaxed expression as he flipped through the pages of a small book.

The door opened suddenly.

A girl with shoulder-length hair walked in, her expression tight with frustration. She didn't bother with pleasantries.

"You're not giving up, are you?" Her voice was sharp, accusatory.

The male looked up, a sharp glint in his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Going behind my back. Striking a deal with a member from Class B." She spat the words like poison. "You damn snake."

He scoffed, closing his book. "Having your underlings spy on me, Koshka?"

The girl, Koshka, didn't deny it. Instead, she took a seat on the table directly across from him, her posture challenging.

"We'll have to suck up our rivalry," she proposed, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "Temporarily, Blake."

Blake raised his eyebrows, amusement flickering across his features. "My profiling of you being overwhelmingly stupid was correct after all."

Koshka shot him a glare hot enough to melt glass. Blake simply shrugged it off and flipped to the next page of his book as if she weren't there.

"You have the premise that I met with a student from Class B," he continued, his voice maddeningly calm. "And your first thought was that I was plotting against you?" He chuckled, the sound humorless. "Way to overestimate yourself."

"Very funny, Blake." Koshka's voice was dry as dust.

Blake hummed softly, turning another page, letting the silence stretch. Finally, he spoke again. "Are you curious what it was about?"

Koshka's eyes narrowed, but she said nothing.

"The deal, you tortoise." He smiled slightly. "It's a good one."

"Oh?" She tilted her head, suspicion warring with curiosity. "You're telling me? I thought that went against your precious autocratic leadership style."

"Oh, believe me." Blake's voice dropped, something darker flickering beneath the amusement. "Labels are for people who care about optics, Koshka. I only care about results."

Koshka rolled her eyes but leaned forward slightly. "Well? What is it?"

Blake set down his book, revealing it to be nothing more than a comic, the cover brightly colored, and fixed her with a sharp, penetrating gaze.

"Let me ask you something first. Why are we in this school? What's the end goal here?"

---

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the football field. Gertrude and I sat in the bleachers, watching practice sessions unfold below, players running drills, coaches shouting instructions, the thud of balls connecting with feet a steady rhythm in the background.

"Yeah, what's your end goal here?" I asked, my gaze fixed on the field.

Gertrude glanced at me, puzzled by the non-sequitur. "What do you mean? Isn't it obvious?" She turned back to watch a player execute a perfect dribble. "To graduate as a student of Class S. That way, I can get into World High University. It's only accessible to those of Class S descent."

I processed this. Class S. The ultimate prize. The golden ticket. But something nagged at me.

I watched the game closely, my mind working. Hildegard's goal is too straightforward. Too simple. There has to be more.

After a long moment, I spoke again. "Did you notice how Class S is never mentioned? Even though it's this school's entire selling point?"

Gertrude threw me a sharp glance. "Yes... It is strange, isn't it?"

I sat up slightly, my dull expression unchanging. "Given how this school is structured, Class S is probably not a class you're assigned upon resumption. If that's the case, then our whole theory about specialist students crumbles."

Gertrude nodded slowly. "I'm assuming Class S comes into the picture at the end of a semester. After assessments."

"Wrong." My voice was mechanical, devoid of inflection. "Think back to the monthly credit allocation."

Gertrude's brow furrowed. "Oh. Personal credit and class credit are determined monthly. In Class S's case... class credit would tell us if we qualify?"

"Wrong again."

Gertrude sighed heavily, frustration evident.

I continued, unperturbed. "The school's nature is highly competitive, that's how it's described externally. With that in mind, reaching Class S is more of a race. A collective class effort."

Gertrude's eyes flashed with sudden enthusiasm. She shot up from her seat, energy radiating from her. "We should collaborate with our classmates! Build connections, foster unity! That way, we'll have an easier path to Class S!"

I looked at her lazily, then back to the field. "Go ahead." My voice was flat.

Gertrude deflated instantly, her enthusiasm wilting under my nonchalance. "You came up with half the theory. You don't want the credit?"

"I don't need it." I picked up my bag and stood. "Besides, I have better things to do."

I walked toward the gymnasium exit, leaving Gertrude staring after me.

"What a low-energy guy," she muttered.

---

---

The gymnasium was chaos organized, a seething mass of students all vying for position at various club registration tables. Banners hung from the rafters: Football Club, Basketball Club, Gardening Club, Chess Club, Drama Club, and dozens more. The air buzzed with excitement, anxiety, and the sheer noise of hundreds of conversations overlapping.

I stood still at the entrance, a rock in a river of moving bodies. Students nudged past me, jostled me, barely noticing my presence. I surveyed the options with mild disinterest.

I should join the Gardening Club, I thought. I like plants. They don't talk.

I took three steps toward the Gardening table.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder.

"Yo."

I turned. Behind me stood the delinquent from my class, the same boy from the confrontation with the seniors days ago. Up close, I could see the details I'd missed before: sharp features, dirty blonde hair deliberately disheveled, an easy confidence in his posture.

"Oh. What's up."

The boy looked me over, head to toe, a slow assessment. Finally, he spoke. "The name's Caspian Bale."

I just stared at him for a long beat. "Well, hello, Caspian." My voice carried the enthusiasm of someone reading terms and conditions.

Caspian's expression shifted, dissatisfaction, then something approaching offense. He took a half-step back. "Sorry for being friendly."

"What?"

"You're doing the thing again." Caspian pointed an accusing finger at my face.

"I don't know what you're saying—" I paused, then realization dawned. "Oh. It's my tone." I pointed at myself.

"You tired or something?"

"The opposite, actually." I glanced around at the chaos. "Here to join a club."

Caspian tilted his head, a mischievous expression creeping across his features. "I've got just the right club for you, dude!"

I gave him my attention, mildly curious despite myself. "I already had one in mind, but go ahead."

Caspian surveyed my body again, the height, the build, the long arms. A few nearby students glanced at us, curious about the inspection. Caspian nodded slowly, a grin spreading.

"Yeah. I see it. I see the vision."

He stepped back, framing me with his hands like a director composing a shot. "You should join the Baseball team!"

I stared. "I'll decline."

"What?!" Caspian's arms dropped. "You're sculpted for baseball, man! Maybe American football as a close second, but still!"

Hmm. I considered. I'm 5'9 with an athletic build. Football would fit me better physically. But that's if I'm actually considering a physical club.

"Mhmm," I hummed noncommittally.

Caspian's expression shifted, the playful mask dropping, something more serious emerging. "I wanted to thank you, by the way. For that save back then. Those seniors were a pain in the ass."

I studied him. He's using this as leverage. Creating a sense of debt. His sudden approach after days of silence isn't coincidence. He wants something.

He wants me to join his club. It doesn't make sense since I was the one who helped him against those seniors, so he should be the one indebted to me.

This gave me a few implications, one being he sees me as isolated. That isn't quite right since our first interaction is me approaching them. Or maybe he had been observing me ever since we were in class?

Recommending two clubs which are in fact tailored to my physique is also telling. He wants me to join a club, either of the two. However, if I joined a club he isn't a part of, then whatever validation he would get would disappear as someone who brought an elite member.

Therefore, he himself isn't in any club at the moment. He's gathering some sort of circle. Whatever I join, he would as well.

I waved a dismissive hand. "I'll think about it."

Caspian's grin returned, though something sharper lingered beneath it. "That's all I ask."

I turned and walked toward the Gardening Club table, leaving Caspian standing amid the crowd.

Behind me, I heard a final call: "Think hard, Merlio! Baseball team needs you!"

Gardening, I thought firmly. Silence. Photosynthesis. No politics.

But even as I approached the table, a small part of me wondered: What exactly is Caspian's end goal?

The question lingered, unanswered.

---

Outside, the campus hummed with activity. Clubs were forming. Alliances were being forged. And somewhere in the chaos, first years were beginning to realize that this school operated on rules far more complex than any of them had anticipated.

I walked toward the Gardening Club table, my steps unhurried.

Plants, I reminded myself. Quiet. Simple. No hidden agendas.

But even as I signed my name on the registration sheet, I couldn't shake the feeling that simplicity was a luxury this school would not afford me.

Classes had ended for the day, and the classroom had transformed from a place of learning to a social hub. Small clusters of students huddled together, conversations flowing freely now that the pressure of lectures had lifted.

Mia and her friends sat gathered around their table, chatting animatedly about everything and nothing, weekend plans, cafeteria gossip, the relative merits of different club activities. Their laughter punctuated the air, a small pocket of warmth in the otherwise sterile room.

Across the classroom, I rose from my seat. I had been waiting for this moment, the post-class lull when formalities dissolved and genuine interactions became possible. My target: Mia's table.

I began walking, my path carefully calculated. But before I could reach my destination, a figure stepped directly into my path.

Flora.

Behind her stood the infamous mean girls' clique, the ones I had catalogued in my mental files. Emilia Honors at the head, flanked by Chad Blare and Emily Swerve. But instead of the expected looks of disdain, their expressions held something else entirely: curiosity.

"Good morning, Merlio!" Flora's greeting was enthusiastic, genuine.

Mia and her friends, noticing the interaction, fell silent. Their attention shifted to the scene unfolding nearby, the quiet boy from our class approaching the most notorious clique in the room. Curiosity flickered across their faces.

I noted every micro-expression. *Interesting. They're watching. Judging. Filing away information for later use.* I filed this observation away and replied smoothly.

"Mornin', Flora." I gestured toward the door with a slight tilt of my head. "Heading to the cafeteria?"

Flora glanced back at her friends. Emilia shook her head slowly.

"Not really," Emilia said, her voice measured. "We have other places to be." She trailed off at the end, leaving the statement hanging, neither invitation nor dismissal.

Flora chuckled sheepishly, rubbing the back of her neck. "Yeah... I'd love to join you, though! Maybe next time?"

I nodded once, a small, accepting gesture. The entourage moved past me, following Emilia toward the door. As they passed, I caught Flora's eye for the briefest moment, a silent acknowledgment.

I turned back toward Mia's desk.

Mia, caught staring, quickly dropped her gaze to the floor, feigning interest in nothing.

I approached their table and placed my notebook on its surface. "Sorry to ask," I began, my voice carrying just enough uncertainty to seem genuine.

Mia and her friends looked down at the open pages, then back up at me.

"I'm having trouble with this topic." I pointed to a section of notes. "The definitions of 'cost' and 'cost accounting' are a bit blurry for me."

Mia gasped softly, a small, almost theatrical reaction. She looked from the notebook to my face, her expression shifting through several emotions in rapid succession.

"Uhh, s-sure!" She stammered slightly. "What do you want me to help you with?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, a gesture of awkwardness I'd practiced until it felt natural. "I'll need all the help I can get with this topic. Do you think you could walk me through it?"

Mia turned to her friends, seeking silent consultation. They offered small shrugs, noncommittal. She turned back.

"Didn't you come in eighth place in the top ten from last week's test?"

My expression remained unchanged. "I was just lucky, I guess."

Mia rubbed her chin thoughtfully, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considered. Finally, she nodded. "...Sure!"

I nodded subtly in return. "Thanks." I paused, letting the silence stretch just long enough. "It's kind of embarrassing, honestly. I wonder if there was some kind of study group where everyone is welcome, you know?" I reached for my notebook, preparing to leave.

Mia's eyes lit up. She snapped her fingers, an idea striking.

"I've got it! Instead of wondering, why don't we just create a study group for the class?"

Her two friends exchanged glances. "Eh?" they said in unison.

"Think about it!" Mia's enthusiasm built with each word. "We'd be doing everyone a favor! Everyone studies, everyone does well on the end-of-month test!"

*Mia is one of those students I have an interest in so far…*

"I guess..." one of her friends agreed reluctantly. The other nodded, adding, "Besides, seeing Merlio struggling with this shows that everyone has specific areas they excel at."

"Yeah!" Mia seized on this. "That makes perfect sense. That test was just a mock with two subjects, math and history. A bit specific, don't you think?"

I adjusted my bag on my shoulder. "Maybe it's to test general knowledge? Since math and history are core subjects... I could be wrong, though."

Mia nodded enthusiastically. "No, that fits too."

"So then." I prompted gently. "How do we go about this study group?"

Mia giggled, an animated, almost performative sound.

"Hehehe. Just leave it to me!"

---

The rooftop of the lecture building offered a panorama of the campus, sprawling grounds, distant buildings, the tiny figures of students moving between them like ants in a colony. The wind carried the sounds of activity from far below, muffled and distant.

Gertrude and I stood at the railing, sandwiches in hand.

"So she proposed creating a study group?" Gertrude asked, leaning forward to peer at the grounds below.

"Yes." I took a bite of my sandwich, chewing methodically as I stared at the full clouds.

"Doesn't she, of all people, realize our class is full of disconnected groups? Twenty-five individuals, each in their own circle."

I swallowed. "I think she does."

"And where is she going to find tutors for these study groups?"

"That's what I thought as well."

"Stop that." Gertrude's voice carried an edge of annoyance.

I paused mid-chew and looked up at her. "Stop what?"

"Your answers are passive."

"Your questions were open-ended."

Gertrude groaned, the sound carried away by the wind. "Okay, then. *Merlio*. Do you think any academically capable student will volunteer to teach the others?"

"Depends." I finished my sandwich and began folding the wrapper with precise, deliberate movements. "What would they want in return?"

"What they'd want in return?" Gertrude's brow furrowed. "That seems redundant."

I tilted my head slightly. "What does that mean?"

Gertrude straightened, turning to face me fully. "Intellectual students in our class are few. The top ten, really, only the top five are guaranteed high performers. The rest five in the top ten aren't secure. In essence, there are few potential tutors and many who could learn. And even those tutors wouldn't want to dedicate their time to teaching others."

I was quiet for a moment, processing. Then: "Do you really think everyone in our class would join a study group?"

Gertrude's brow furrowed deeper.

"Everyone has grown accustomed to the school's system of loose monitoring," I continued. "Here, you're left to handle your academics yourself. No one pressures you. No one checks your homework. No one forces you to study."

Gertrude's eyes narrowed slightly, seeing where I was leading.

"What I'm saying is," I pressed on, "most of these students have spent their lives pursuing academic growth,often forced into it by parents, by tutors, by expectations. Now, given freedom for the first time, do you think they'll maintain habits that were never their own?"

Gertrude was silent.

"The same logic applies here. Not everyone will join the study group. The numbers will be smaller than Mia expects."

Gertrude turned back to the sky, processing. After a long moment, she said quietly, "Yes, but still..."

My voice remained flat, analytical. "Mr. Ashworth said we're on a three-week assessment. We've written one mock test. But personal credit is allocated at the end of the month. That means we should expect the real test on the last day, or close to it."

Gertrude absorbed this. She understood the implications, but I had left the final connections for her to make. I always did. It was my way, presenting the pieces, letting others assemble them.

But then I surprised her.

"I take it you haven't shared the credit system theory with anyone."

Gertrude turned, her jet-black hair catching the wind. "Not yet."

"I see."

*She's still in the deciding phase*, I thought. *A small nudge won't hurt. We don't have much time*.

I stood from the rooftop floor, brushing off my uniform, and picked up my bag. I walked toward the staircase, then paused, as if remembering something.

"Oh. I forgot to mention." My voice carried back lazily over my shoulder. "I recommended you as a tutor."

Gertrude's head snapped toward me. "Wait, what?!"

But I was already descending the stairs, my footsteps echoing in the stairwell.

*That absolute*...

I could almost hear her internal fury. She couldn't decide whether to be furious or impressed.

—

Wednesday of the second week. The library maintained its eternal quiet, a sanctuary of silence in the chaos of campus life. Sunlight filtered through tall windows, casting long rectangles of gold across polished tables and carpeted floors.

Near the back, a cluster of students had claimed territory: one large table with two smaller ones pulled alongside it. Seven students total, scattered like islands in an archipelago of notebooks and textbooks.

Gertrude checked her watch for the fourth time in as many minutes. Her expression had shifted from mild impatience to barely contained annoyance.

"Taking his sweet time?" she whispered, her voice carrying just enough to be heard by those nearby. "And why can't we start without him, anyway?"

As if summoned, I appeared at the library entrance. My expression was skeptical—eyebrows slightly furrowed, eyes scanning the room with habitual assessment. I spotted the group and made my way over, sliding into the seat directly opposite Gertrude.

I settled in, arranged my notes with methodical precision, and then looked up. Seven pairs of eyes watched me with varying degrees of awkwardness.

"Good morning," I said flatly.

Gertrude sighed in defeat. She surveyed the group—seven students, a mix of familiar faces and near-strangers. How was she supposed to lead this?

Mia, ever the social facilitator, stepped in with her characteristic enthusiasm.

"Okay, everyone! Why don't we introduce ourselves one by one? That way, when we're studying, it won't feel awkward to ask questions."

I nodded subtly. *Smart. Break the ice before diving in*.

Gertrude seized the opportunity, introducing herself with practiced brevity.

"Good morning. I'm sure most of you have heard of me. My name is Gertrude Hildegard, please call me Gertrude. I'll be acting as today's tutor, so feel free to ask questions."

I bobbed my head in silent approval. *Brief. Sweet. Effective*.

A beat of silence followed, the kind that teeters on the edge of awkwardness. But it didn't last.

A boy with an open, friendly face spoke up next. "My name's Dorian Pryce! Call me whatever feels comfortable." He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "I'm... uh, experiencing some hardships with my studies, so I'm looking forward to working with you all!"

A ripple of smiles passed through the group. Dorian's combination of enthusiasm and modesty was disarming, genuine.

*That's how you introduce yourself, Gertrude*, I noted internally. *Warmth. Vulnerability. Connection*.

As Dorian finished, a girl with a pitched but pleasant voice introduced herself as Lina, one of Mia's friends. I filed this away.

*Mia's circle keeps expanding*.

Next came Clide Goodman, quiet, reserved, offering little more than his name. Then another boy leaned back in his chair, posture deliberately lazy.

"Call me Pincer. I'm here because Dorian made me." He settled back, clearly unbothered by formality.

Dorian shot him a cautionary glance. Pincer waved it off. Dorian's expression hardened, and he nudged his friend sharply.

*So they're friends*, I observed. *Dorian the responsible one, Pincer the slacker. Interesting dynamic*.

The introductions concluded, Gertrude straightened her notes. "Shall we begin?"

---

The study session unfolded in fits and starts.

Gertrude explained economic concepts with clinical precision, definitions, applications, examples. She moved through topics methodically: cost accounting, legal entities, market structures. The four less-academically-inclined students followed along with varying degrees of success.

Lina raised her hand. "Can a legal entity, like a company, sue its own owner?"

Gertrude sighed heavily. "It depends. But yes, in certain circumstances."

"Entity?" Pincer asked, clearly lost.

Dorian jumped in, eager to help. "I think it's like... the way the legal system recognizes stuff? And gives it basic rights?"

"Something like that," Gertrude acknowledged, "though you're a bit off. Let me clarify." She pointed to a passage in the textbook and explained the concept more thoroughly.

I watched the group dynamics with the detached focus of a scientist observing specimens.

*Pincer's ignorance is evident throughout. He's not just struggling, he's completely lost. Lina is easily distracted; she's checked her phone six times in the last fifteen minutes. Clide is practically invisible, silent, withdrawn, contributing nothing. And Gertrude...*

My gaze shifted to the tutor.

*Gertrude has zero patience. She's competent, but she lacks the temperament for teaching. Her explanations are accurate but cold. She doesn't read her audience.*

I glanced at my watch: 9:36 AM.

Catching Gertrude's eye, I gave a subtle signal. She understood immediately.

"Alright. Let's end here for now." Gertrude's voice was cool, dismissive. "Return after break if you'd like to continue."

The students' faces soured. Only Mia managed to maintain her smile, though it looked strained at the edges.

As the others gathered their things and drifted away, Mia approached Gertrude.

"Thanks for taking the time to tutor!" Her voice was bright, but there was something underneath, hesitation, perhaps. "I had a hard time recruiting students from our class to help..."

Gertrude glanced back at me, side-eyeing me meaningfully. "Yes. And you can thank someone for that." She turned back to Mia. "You're welcome."

Mia fidgeted. "This might sound unreasonable, but... could I ask a favor?"

Gertrude raised an eyebrow.

"It's just..." Mia hesitated. "Your tone is very cold when you're tutoring. And your patience is... well, short. From what I observed."

*She said it*, I thought, impressed despite myself.

To both our surprise, Gertrude simply sighed and nodded. "Understandable. Thank you for pointing that out, Mia."

Mia's mouth opened slightly, then closed. She blinked, as if resetting. "Yeah! No problem!" She gathered her things and hurried away, her figure disappearing among the bookshelves.

I watched her go, then turned back to Gertrude.

She spoke first, frustration bleeding into her voice. "What a bunch of idiots we have in our class. Is it always going to be like this?" She clicked her tongue. "It seems I'll have to work extra hard."

I considered this. "She's right, though."

Gertrude glanced at me briefly.

"About your tone. Your patience."

"Accurately, if I may."

"You complied to save face?"

Gertrude's expression hardened. "Don't be stupid." She tugged her bag strap tight. "Be here in the afternoon." Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked away.

I sat still, listening to her footsteps fade. When silence returned, I pulled out my phone and dialed.

A voice answered after several rings. "Yes? Who's this?"

I let the silence stretch for a beat before responding. "It's Merlio."

"Ah, Merlio! Silly me. What's up?"

The voice was familiar, warm, slightly breathless, always on the edge of laughter.

"I need your help."

---

Midday sun cast sharp shadows across the lecture building's surrounding gardens. I walked without apparent purpose, my path meandering.

**Flora would be a good addition to the study group. She's academically solid and socially connected. Caspian could be useful too, if he's interested, which is doubtful. Mia's social network is proving valuable; she reached students I couldn't.**

I stopped walking.

Before me lay a decorative waterfall, one of campus's many aesthetic touches, designed to soothe and inspire. At its center stood a statue, a figure frozen in artistic contemplation.

But the statue wasn't a statue.

A student stood atop it, balanced on one toe, arms extended like a monk in meditation. His blazer was discarded, revealing a sleeveless shirt that did nothing to hide the sculpted muscles beneath. In each hand, he gripped a bottle, holding them steady despite the precarious position.

*Hanman Durant*.

I watched with my usual blank expression as Hanman held the pose. Seconds stretched into minutes. The bottles didn't waver. The balance didn't break.

Finally, with a fluid motion, Hanman straightened. The bottles fell, shattering against the stone below. He looked down, meeting my gaze.

I didn't flinch. Instead, I asked, my voice perfectly innocent:

"Do you want to join our study group?"

Hanman grunted. He leaped from the statue, landing on the ground with a solid thud that seemed to shake the earth.

"What are you?" His voice was deep, resonant, a voice accustomed to commanding attention.

I considered the question. "The type of being that can't do whatever you just did."

Hanman didn't respond verbally. Instead, he extended his left hand. In his palm sat a Rubik's cube.

I took it, examining the jumbled colors.

"Scatter it," Hanman commanded.

I complied, twisting the cube methodically, mixing the colors into chaos.

"That's enough." Hanman's hand stopped me. He still hadn't looked directly at the cube.

I returned it and stepped back.

Hanman reached into his bag, draped carelessly on the fountain's edge, and produced another cube. Then, with a fluidity that seemed almost supernatural, he began to work.

His left hand solved the cube I had scrambled. His right hand, simultaneously, scrambled the new cube.

Both hands moved independently, each performing complex operations without the other's interference. In seconds, the left-handed cube was perfect, each face a solid color. The right-handed cube was chaos.

Hanman examined both, a small smile playing at his lips. "Perfection..."

*It would be perfect if you joined our study group*, I thought. Aloud, I said, "So is that a yes?"

Hanman chuckled, a low, rumbling sound. Then, anticlimactically: "No."

He gathered his belongings and walked away, his strides calm and measured. I watched him go, the figure growing smaller against the sprawling campus.

*He's definitely something*, I mused. *Something worth understanding.*

I turned and continued my walk, the encounter filed away for future reference.

The next day, Class B's study group had migrated to new territory. "**De Patel**" sat in the heart of the Commerce Hub sector, a café renowned among students for its quiet atmosphere and excellent coffee. The space struck a careful balance between cozy and productive, with warm lighting, comfortable seating, and just enough ambient noise to make silence feel natural rather than oppressive.

I walked in late, as usual, and slipped into an empty seat at the large table the group had claimed. The numbers had grown since yesterday. New faces dotted the gathering, though some were notably absent. Lina wasn't there. Neither was Pincer. But Clide had returned, sitting quietly at the edge of the assembly.

"Good morning," I offered in my characteristic flat tone.

Gertrude watched me closely as I settled in. I could feel her gaze boring into me.

I turned. "What?"

She rubbed her temples with evident frustration. "Just sit down."

*The numbers increased today,* I observed, scanning the table. *I'd estimate the remaining students from the bottom fifteen are mostly present.*

My gaze drifted to Mia. Her usual enthusiastic attitude had dimmed noticeably, her smile less bright, her posture less animated.

As expected. Without reciprocated energy, her enthusiasm was bound to fade. She gives and gives, but receives little in return. That model isn't sustainable.

I turned my attention to Gertrude. She was drinking her coffee in mechanical sips, her eyes darting between her notes and, increasingly, me.

She's nervous. The scale is overwhelming her. And interestingly... she's using me as an anchor. Already so familiar with me that in a crowd of strangers, I'm her reference point for stability.

I glanced at my watch. As if on cue, a new figure approached the table, commanding immediate attention.

"Morning!" The boy had deep brown hair and an easy confidence in his stride. "This is the study group for our class, right?"

Mia's voice rang out. "Hey, Flint Woods!" She went so far as to hug him, which he accepted with a good-natured chuckle.

Gertrude's expression soured slightly. I simply hummed with my eyes half-closed.

Another student, Christa, one of the sharp ones who'd placed in the top ten, cut in with her own greeting. "Hello, Flint Woods. I didn't expect a hardworking student like yourself to be here~" Her tone carried a familiarity that suggested prior acquaintance.

Flint smiled warmly. "You flatter me. Not as hardworking as you, Christa. You placed sixth, correct?"

Christa waved her hand dismissively, hiding her flushed face behind her notes.

Gertrude rolled her eyes.

I opened mine fully and scanned the table again.

*Now it's looking lively. Flint's social status in our class is fascinating. Mia and Flora have popularity, but it's localized, contained within our classroom. Flint's is general. He's known across circles, respected across groups.*

I watched as student after student gravitated toward Flint, their expressions brightening as they engaged with him. After addressing everyone present, Flint finally took a seat.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Gertrude flinch almost imperceptibly. I nodded subtly. *She feels the competition.*

We were about to begin when another figure appeared, one unfamiliar to most, but not to me.

"Yo, Merlio!"

Every head turned.

My expression remained blank, but internally: *Caspian... Could you not address me that way? Seriously.*

"What's up, Caspian?"

The delinquent shrugged, sliding into a seat. "Eh. Skipped workout for this. Since you asked."

*Great. Now he's my responsibility*.

---

The session split naturally into two groups. Gertrude took six students under her wing. Flint handled the remaining seven. For a while, the café hummed with the sound of explanations, questions, and the scratch of pens on paper.

But halfway through, I noticed a problem.

Students were struggling, particularly with statistics: the multiple formulas, knowing when to apply them, the principles of management. But no one was speaking up.

*With greater numbers comes greater reluctance*, I observed. *People are less likely to admit confusion in a crowd. Dorian is the perfect example. Yesterday, he was open about his struggles. Today, he's silent, despite clearly being lost*.

I diagnosed the issue and acted.

"Can I ask a question?"

Gertrude, mid-explanation in her group, stopped and looked at me.

"Go ahead."

"Could you start this topic again?" My face was perfectly straight. "Please?"

Gertrude's eye twitched slightly. "Deviations?"

"I meant quartiles and percentiles." I tilted my head innocently. "I have no idea what those mean."

Gertrude gritted her teeth, a flash of her short patience, but then something shifted in her expression. She took a breath and began.

"Quartiles are a type of quantile. They divide data points into four parts, or quarters, of roughly equal size."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully, then offered: "So it's like having a pizza with twelve slices. You want to share it among friends, so you cut the stack into four piles of three slices each. The lines where you cut, those are the quartiles?"

Gertrude stared at me with a blank expression. Then, slowly: "Yes. That's... actually a wonderful explanation."

Around the table, lightbulbs were going off. Students who had been too embarrassed to ask were now nodding, understanding dawning.

*Did I piss her off?* I wondered. *Probably. But she'll get used to it. I'm going to do this more often.*

Across the room, another interaction caught my attention.

"Hey, Flint! Can you help me with this?" Bennett called out.

Flint welcomed him warmly, drawing him into his group.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, students began migrating from Gertrude's table to Flint's. She didn't seem to mind at first, but as the trickle became a steady flow, her expression hardened.

Finally, she stood abruptly.

"Excuse me."

She walked away without another word. The remaining students at her table barely noticed, too absorbed in Flint's engaging teaching style.

I waited a beat, then followed.

---

I found her in the café's small library section, standing before a shelf of books, her back to me.

I appeared at her side without warning.

"Stop that." Her voice was cold.

I said nothing. When she reached for a book on a high shelf, I simply extended my arm and handed it to her.

She took it, not meeting my eyes.

"You're terrible at this," I said.

"Thanks for pointing out the obvious." Her shoulders slumped. The frustration bled through her usually controlled demeanor.

I leaned against the adjacent shelf. "You have to engage with them. Not just intellectually, emotionally. Egotistically."

She looked at me, puzzled.

"Flint isn't a better teacher because he knows more. He's a better teacher because of his methods. His approach. He communicates knowledge in a way that feels less like a chore and more like engagement." I picked up a random book, examining its cover as I spoke. "To paint a picture: you're like an old telephone. It can make calls. That's it. Flint is like a modern smartphone. It calls, but it also offers variety, features that don't overwhelm the user."

I set down the first book and picked up another, *The Prince* by Machiavelli.

"Offer people variety. Don't just give thorough explanations, give them reasons to listen. Throw in a joke. A relatable experience. A challenge." I turned to leave, then paused. "You'll need this. Not just as a tutor. But as the leader you plan to become."

I walked away, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

---

When she returned to the table and took her seat, a small smirk played on her lips.

I noticed the shift immediately, the change in her energy, her posture, her presence.

She caught my eye and pointed at her chest, then raised her voice.

"Who wants food? I'm exhausted and hungry from all this teaching."

Several students looked up, surprised by the sudden shift in tone.

I raised my hand lazily.

Gertrude's smirk widened. "I'll also pay for anyone's meal!"

Flint's head snapped toward her. So did several others.

"Pay for our meal?" someone echoed.

"Well—" Gertrude held up a finger. "What I *meant* to say is: I'll pay for the meal of anyone who can answer a question related to today's topic!"

Flint deflated visibly. The free meal wasn't so free after all.

Christa's hand shot up. "Quartiles always come in four, right?"

"Yes!" Gertrude nodded approvingly, a genuine smile breaking through. "Correct. And with that, I'll treat you to a meal."

Christa bounced up, following Gertrude toward the counter with obvious excitement. Mia grumbled about how simple the question had been.

Suddenly, students who had migrated to Flint's table were reconsidering. Two tutors meant two chances at a free meal. The dynamic had shifted.

I sat back, watching with quiet satisfaction. My expression betrayed nothing, but internally, I approved.

*Good. She's learning.*

A small, private thought followed:

*I could have won that meal for myself, though.*

___

Later, as the session wound down and students filtered out of the café in ones and twos, I found myself alone at the table with Flint.

The other boy was packing his materials with methodical precision, each notebook aligned, each pen capped and returned to its proper place. He didn't look up when he spoke.

"I was called by Flora."

I said nothing, waiting.

Flint continued, his voice measured. "Just a thought occurred to me, that you might have been the one to suggest she reach out. To ask me to join."

I regarded him with dull, unreadable eyes. "I'm not the one."

Silence followed. Heavy. Charged.

Flint continued packing, his movements unhurried. "I would have joined either way." He paused, then looked up, and when our eyes met, his expression had shifted. Something sharper lurked beneath the surface. Disdain, perhaps. Or suspicion.

"But I don't like being a little pawn in someone else's story."

The words hung in the air between us.

I shifted slowly in my seat, but my gaze remained steady. Dull. Unreadable.

"What do you mean?"

Flint cracked a smile, but it was strained, forced. The expression didn't reach his eyes. "I'm just mumbling. Forget about it." He gathered the last of his materials and stood. "Well, then. I'll see you at the next session. Bye."

He walked out without looking back.

The café door swung shut behind him, the little bell above it chiming softly.

I sat alone at the table, my expression unchanged. Several minutes passed, or perhaps only one. Time felt elastic in the sudden quiet.

Finally, I stood. My movements were unhurried, deliberate. I gathered my things with the same methodical precision Flint had displayed.

As I walked toward the door, a single thought surfaced, flat, practical, almost mundane.

*I should get something to eat.*

I pushed open the door and stepped out into the afternoon sun, leaving the weight of Flint's words behind.

Or trying to.

---

"Good afternoon, Sir Ashworth."

I stood in the doorway of the teachers' office, my posture neutral, my expression unreadable. The room was cluttered in the organized way of career academics, stacks of papers, reference books, a computer humming quietly in the corner.

The man behind the desk pushed his glasses down the bridge of his nose, inspecting me with the careful attention of someone who had seen too many students try too many things.

"Oh, Mr. Merlio, or Klein?"

"Merlio is fine."

A beat of silence followed as I crossed the room. The only sound was the soft rustle of my blazer fabric as I settled into the chair across from him.

Mr. Ashworth pushed aside a stack of files, creating space to rest his hands on the polished wood. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I sat perfectly still, my face blank. When I spoke, my voice was quiet, measured.

"I've come with a request."

"Go on." He rested his chin on his elbow, curiosity flickering behind his eyes.

"I'd like to sign a contract regarding the next written test."

Ashworth recoiled, a brief movement, quickly suppressed. He brushed off his discomfort with practiced ease.

"The next written test? You do know that's tomorrow, correct?"

I shrugged, the gesture almost lazy. "That's not the one I'm referring to. I'm talking about the test after this one. Not tomorrow's."

His eyes narrowed, suspicion flickering behind them.

I could almost hear his thoughts. *What's wrong with this student? Already losing faith that he'll fail tomorrow's test? How... endearing.*

Aloud, he said, "Okay, then. What about the next upcoming test?"

I placed my hands in my pockets, a casual gesture that I knew conveyed something else entirely. "You never told us about contracts, did you, Mr. Ashworth?"

The room went stale. Quiet in a way that felt suddenly oppressive.

Ashworth shifted in his chair, a rare display of discomfort. He muttered, almost to himself, "Indeed."

I waited.

"I didn't mention that, did I?" His voice was quieter now.

"You didn't."

*He got me figured out*, I imagined him thinking. *A little slip. A crack in the facade. And I saw it.*

But before he could dwell further, I continued.

"However. My terms are simple: I'll ace the test. And for every wrong answer, I'll pay 1,000 credits."

Ashworth's skepticism returned. I could see him calculating behind his eyes, running the numbers.

*He's desperate. Instead of focusing on tomorrow's test, he's trying to leverage the time window, buy himself space to study for the next one. But if that's the case, he'll need to develop strong study habits quickly. His mock test score placed him eighth, which isn't a testament to academic strength so much as surrounding mediocrity.*

He leaned back, and I watched the assessment continue across his features.

*Either way, I benefit. If he somehow passes the next test, I have a capable student in my class, and the assessments only get harder. But if he fails*... A small smile tugged at his lips. *The school still benefits. Credits circulate back into the system. Students have 10,000 credits total and a total of fifty questions. If he fails close to five questions, his total credit will plummet significantly.*

His eyes glittered with calculation.

*Even if he studies, the tests increase in difficulty exponentially. He can't magically close that gap. He'll fail at least three questions. Minimum*.

Ashworth chuckled lightly, the sound dry and knowing. "I see no issues."

I stared at him with an expression that seemed to peer past flesh and bone, into the very mechanisms of his thoughts. After a long moment, I replied, "Alright, then."

---

Ashworth typed up the contract with practiced efficiency, the keyboard clicking in the quiet room. When he finished, he slid the thick paper across the desk.

I took it, scanning the contents. The school's stamp occupied the lower left corner,official, immutable. But my eyes sought something else entirely.

**Name:** Klein Merlio
**Year:** Freshman
**Axis:** Eve

*The student has agreed to pass the next written test. However, for every wrong answer, he will compensate the school with 1,000 credits.*

***Note***:*Contracts must be fulfilled. Until terms are met, the student must remain on campus. Read manual for further information*.

I read it once. Twice. Then nodded in satisfaction. I produced a pen and signed with a fluid motion.

I slid it back across the desk.

"I have one last request, Sir Ashworth."

His interest piqued again. "I'm all ears."

I withdrew my phone and displayed a photograph, a student's face, familiar to anyone in Class B.

"Are you familiar with this student?"

Ashworth glanced at the image. "Of course. It's my duty to know every student in my class."

"Good." My voice remained flat. "During tomorrow's test, I want my score points allocated to him. If he falls below the average."

Ashworth shifted uncomfortably. The request had struck him like an unexpected blow.

"I'm not sure that's possible..."

My expression didn't change. "It is. If you name your price."

The room fell into silence again, heavier this time, charged with implication. He stared at me with calculating eyes.

"My price?"

"You said it yourself." My voice was calm, almost gentle. "As long as it has a price, it can be bought with credits."

He leaned forward slowly. "And you think I'll place a price on this because...?"

He let the sentence hang, unfinished.

We regarded each other across the desk, reading between lines that hadn't been written. A lock. A standoff.

Finally, he spoke. "Give me 6,000 credits, and I'll think about it."

For the first time, something flickered in my eyes, a slight widening, quickly controlled.

"That's cruel, sir."

"But—" He raised a hand, cutting off further protest. "You give me nothing. Not a single credit. If, you can actually score high enough in the first place."

I processed this. "So if I can't save him with points, I pay you. But if I do save him, I don't pay you. Is that correct?"

He nodded slowly.

*Good*, I thought. *He's underestimated my academic capabilities. Either that, or the next test is harder than I anticipated*. *Not a problem for me.*

I mirrored his nod and stood, walking toward the door. My hand hovered over the handle.

"And yes, Merlio."

I turned, my expression monotonous. "Hmm?"

"Don't disappoint me."

I stood there for several seconds, as if processing the weight of the words. Finally, I replied:

"Hopefully."

The door clicked shut behind me.

---

Alone in the office, I imagined Mr. Ashworth staring at the closed door for a long moment, then looking down at the contract, my signature fresh on the page.

He would file the document away and return to his work, but the encounter would linger at the edges of his mind.

Rain.

It fell outside the classroom windows in steady sheets, each drop tapping against the glass like a thousand tiny reminders of the weight pressing down on us. The sky was a uniform grey, depressing, suffocating, appropriate.

Beside me, Flint sat uncomfortably in his chair, shifting every few minutes as if he couldn't find a position that eased whatever was coiling inside him. The classroom was filled with heavy silence and tension, broken only by the scratch of pens and the occasional nervous cough.

I glanced around discreetly. Some students stared at their test papers with expressions of utter confusion, eyebrows furrowed, mouths slightly open, as if the questions were written in a language they'd never seen. Others had already given up, their pens resting on desks, their gazes fixed on nothing.

A drop of sweat rolled down the side of my head.

I felt Mr. Ashworth's gaze on me, daring, probing, watching my every side glance. I waved my hand slightly, a small acknowledgment, and returned my attention to the paper.

Behind me, a voice muttered. Very low, almost a breath, but loud enough for me to catch.

Tess Oberlin. One of Mia's circle. Pamela's close friend. She was whispering something to herself, encouragement, probably. Or despair.

At the front of me, Dorian rubbed his head vigorously but didn't stop writing. His expression held something I hadn't expected: determination. Genuine, stubborn determination.

"Mr. Merlio!"

Mr. Ashworth's voice cut through the quiet like a blade. I looked up.

"Sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

He held my gaze for a moment longer than necessary, then returned to monitoring the room.

I looked down at my test sheet.

Fifty questions. From a single glance, you could tell this wasn't just an assessment, it was a filtration system.

Twenty-five questions were straightforward: simultaneous equations, definitions of economic terms, lists of importance. The kind of questions that separated those who paid attention from those who didn't.

The other twenty-five were something else entirely. Complex questions disguised as puzzles, woven together from multiple subjects. They didn't test memorization, they tested whether you could think. Whether you could see connections where others saw only confusion.

Attempting those questions meant you possessed at least a general but deep understanding of multiple disciplines. Not mastery, but synthesis. The ability to weave knowledge together.

This further solidified my theory about the school's approach. They weren't testing what we knew. They were testing how we thought.

I worked through the questions methodically. By the time I reached question forty, I heard the shuffle of papers from the front.

Hanman Durant was standing, his completed test in hand. Mr. Ashworth glanced over it briefly, nodded, and placed it on his desk. Hanman left without a backward glance, his footsteps echoing in the silent corridor.

I finished my remaining questions but didn't move.

Instead, I sat still, pen in hand, staring at my paper as if deep in thought. As if I had no idea what else to write.

The reason was simple: there was a time limit. One hour and thirty minutes. And I wanted to avoid any questions about why I'd finished so early.

So I waited.

Twenty-five minutes left on the clock.

Fifteen minutes.

"Fifteen minutes remaining!" Mr. Ashworth's voice cut through the room like a starting pistol.

Panic rippled through the class. Students who had been frozen in indecision suddenly scrambled. The rule was clear: once he left the classroom, no more papers would be accepted.

Everyone rushed to place their sheets on the stack at his desk.

I slipped into the current of bodies and added mine to the pile.

Stepping back into the hallway, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

**What an experience*, I thought.

—

The hallway stretched endlessly in both directions, or at least, that's how it must have felt for some of my classmates. I stood by the vending machine, a can of popping grapes in my hand, watching the flow of students like a river of varying emotions.

I emptied the can slowly.

Dorian walked past me. His expression stopped me cold, soul-crushing, defeated, hollow. The kind of look that said more than words ever could.

My face shifted. I let it morph into something empathetic, something human. He noticed. He walked back to my side and slotted a coin into the machine. A beverage clattered down and landed in the retrieval compartment.

He hesitated.

His hand hovered over the can, fingers twitching. Then he grabbed it, peeled it open, and gulped the contents down like medicine.

I watched him closely.

I wanted to ask. The words formed in my mind: *How did it go?* But I knew the implications of such a question. The weight it would carry. The answer was already written on his face.

*It didn't go well*.

My mind pointed out the obvious, and I let it.

We stood there together, two figures in the flow of students passing by. Some wore expressions of shared disdain toward the test's difficulty. Others clutched something else, false hope, perhaps. Or was it the opium of faith? That dangerous belief that your abilities would be enough in an environment designed to prove they weren't.

Either way, it soured the mood of what had once been vibrant hallways.

---

Dorian eventually departed toward his hostel. I took a different path.

I boarded a bus to the entertainment sector, heading for the school's gymnasium. When I arrived, something had changed.

The entrance, usually occupied by clusters of first years, was now controlled by seniors. They stood in small groups, laughing, their voices carrying.

"I remember looking like that during our first test," one of them said, gesturing toward a group of dejected first years nearby.

The sentence snagged my attention. It dangled on a thread of possibility: either this senior was genuinely capable but modest about his abilities, or the same opium of false hope was being applied here, years later. It was impossible to tell which.

I brushed past their conversation and headed toward the football field.

The stands were mostly empty. Evening was approaching, the grey sky beginning to darken. My eyes scanned the seats and landed on a familiar figure.

I made my way toward her.

When she spotted me, I raised my hand in a small wave. She looked away deliberately.

I sighed.

I reached her row and stood, not taking a seat. She looked up at me with a judging expression but said nothing.

I let the silence build.

Seconds passed. Then a minute. She didn't speak.

Finally, I sat down next to her.

"Gertrude?"

Instead of replying, she rubbed her temples. The gesture was heavy, weighted with something deeper than test anxiety.

Her stress was visible, but it wasn't the test. It was something heavier. Something relational.

I pieced it together silently. If the test had been difficult for her, and I suspected it hadn't been, that wasn't the source. The source was the people she'd taught. The students who had looked to her for guidance.

If they failed, she would become someone to blame.

It sounded unrealistic on the surface. But yes, something like that could happen. Would happen. In an environment this competitive, blame flowed downhill, and tutors were convenient targets.

I watched her profile as she stared at the field, the evening light beginning to fade.

*What I'm concerned with*, I thought, is *whether she understands that there are three possible outcomes arranged before her. Three paths. Three futures.*

*Gertrude, which are you going to choose?*

The thought hammered in my head as the illuminance of the field's bright lights flickered to life, pushing back the evening darkness.

Tomorrow, our class's fate would be decided.

The rain had stopped, but the clouds remained.

—

The classroom yet again maintained its quiet atmosphere, that suffocating silence that had become familiar over the past days. Merlio sat with his eyes closed, patient, waiting. Around him, the weight of anticipation pressed down on everyone like a physical force.

He opened his eyes and glanced sideways. Most students wore uncomfortable expressions, fidgeting, sweating, chewing on lips. All except two.

Emilia Honor sat perfectly still, her posture radiating confidence. Hanman Durant, as always, seemed utterly untroubled, as if the concept of academic failure was beneath his notice.

These two seem very confident, Merlio observed. I probably look like them as well. Should I act the part of a student who's certain they failed?

He considered it for a moment.

Too much effort.

He rested his chin on his hand and waited.

The door opened. Mr. Ashworth entered with a controlled expression, his movements deliberate, measured. He didn't acknowledge the class. Instead, he walked directly to the board and began writing.

First, he listed every name in Class B. Then he added two columns: Score and Deviation.

When he finished, he wrote one more line at the bottom:

**73 AVERAGE.**

He circled the number three times, each rotation of the marker squeaking against the board like a knife on glass.

Then he turned to face them.

His expression was sharp, judging. His eyes swept across the room, lingering on certain students, dismissing others. When he spoke, his voice carried the weight of absolute authority, and something else. Something darker.

"Threshold here is 10 points away from average. Fall below it, and you're expelled.” He said as he gaze surveyed the class, “Shall we?"

The sarcasm dripped from each syllable. A sadistic smirk played at the corner of his mouth.

Without waiting for a response, none would have come, he turned back to the board and began writing the numbers.

---

**THE TOP TIER (Above Average)**

**Rank Name | Score | Deviation**
1 Hanman Durant | 98 | +25
2 Emilia Honor | 95 | +22
3 Flin Woods | 92 | +19
4 Gertrude Hildegard | 89| +16
5 Flora Hans | 87 | +14
6 Emily Swerve | 86 | +13
7 Winston Montgomery | 84| +11
8 Dorian Pryce | 82| +9
9 Silas Ferguson | 80| +7
10 Emerson Ave | 79 | +6

Audible sighs of relief rippled through the room. Shoulders slumped. Hands unclenched. Students who had been holding their breath for what felt like hours finally exhaled.

From the corner of his eye, Merlio saw Gertrude's tensed shoulders drop. But then something else happened, her eyes widened slightly, and she turned toward his seat.

Merlio had already returned his gaze to the board.

Dorian, however, was a different story entirely. He shot up from his seat as if launched, pumping his fist into the air with tears of joy streaming down his face.

"YES!"

The celebration lasted exactly two seconds before Mr. Ashworth's glare pinned him back to his chair. But even seated, Dorian vibrated with barely contained elation, his expression a mixture of disbelief and ecstasy.

How did I make the top ten? his face seemed to ask.

Emilia scoffed at the display. Flora giggled quietly.

---

**THE MIDDLE TIER (Near Average)**

**Rank Name** | **Score** | **Deviation**
11 Christa Glen | 76 | +3
12 Mia David | 75 | +2
13 Chad Blare | 74 |+1
14 Justin Clearance | 73| 0
15 Everett Cent | 72 | −1
16 Caspian Bale | 71 | −2
17 Jian Xuan | 70 | −3
18 Bennett | 68 |−5

The tension in the room ratcheted higher. Everyone knew what came next.

Mr. Ashworth's marker squeaked against the board as he wrote the final list.

---

**THE BOTTOM TIER (Below Threshold)**

**Rank Name | Score | Deviation**
19 Null Heednick | 65 |−8
20 Clide Goodman| 63 | −10
21 Klein Merlio| 62 | −11
22 Lina Marchetti | 59 | −14
23 Tess Oberlin| 57 |−16
24 Simon Voss | 54 |−19
25 Pincer Clerk| 48 | −25

Gertrude's head snapped toward Merlio so fast he heard her neck crack. Her expression shifted through several emotions, confusion, concern, worry, before settling on something unreadable.

Merlio glanced at her with his usual blank expression, then returned his gaze to the board.

Flint studied him from the corner of his eye. Merlio noticed but didn't react.

What a terrible performance, Flint thought, his internal voice dismissive. Despite grasping some of Gertrude's teachings in the study group... Quite pitiful. Maybe I judged you too soon.

The list meant one thing, and everyone in the room understood it.

Expulsions.

Slowly, inevitably, every head turned toward Pincer.

His expression shifted through several stages: disbelief first, then something like acceptance, and finally a calm that seemed almost too controlled. Too practiced.

Dorian's face crumpled with worry for his friend.

I wonder, Merlio thought, watching Pincer's carefully constructed facade, if he really doesn't mind being expelled. Two years of military corps service isn't something the average person finds pleasant these days.

Mr. Ashworth cleared his throat, commanding attention.

"Now then." His voice was calm, almost conversational. "As you can see, each question carried two marks. We didn't disclose that to you beforehand."

The room's usual vibrancy had been draining for two days. Now it was nearly gone.

Mr. Ashworth began walking down the rows, his footsteps measured, deliberate. "However, that's not what matters. I did warn you."

Pamela looked at Tess with dawning horror, finally understanding what was coming.

"And yes, I mentioned the threshold mechanism. But here's the truth." He paused, letting the silence stretch. "Students who fall more than ten points below the average will be expelled. Immediately."

Merlio sat perfectly still as Mr. Ashworth stopped at his row, standing over him.

The air went still. The only sound was the beating of hearts, too fast, too loud in the silence.

Mr. Ashworth looked down at Merlio with narrowed eyes.

Gertrude understood the implication immediately. Merlio had fallen eleven points below the average. The threshold was ten.

He'll be expelled.

Mr. Ashworth held the gaze for a long, uncomfortable minute. Then he withdrew a sheet of paper from his jacket.

"If your name is on this list, please collect your belongings from your hostel. You will be issued an expulsion letter with immediate effect."

No one spoke. No one whispered. The students in question already knew, it was on the board for everyone to see.

But knowing and hearing were different things.

"Pincer Clerk."

Pincer clicked his tongue, irritation flashing across his features. But his eyes, his eyes were red-rimmed, betraying the calm facade.

"Simon Voss."

Gertrude's attention sharpened. Simon had been attending the study group consistently. He'd tried. He'd genuinely tried.

Simon removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. His calm expression cracked, then shattered. Emotions stormed across his face, confusion, denial, grief. He tried to speak, but his throat closed around the words. His eyes blurred.

"Tess Oberlin."

Before Mr. Ashworth could finish the name, Tess broke. Silent tears became audible sobs. Her carefully applied makeup ran in dark streaks down her face, transforming her into something raw and human and utterly broken.

Mr. Ashworth walked to her desk and stood over her. "You're excused, Miss Oberlin." No warmth. No comfort. Just efficient procedure.

Tess sobbed harder. She stood on shaking legs and walked out of the classroom, each step a small death.

Pamela wiped her own eyes and nodded, at what, no one knew.

"Lina Marchetti."

Lina stood and walked out without a backward glance. Her expression didn't change. If she felt anything, she didn't show it.

Pincer followed, hands in his pockets, affecting indifference that fooled no one.

Gertrude's face twisted with pity as she looked at Merlio.

He's going to be expelled.

Mr. Ashworth looked at his list. The room waited for the final name.

But the man simply walked to his desk, gathered his books, and addressed the class as if nothing had happened.

"Have a good day. And remember to check your credit deposits for this month."

He left.

The door clicked shut behind him.

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Silence.

Then chaos.

Gertrude's eyes widened. She doubted reality for a moment, recalculating furiously in her head.

He was eleven points below the average. The threshold is ten. That's one point over. One point. But he's still here. How? Did I calculate wrong?

She stood, intending to reach Merlio, but someone else got there first.

Emilia Honor and her friends blocked Merlio's path before he could move.

"You." Emilia's voice dripped with smug suspicion. "Why aren't you expelled?"

Merlio looked up at her with his resting face. "Lucked out hard, I guess?"

Emilia's eyes narrowed. "You don't 'luck out' pure math. You were eleven points below average. Net negative eleven. But here you are. Still sitting."

Around them, the classroom had gone quiet again. Every student watched, waiting for his answer.

Merlio scratched the back of his head, the picture of awkward cluelessness. "Gee. I guess I don't know."

Flora stepped forward, her voice gentle. "Maybe Mr. Ashworth wrote the wrong numbers?"

Emilia scoffed, the sound sharp and dismissive. "Don't be stupid, Flora honey~" She leaned in close to Merlio, close enough that he could smell her perfume, expensive, cloying.

"I know whatever the reason is, it sure helped you conveniently."

Merlio stepped back, his shoulders tensing almost imperceptibly. Emilia caught the micro-expression, the nervousness, and smiled. She'd gotten what she wanted.

She snapped her fingers. Flora and the others fell into step behind her as she walked away.

But Flora glanced back, mouthing two words: Sorry for that.

Merlio nodded almost imperceptibly.

Gertrude appeared at his side as the last of Emilia's entourage departed.

"We need to talk."

Merlio looked at her, at the concern etched into her features, the questions burning behind her eyes, and gave a single, slow nod.

"Yes," he said quietly. "We do."

---

---

Outside, the rain had stopped. Grey clouds still hung overhead, but somewhere beyond them, the sun was trying to break through.

Merlio walked beside Gertrude, their footsteps synchronized on the wet pavement.

"You're going to explain," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I am."

"And it better be good."

Merlio glanced at her. For a moment, something flickered behind his dull eyes, amusement, perhaps. Or satisfaction.

"I think," he said carefully, "you'll find it interesting."

Gertrude stopped walking. He stopped with her.

"Merlio." Her voice was low, intense. "What did you do?"

He considered the question. How much to tell? How much to hold back?

Finally, he answered with characteristic ambiguity:

"What needed to be done."

He started walking again, leaving her standing alone on the path.

After a moment, she followed.

The gloomy clouds never went away.

I stood and watched Merlio walking away with his hands in his pockets, his figure growing smaller against the grey expanse of the campus. But as the rain started picking up, first a few drops, then a steady rhythm, he stopped.

He turned to me slowly. His expression was unreasonable, somehow. Not confused, not frustrated. Just... unreasonable. Like he'd just remembered something inconvenient.

"It's raining again."

He stated it as if I might not have noticed. Then, apparently remembering he hadn't brought an umbrella, he walked back toward the cover of the overhang where I stood.

He came to my side and we both watched the rain together. Droplets hammered against the stone slabs of the school grounds, releasing that distinctive earthy smell, petrichor, that overrode everything else in the atmosphere. Clean. Fresh. Deceptively pure.

"Klein."

I said his name but didn't look at him.

"What is it?" His voice was monotone as always.

"I'm confused." I paused, choosing my words carefully. "How are you still here?"

He turned to me with something almost like amusement. "You want me expelled?"

"Don't be stupid." The words came out sharper than I intended. "I'm just wondering."

He went silent. His eyes stared off into the distance, watching students with umbrellas walk past in a montage that felt almost ethereal. The rain created a soft-focus effect, turning the campus into something between reality and dream. Depressing, but strangely beautiful.

"Gertrude." His voice pulled me from my thoughts. "I'm a bit surprised you haven't figured it out."

I looked at him slowly. "Yeah?"

"Remember the credit system?"

"Obviously."

He shifted, adjusting his stance. "I figured out that Mr. Ashworth withheld important information from us."

My brow furrowed. "Isn't that all in the manual he gave us on the first day?"

Merlio shook his head. "No. That's just a hoax." He reached into his bag and withdrew the slim booklet. "There's nothing in here about the credit system as we theorized it. Just that we can spend credits on things. Basic transaction information."

He flipped to page fifteen and handed it to me.

"Here. There's a discrepancy about transferring credits. It mentions mutual agreements between students—that's possible. But what about transfers to the school itself? Not for buying food or products, but as an institution? As a body?"

I read the page carefully, then looked back at him. My hand moved to my chin, rubbing thoughtfully as I worked through the implications.

"If we can't transfer to the school willingly, there must be some kind of procedure, right? Some mechanism?"

Merlio tucked his hands in his pockets and waited. He was letting me work it out myself—his usual approach.

I pressed further. "Something to be signed... A contract?"

He gave me a side glance—affirmative, approving.

"Yes." He turned to face me fully, and for a moment, his lazy pupils sharpened into something more focused. "Contracts. What does that tell you?"

"That this manual isn't actually a hoax." The words came faster as the pieces connected. "Just incomplete. Important information has been cut out. If one piece can be removed, more can be removed. Combined with the nature of the credit system..." I looked down at the booklet in my hands. "But this is twenty pages long."

"Meaning it's just a brushstroke," Merlio concluded. "A hint at the bigger picture. The actual manual is either purposely made this way, or this isn't the real one at all."

I wasn't satisfied. "So what happened to the real manual? If the latter is correct?"

He muttered, almost to himself, "I can't say for sure. But it's possible Mr. Ashworth deliberately withheld it."

"That doesn't make sense." I shook my head. "Why would he want his class operating on limited information? Wouldn't that harm us in the long run?" I considered another angle. "Unless he's conditioning our reasoning skills?"

Merlio dismissed this with a small shake of his head. "I doubt that's the reason. Reasoning can be sharpened with vivid clues—especially for average students, which I'm assuming most of us are. But the way this manual is presented doesn't reward that approach."

"Then what is it?" I pressed.

He looked at me with those sharpening eyes. "If students are evaluated by merit... how do you think teachers are evaluated?"

My mind scrambled to keep up. "Teachers have a fixed salary, no?"

"Not in this institution." His voice was calm, certain. "If teachers had fixed pay, Ashworth's actions would be meaningless. There'd be no motive."

A bead of sweat rolled down my temple despite the cool rain.

"Let's assume teachers are also evaluated by merit," Merlio continued. "But in their case, it's based on how their teaching impacts student performance. If we perform poorly, his pay decreases—just like our credit decreases when we perform poorly."

*So class credit directly impacts his earnings,* I realized. *And since credit functions as the school's economic system...*

But something still nagged at me.

"I still don't understand why he'd withhold the manual."

Merlio tilted his head. "If you were a teacher, Gertrude, what would you do to maximize your earnings?"

"Share the manual, obviously." The answer came easily. "Give students the information they need to maintain good behavior and involvement. That would boost personal credit and, by extension, class credit."

Merlio shook his head slowly.

"No," he said. "The best course of action is to eliminate students who'll drag the class down. Those who aren't academically capable are dead weight. And specialists—those who rely on one skill—will eventually be eliminated too. Being a specialist isn't enough. It's just a cover for academic weakness."

The realization hit me like a physical force.

"So by eliminating students," I said slowly, "he ensures only the best performers remain. In the short term, it looks like he's sabotaging his own class. But strategically..." I trailed off.

"Exactly." Merlio snapped his fingers. "If he kept low-performing students, they'd drag down class credit. Eventually, the system would flush them out anyway—but that takes time. This way, he accelerates the process. Specialists who rely too heavily on one area get removed early."

My head felt light. The pieces clicked into place with terrible clarity.

"That's... brutal." The images flashed through my mind—the expelled students, their expressions haunting me. Tess's ruined makeup. Simon's shattered composure. Pincer's red-rimmed eyes.

Merlio shrugged, utterly nonchalant. "Well. Now you know."

He stepped forward toward the drizzling weather, then stopped abruptly.

"I don't want to get wet."

I stared at him. "..."

Then I remembered. "Wait—you still haven't told me how *you* aren't expelled!"

For just a moment—a fraction of a second—his lips curved into something. A very faint smile. Then it was gone.

"It's all in the paperwork, Gertrude."

I stood watching as he weighed his options, clearly debating whether to make a run for it. Without thinking, I reached into my bag and pulled out one of my umbrellas—black, simple, practical.

I held it out to him.

"Here."

He looked down at the umbrella, then back at me. "Thanks."

He took it but didn't move. Just stood there, staring.

"What?" I asked, uncomfortable under his gaze.

"What are you going to use?"

"I have three."

"Lies."

I opened my bag and showed him. Three umbrellas, different colors, neatly rolled.

"See?"

His expression didn't change, but something in his posture shifted. "Why didn't you offer me one sooner?"

I reached to snatch the umbrella back from his ungrateful hands, but he stepped back smoothly, dodging my grab.

"Sorry." His voice was flat, but there was something underneath it. "But I'm grateful."

*What a strange boy*.

I watched as he opened the umbrella and walked into the rain, his figure gradually disappearing into the grey.

The clouds showed no sign of clearing.

But somehow, the world felt a little less heavy than before.

The rays of the morning sun cut through the stained glass windows of the classroom, casting warm, colored light across every surface. Reds and blues and golds painted the desks, the floor, the faces of the students who sat in unusual silence.

Class B was quiet. Too quiet.

I looked down at my phone, the screen glowing with my updated account balance.

PETSONAL CREDIT: 4,000 CREDIT

"What the hell!?" Caspian's voice shattered the silence like a rock through glass.

I cast a glance at the delinquent, then returned my gaze to the board. My expression didn't change.

"Caspian, could you... not shout, please?" Gertrude's voice carried an edge of irritation.

Caspian gestured wildly at his phone. "How am I supposed to do that? We got 4,000 credits this month! Four thousand!"

Gertrude glanced instinctively toward my seat. I kept my gaze fixed elsewhere, boredom radiating from my posture. She turned back to Caspian.

"Everyone received 4,000 credits. You don't see them acting like hooligans."

Caspian clicked his tongue and folded his arms, slouching back in his chair. "Okay. I get it."

Mia watched the exchange with something approaching amusement. "Well, that was easy."

From across the room, Emilia's voice carried just loud enough to be heard: "What a prick in the skin."

Caspian's head snapped toward her. "What did you say to me, you preppy queen?!"

He slammed his palm against his desk and half-rose, but before he could take a step, Winston Montgomery was there, moving with surprising speed for someone his size, inserting himself between Caspian and Emilia's table.

"I don't think you want to do that," Winston said calmly.

Caspian's jaw tightened. His fists clenched. For a moment, the air crackled with potential violence.

Then he turned and dropped back into his seat.

Flint stood, his voice measured and reasonable. "Look. We're all in a tough position. But things might get better."

"What are you on about?" Caspian's tone was still sharp.

"What I'm trying to say is, the school knows surviving on 4,000 credits won't be enough. There has to be an alternative. Some other way."

Mia nodded eagerly. "I agree with Flint. The school can't just leave us hanging... right?"

I rested my head on my hand, my expression utterly passive. Gertrude rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"That does make sense," she said slowly. "They wouldn't want their students to suffer from lack of financial support." She glanced at me again, then continued. "The best we can do for now is probably manage with the free items from shops and the school-paid meals at the cafeteria."

"I can't survive on that bland food!" Christa protested, her voice rising.

"Everyone settle down."

The voice came from the door. Mr. Ashworth stood there, a thick stack of manuals in his arms.

He walked to the front of the room and placed them on his desk. "Mia, could you help distribute these?"

Mia's eyebrows rose. "Haven't you already given us manuals?"

Mr. Ashworth's face shifted into something unpleasant, a despicable smirk that didn't reach his eyes.

"That was nothing." He patted the stack. "This is the real thing."

I raised my head slightly, taking in the scene. Gertrude's eyes widened, and she shot me a look of dawning understanding.

*The real manual,* we both thought simultaneously.

From the back of the room, Hanman scoffed. "Of course. Expected from a teacher in this school."

Mr. Ashworth glanced at the boy but said nothing. Didn't ask what he meant. Didn't challenge the implication.

I noted this exchange carefully. *Hanman already picking up clues is apparently normal. Not surprising to Mr. Ashworth at all.*

Flint raised his hand. "With all due respect, sir, isn't withholding information from your students counterintuitive? Wouldn't it harm our performance?"

Mr. Ashworth nodded, almost appreciatively. "Understandable question. But it was the best course of action as a teacher." He paused, letting the words settle. "Now that the initial filtering is complete, the class is more uniform in ability. With time, we'll filter out the finer particles still clogging the machine."

Students exchanged uneasy glances.

"With that said," Mr. Ashworth continued, "today's topic is a full explanation of the credit system."

Gertrude sat up straighter, focus sharpening in her eyes. Flint did the same.

"There are two types of credit." Mr. Ashworth turned to the board and wrote:

**PERSONAL CREDIT • CLASS CREDIT**

"One influences the other. Class credit affects personal credit, and vice versa. They're interconnected."

He drew three pillars beneath the words:

**ACADEMICS • SOCIAL SKILLS • PHYSICAL PROWESS**

"These are the three pillars supporting personal credit." He circled each one as he spoke. "What you need to understand is that while this school holds scholars in high regard, the Eve Axis emphasizes practical application of knowledge. Hence the other two pillars."

He pointed directly at Caspian. "Which means you're evaluated based on excellence in the area where you're most versed."

Mia raised her hand tentatively. "Does the school assume everyone is the absolute best in one of these pillars?"

Mr. Ashworth chuckled, a dry, knowing sound. "Why, of course. If you consider what I've said about practical application, the other two pillars emerge naturally from that foundation. Physical prowess. Social skills. A simplistic toolkit for every individual in society."

He wrote again on the board:

**BASE ASSUMPTION: EVERY STUDENT EXCELS IN ONE PILLAR**

**REWARD: 10,000 CREDIT**

"Failure to meet the expected value in your chosen pillar will result in reduced deposits the following month." He paused. "Though that depends significantly on class performance."

Gertrude's hand shot up. "If that's true, then class performance must be the aggregate impression of every student here."

"Exactly." Mr. Ashworth nodded approvingly. "That is class credit. It acts as a bonus added to your personal credit earnings."

Flora spoke up, confusion evident. "I thought 10,000 was the ceiling? That made sense, the school rewards peak students in each domain with exactly that amount."

Gertrude answered before Mr. Ashworth could. "It does make sense, but it's also the school's way of forcing cooperation. If one student damages our reputation, everyone suffers. Our class credit bonus gets cut." She turned to Mr. Ashworth. "I'm assuming that's also capped at 10,000?"

Mr. Ashworth nodded slowly. "Sharp. Though I should clarify, there is no ceiling to a student's total earnings. The primary sources have caps. Combined, personal and class credit can reach 20,000 per month."

He wrote on the board again:

**CLASS 1B CURRENT STANDING: 4,000 CLASS CREDIT**

**APPROXIMATE RESULTING DEPOSIT: 14,000 CREDIT**

The faces around the room hardened.

"The school's record for lowest class economy is 2,000 Class credit." Mr. Ashworth's voice was calm, almost clinical. "You still have hope. For now."

Mia scratched her head nervously. Gertrude's expression was unreadable. I stared at something in the middle distance, my thoughts clearly elsewhere.

A boy near the back, Everett Cent, spoke up, his voice carrying a dark edge that slowly transformed into a smug smile.

"So you're saying you withheld the real manual deliberately. To get some students expelled."

Mr. Ashworth neither confirmed nor denied. He simply chuckled, a low, rumbling sound that filled the room with uncomfortable implication.

"I'll leave that for you to decide." He gathered his materials, then paused at the door as if remembering something. "Oh. And remember, the Project is coming soon."

My head lifted slightly. A small sound escaped me. "Mmm?"

"Project?"

A crimson-haired boy with a sharp, hard expression walked down the pathways of the campus, his footsteps measured and deliberate. Two lackeys followed behind him like shadows, matching strides, matching smirks, matching malice.

Dennis Fisher and Wasckus Fisher. Twins. Both wore sly, sadistic expressions that made students instinctively step aside as they passed.

I paid no attention to the parting crowds. My focus was forward, fixed on my destination.

De Patel Rose. The café had become something of a neutral ground on campus, a place where students from different classes could coexist in relative peace. At least, usually.

Today, as I and my entourage approached, the students gathered near the entrance shifted uneasily.

"Yeah... we should get moving."

"I agree."

Murmurs spread like ripples. Within moments, the entrance was empty.

I chuckled softly and walked inside.

---

The café's interior hummed with the usual sounds, quiet conversations, the clink of cups, the rustle of pages. Students sat in small groups, some studying, others simply enjoying the atmosphere.

Then I appeared.

Conversations dimmed. Voices dropped to whispers. Eyes followed my progress through the room.

I paid them no attention. My focus was on a specific table in the corner, where two students sat utterly unconcerned by my presence.

One had ginger hair and a hard expression that matched my own. Nero. The other, with black hair and a more relaxed demeanor, was Thiesa, though the boy's uniform did little to hide the feminine features beneath.

As my group approached, both students looked up.

Nero smacked his lips in annoyance. Thiesa continued eating strawberry cake, unbothered.

"Yo." My voice was casual, almost friendly. "Mind if I take a seat?"

Thiesa opened her mouth to respond, but Nero cut in sharply. "I would, in fact, mind you taking a seat."

I sat down anyway.

I glanced back at the twins and waved a hand. They retreated to nearby empty tables, still watching, still waiting.

"Good morning to you too, Nero." Amusement colored my voice.

Nero's eyes narrowed. "I don't give a crap about that. The morning's already ruined because you're here."

I raised my head, meeting Nero's sharp gaze directly. "Now you seem awfully hostile. Care to explain why?" Sarcasm dripped from every syllable.

"I don't think we gotta spell it out for ya," Thiesa interjected, cheeks stuffed with strawberries.

I tilted my head. "Oh, I see. You're talking about the culling in Class D?"

"Glad you can remember correctly, old man." Nero's voice was ice.

Thiesa swallowed and waved a hand. "Actually, it's not his fault. The culling happened because Class C's homeroom teacher withheld information. That's not really Blake's doing."

Nero rubbed the bridge of his nose, frustration evident. "That's not the point. It's his sniveling approach to using it as an advantage."

I leaned back, letting the accusation hang. Then I spoke, my voice calm and measured.

"In a setting like this, being a snake is more beneficial than being a diplomatic lion. A lion may be proud of its strength, but in a pit of snakes, that strength means nothing."

"Again with that bullshit." Nero's voice rose slightly. "You think everyone's going to become a snake just like you?"

"Not uncertain." My eyes glinted. "It's inevitable, really. Especially given my goals."

Thiesa giggled, a light, incongruous sound.

I glanced at her, surveying. "Why the boy's uniform?"

Silence.

Nero reclined further in his seat. Thiesa licked her thumbs clean before responding, a playful smile on her lips.

"Can't a girl wear a boy's uniform anymore? I think it's cute!"

I studied her for a long moment. "...Interesting."

I let the observation pass. "That's beside the point. Since we're all in the same class, I figured I'd share my recent endeavors."

Nero didn't object. He folded his arms, waiting. Thiesa's eyes glittered with curiosity.

"Class D is now in an alliance with us," I continued. "That gives me hope that my larger goals might be achievable."

Nero's sharp gaze intensified. "I see. Control over the entire year."

The atmosphere around the table grew tense. I closed my eyes and nodded slowly.

"Indeed."

"Ehh?" Thiesa whispered, confused.

Nero leaned forward. "How did you get control of Class D?"

I shrugged, confidence radiating from every line of my posture. "Thiesa actually stated a crucial piece earlier. After the culling, Class D was left with fifteen students. That was triggered by the assumption that every student is capable, which left the struggling ones expelled by the end of the three-week assessment."

Nero rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Their class credit must be abysmal."

"Of course. Expulsion affects class credit significantly. The rate of expulsion is a factor, just like social abilities and academics. Damage one pillar, and your class credit drops. Damage all three..."

"And if you damage all three," Thiesa whispered, "your class credit falls to zero."

Nero's eyes widened slightly. "Fifteen students. Ten whole students expelled. Just like that?"

"Surprised me too." My voice held genuine wonder. "I never thought a class would go that route. At most, students share information. At minimum, they try to minimize expulsions. It's supposed to be a filtering mechanism, not a culling."

Thiesa frowned. "If that's the case, shouldn't their class credit be zero? They ticked every box, high expulsion rate, low academic ability, drop in social capabilities."

"Yes," I agreed. "Their class credit is the lowest in the entire year. The only thing saving them is their intellectual students, who raise the class average in that specific pillar. That's what triggered the expulsions in the first place, the gap between the capable and the struggling became too wide."

I leaned forward, my voice dropping. "But here's the thing. When class credit is that low, you end up with a divided class. The academically strong students do well because of their personal credit. The struggling students suffer, no bonus from class credit, and still not enough to raise their personal accounts."

I paused, letting that sink in. "It becomes an oligarchy. A plutocracy. But the existence of Class S makes that thinking obsolete."

Nero's eyes narrowed to slits. "You're pointing out that graduating into Class S is impossible if the class is divided."

I smiled and pointed at him. "Exactly. That's why the only path to Class S is through collective effort. A community. A unified class. That requires bringing the two factions together."

Nero's glare intensified. Thiesa's eyes widened with dawning understanding.

"Did you do something else, Blake?" Nero's voice was low, dangerous.

I didn't answer verbally. Instead, I snapped my fingers.

Wasckus Fisher materialized at my side instantly. "Problem, Blake?" His eyes flicked to Nero with predatory interest. "I could take care of it if there is."

"That's not why you're here." My voice was calm. "Bring the file."

Wasckus hesitated for half a second, then nodded. He returned to his table and came back with a slim folder.

"Here."

I took it and slid it across the table to Nero. "See for yourself."

Nero snatched the file, his eyes never leaving my face.

"Let me see, let me see!" Thiesa bounced in her seat.

"Keep it down, you jackass." Nero shoved her shoulder, then opened the folder.

His eyes scanned the document inside. A contract. His eyebrows rose as he read further.

**CONTRACT OF MUTUAL ASSISTANCE**
**Between Class A and Class D**

- Class A will transfer 50,000 personal credit to Class D every month.
- In return, Class D will provide academic assistance during written examinations.
- Failure to fulfill terms will result in a penalty of 20,000 personal credit to the breaching party.

Nero looked up slowly. "You bastard."

I examined my nails, utterly unconcerned.

"Class A will transfer credit to struggling students in Class D. In exchange, they help us with exams." Nero's voice was flat. "And if either side fails, a twenty-thousand credit penalty."

"That's the summary, yes."

Nero closed the file. "You're a snake. And you'll always be one."

I chuckled. "What? I'm just being resourceful."

"Your own gain here is counterintuitive." Nero's eyes narrowed. "Class A is supposed to be the best. We didn't even have a single expulsion. Our students are versed in all three pillars."

"Your first assumption is wrong." My voice sharpened slightly. "There's no class where every student is an all-rounder. That's statistically impossible. But me 'hoarding' struggling students isn't without purpose."

I raised my hands, framing my next words. "There's an illusion of ranking in this school. Class credit suggests one class is simply better. But when Class A, the 'best', asks Class D for academic assistance, that illusion shatters."

Nero's brow furrowed.

"Sylone Selvester, Class D's representative, is the cautious type. Too cautious about everything." My smile widened. "He'll either overthink this or underestimate us. He'll see Class A

asking for help and think, 'They're not so different from us.' He'll lower his guard. Just a bit. Just enough."

Thiesa's mouth formed a small 'o.' "He's really good at this, Nero!"

Nero scoffed, but something in his expression shifted.

"That's not even my main objective." My voice dropped, intimate and conspiratorial. "I'm aiming for something entirely different. A guaranteed ticket to Class S."

Thiesa and Nero exchanged glances. "Which is?" they asked in unison.

My eyes glittered with barely contained ambition.

"The Students' Honor List."

---

Silence descended on the table.

The Students' Honor List. The most prestigious recognition in the entire school. A permanent record of excellence that followed students throughout their academic careers, and beyond.

Nero's sharp gaze softened slightly, revealing something underneath the hostility. Respect, perhaps. Or wariness of a truly dangerous player.

Thiesa's eyes sparkled with genuine interest.

"You're playing a long game," Nero said quietly.

I nodded. "The longest."

Outside the café window, students continued their daily routines, unaware of the machinations unfolding just feet away. The sun continued its arc across the sky. The world kept turning.

But in that small corner of De Patel Rose, something significant had shifted.

The month of September held no promise for the students of Class B.

Classes had ended, and the room slowly emptied as students gathered their things and departed in small clusters. The usual post-lecture chatter was subdued, replaced by a heavy silence that seemed to cling to the walls.

Gertrude looked toward Merlio's seat. Empty. He had slipped out sometime during the final minutes, as he often did, leaving no trace of his presence.

She sighed and began gathering her own materials when Flint's voice cut through the room.

"Guys. I think we should discuss something."

Those who hadn't already left paused. Those who had reached the door stopped and turned. Slowly, the remaining students settled back into their seats, expressions shifting from casual to cautious.

The room fell into silence. On every face, a visible tension lurked beneath otherwise unreadable expressions.

Gertrude folded her arms, her voice cool. "What is it, Flint?"

Flint stood at the front of the room, his posture serious. "We're in a tough spot. 4,000 class credits is one problem. But we also have to consider something else, a class representative."

Gertrude's eyes widened slightly.

From the back, Hanman Durant grunted under his breath. "I'll leave it to you people." He stood, gathering his things with deliberate slowness. "I can't reside in a society with no definite head." Without another word, he walked out, as dismissive as always.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Emilia remained in her seat, a smug expression playing at her lips. "Class representative?" She laughed softly, the sound devoid of warmth. "We aren't even coordinated enough to act as a single class. And you think everyone's going to come together to pick a representative?"

Flint met her gaze steadily. "I understand that. But there's no telling how far other classes have progressed. At this rate, we'll be seen as the weakest in the year. At best, second weakest."

Everett Cent leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "Yes, but think about it this way. Mr. Ashworth deliberately filtered out every student who would drag us down. That ensures our class

performance will be peak, predictable earnings from his perspective." He paused. "While that's good for him, it also makes us too individualistic."

The class absorbed this diagnosis in silence.

Emilia chuckled again, the sound sharp in the quiet room.

Gertrude's mind raced. Individualistic. Everyone focused on their own performance, their own credit, their own survival. Her eyes brightened as a connection formed.

"Obviously, that means it'll be harmful in this case for us, doesn't it?"

Mia spoke up, her tone disappointed. "Think about it, Gertrude. Everyone is out for their own pockets. Personal credit drives everything."

"But there are three pillars," Gertrude countered. "Three factors determining personal credit. The same applies to class credit—"

"Not everyone here can meet all those pillars." Emilia's voice cut through Gertrude's argument like a blade. "Some dominate in academics. Others in sports. Some in social endeavors. A jack of all trades in this institution earns peanuts."

Gertrude fell silent, the truth of Emilia's words settling over her.

Everyone wants to outperform everyone else. Personal credit is the deciding factor. So each student focuses on their own pillar, the one they're good at, and maximizes it. Why waste time on weakness when strength pays better?

"This is an issue," Gertrude acknowledged quietly.

"Of course it is!" Caspian's voice rang out, frustration evident. "Nobody wants to waste time on things they aren't good at. Fumbling in a new area just causes penalties. Why would anyone risk that?"

Mia turned to Flint. "What do you think?"

Flint was silent for a long moment, his expression thoughtful.

Emilia spoke again, her voice calm and measured. "This whole discussion is too abstract. Yes, polishing your expertise in one pillar makes sense. But it's unrealistic to think we can't improve in other areas with proper guidance."

She paused, letting her words settle.

"That said, the best way forward is to have everyone fill the spaces others can't occupy. But for that to happen, I have to ask an extremely important question."

Gertrude raised her head. Mia and Flint did the same. One by one, the rest of the class followed.

Emilia's eyes swept across the room, landing on each face in turn.

"Do you want to reach Class S?"

The air grew thick with silence.

A bead of sweat rolled down more than one temple. Throats moved with nervous swallows. The weight of the question pressed down on everyone present.

Gertrude stepped forward, her expression sharpening into something almost fierce.

"Of course." Her voice was steady, unwavering. "And I will do whatever it takes."

Her resolve was palpable. Others felt it, that spark of determination that could either unite or divide.

One by one, others stepped forward. Not physically, but in their expressions, their posture, the subtle shift in their energy. The weight of what they were acknowledging settled over them all.

Emilia watched this transformation with a small smile. Her eyes closed briefly, and she chuckled, not with mockery this time, but with something approaching satisfaction.

"I see we're on the same page, then." She opened her eyes. "What comes next will be... quite easy."

Students exchanged glances, assessing, judging, calculating.

Flora's voice broke the silence, small but clear.

"So... who will be the class representative?"

—

Meanwhile, Merlio walked through the lecture building with a calm and measured pace, his footsteps echoing softly against the polished floors. The corridors were mostly empty now, the last students having dispersed to their various destinations.

He came to an abrupt stop.

A figure stood before him, blocking the path with deliberate intent.

"Mr. Klein." Mr. Ashworth's voice was measured, controlled. "You managed to scale through expulsion."

Merlio shifted his weight, his bag still hanging from one shoulder. "Of course. It would have been a different story, though."

Mr. Ashworth walked forward and fell into step beside him. "Walk with me."

---

Moments later, the two strolled down the sidewalk connecting the blocks of the education sector. Students passed in the distance, but around them, an invisible bubble of privacy seemed to form.

Merlio broke the silence first. "Am I in trouble here?"

"You need not worry." Mr. Ashworth's voice was calm, almost conversational. "However, your method, or should I say, your shielding from expulsion, is quite dangerous."

Merlio raised an eyebrow, glancing at the man.

"I could see what you're saying." His tone was flat. "I was just lucky."

"Were you?" Mr. Ashworth's eyes narrowed slightly. "What if the school had no clause allowing students with active contracts to remain on campus until fulfillment?"

Merlio considered this. "Well then, I'd keep my score points allocated to Dorian to myself."

"And let Dorian be expelled?"

"Everyone for themselves." Merlio's voice carried no irony, no defensiveness. It was a simple statement of fact. Then, after a beat: "However, my reasoning for saving him in the first place will serve my goals better than letting him fall."

His mind flashed to Gertrude, her frustrated expression the day before the test scores were revealed, the weight she carried as a tutor, the way she'd looked at him when she thought he wasn't watching.

Merlio looked at his feet, a wondering gaze crossing his features briefly before disappearing behind his usual mask.

Mr. Ashworth observed this micro-expression but said nothing about it. Instead, he walked ahead, then turned back.

"It seems you won't share why." It wasn't a question. "I'll be watching you very closely, Mr. Klein."

Merlio looked up with his dull gaze. The man's sharp eyes twitched, irritation, perhaps, or respect, before he turned to walk away.

"I hope to see you perform well during the first-years' project," Ashworth called over his shoulder.

After the man disappeared from sight, Merlio felt a drop of water on his nose. Then another. Soon, the drizzle became a steady rain.

"Always a gloomy day here," he murmured.

He reached into his bag and withdrew an umbrella, black, simple, given to him by Gertrude. It bloomed open like a flower, petals of fabric spreading against the grey sky.

He walked toward the nearest bus stop, a solitary figure in the rain.

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At the same time, across campus, four students sat together in the cafeteria.

The table was a study in contrasts. On one side, Sylone Sylvester of Class D, bushy brows, sharp eyes, a posture of perpetual caution. Beside him, Debbie Stallone of Class A, her expression open but guarded.

Across from them, Blake Shelton lounged with practiced ease, Koshka Siri at his side, her eyes darting between the two representatives like a cat watching birds.

"You didn't mention any other party being present here, Debbie." Sylone's voice was skeptical, probing.

Debbie shrugged lightly. "Classmates. They'll hear the terms of our conversation and discuss them with the rest of our class."

Sylone studied the three before him. After a long moment, he spoke. "Well then. I was wondering how you plan to approach the first project for our year."

Blake leaned forward slightly. "The first-year project. We don't know the details yet."

"I thought as much." Sylone rested his chin on his hands. "However, even without knowing the rules or the nature of the project, we can at least make an educated guess."

Debbie nodded, glancing at Blake. "It was announced to the whole year simultaneously, which means it will take place at the same time for everyone. The question is whether it's the same project for all classes."

Blake's expression shifted, dissatisfaction with Debbie's vagueness. He cut in. "Did your homeroom teacher give you a date, Sylone?"

"Yes. The tenth of September."

Blake nodded. "Same with us. We can infer the projects will boost credit significantly for winners, that's stated in the manual. But we also know the school operates within a closed economic system."

He continued, his voice taking on a lecturing quality. "That means the winners earn more, but there's no clear 'loser' in the traditional sense. More of a ranking. A distribution of the total pot."

Koshka added, "Sounds like the marginal gains go to students who perform better. Four classes, so the total pot is a significant sum of credit that students can potentially win."

Sylone's eyes sharpened. "A zero-sum situation?"

Blake nodded slowly. "All four classes competing for a share of the total credit pool."

Sylone leaned forward, his gaze intense. "This is an opportunity for our class to recover what we've lost."

Blake recoiled almost imperceptibly, then recovered. "And this is the time to solidify our position as the overall earning class."

The two representatives glared at each other. The contract between their classes had created an alliance, but projects, competitive by nature, would test that alliance to its breaking point.

Debbie waved her hands, dismissing the rising tension. "We came here to discuss, not this." She gestured between the two boys.

Blake scoffed. "I don't know why we're at each other's throats already. We were simply stating our goals for this project. No intention to achieve them at the expense of our agreement."

Sylone folded his arms. "No intention to achieve them, you say?" He leaned forward. "I'll try everything in my effort to get that done."

"And I won't stand in your way." Blake's voice was smooth, conciliatory. "In fact, I'll help you. After all, we're classes in mutual contract."

Sylone stared at him with a sharp, knowing gaze. "That won't be necessary, Blake. You'll need all the help you can get to win the project."

Koshka laughed, a sharp, dismissive sound. "Seems like you're the one who needs help and luck. You're at the bottom of the barrel."

"Don't be stupid, Koshka." Blake's voice carried a warning edge. Then, to Sylone: "Good luck with your endeavors."

Sylone stood without another word and walked away, not glancing back at the Class A trio.

Blake sat with a sly smile curling his lips. Debbie and Koshka exchanged uncertain looks.

Koshka broke the silence first. "You know you're giving him the key to leaving the contract, right? If that happens, we'll be facing the strongest class!"

Debbie's brow furrowed. "Strongest class?"

Blake snapped his fingers, drawing their attention. "Think about it. They had their weakest students expelled. Now they're left with the most capable. That means they're more uniform in abilities across all pillars." He paused. "If they somehow accumulate enough class credit and surpass us, we'll never pull them down."

Debbie scratched her head, confused. "I understand they're more centralized in performance. But why can't we knock them down in the rankings?"

Koshka answered before Blake could. "Sylone is cautious to the point of paranoia. His approach is defensive, against projects, against alliances, against everything. Layer that with their top-tier students, and you have an impenetrable fortress."

Blake nodded. "It's exactly why he didn't mind signing our contract. He's confident in their abilities. If someone that cautious is that sure..." He trailed off, letting the implication hang.

Debbie's eyes widened as understanding dawned. "If they win enough class credit, they'll withdraw from the contract!"

Blake nodded slowly. "Yes."

Koshka's voice rose. "Then what do we do?"

Blake's eyes glinted, sharp, calculating, dangerous.

"Don't worry." His smile widened. "I have a plan."

Merlio sat under the shade of a large oak tree, his sketchbook balanced on his knee, pencil moving in slow, deliberate strokes. Before him, the school's park spread out in lush greenery, rolling lawns, winding paths, students scattered like scattered petals across a canvas. A serene atmosphere wrapped around him like a blanket, muffling the distant sounds of campus life.

He took a deep breath as he finished his piece, exhaling slowly. Then he held the sketchbook at arm's length, examining his work with a judging expression.

"What do you want, Gertrude?"

His eyes remained glued to the sketch, not bothering to turn.

Footsteps resounded on the pavement behind him, approaching with the familiar cadence he had learned to recognize over the past weeks.

"Sorry." Gertrude's voice carried an unusual note of hesitation. "You've been a bit strange lately."

Merlio finally turned, his expression blank. "Strange? I have no knowledge that you know me that well."

Gertrude absorbed the mild rebuke without reaction. She sat down beside him on the bench, smoothing her skirt. "Makes sense." A pause. "How did you know I was that close, anyway?"

Merlio returned his attention to the sketch, making small adjustments with the side of his pencil. "Vanilla-scented perfume."

Gertrude stared at him, her expression caught between surprise and something softer. He continued sketching, seemingly unaware of her gaze, or indifferent to it.

After a moment, she spoke again. "I came here to tell you about our new class representative."

Merlio's pencil didn't stop. "I'm listening."

"Well, Flint Woods is now the rep for our class."

His pencil paused. He looked up at her, a flicker of something, not surprise, exactly, crossing his features. "Flint?" He considered. "Not surprised."

"Not surprised?" Gertrude's voice carried a edge of something, frustration, perhaps, or curiosity. "Aren't you curious why I didn't get that position?"

Merlio tilted his head, studying her with his dull gaze. "Not really. Seeing as you're not the perfect fit for leading the class. At least... not right now."

Gertrude folded her arms, a disappointed expression settling on her features. She understood what he implied, the sharp edges, the impatience, the inability to suffer fools gladly. All qualities that made her a terrible candidate for a unifying role.

"Unfortunately, I understand." She sighed. "But Flint is a bit too diplomatic. A bit of a liability in a place like this."

Merlio leaned back on the bench, his posture relaxing. "Don't be so worried. Flint isn't as naive as you think." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Honesty and diplomacy will be very strong tools in a setting like this. Used well, they'll bring significant results."

Gertrude's expression shifted into contemplation. After a moment, she nodded slowly. "I understand that much. But leaders like that have blind spots, things they can't account for. We'll have to work together as a class now, more than ever."

Merlio nodded. "That would be the bare minimum in an environment like this. But yes, that's the basic gist of it."

Gertrude fell silent, looking down at her loafers. Merlio glanced at her, then turned back to the park, where students roamed in small clusters across the green.

"You've accepted not getting the representative position," he observed. "Are you okay with that?"

Gertrude rested her chin on her knuckles. "Every leader has flaws. Flint's is constantly maintaining a good image. That's tedious work."

"And you?"

"Unrealistic." She answered without hesitation. "But my knack for setting goals out of bounds is what pushes me higher."

She stood from the bench, brushing off her skirt. "With that said, I'm not aiming to be class representative." She paused, letting the words settle. "I'm aiming for class year president."

Merlio watched her with keen interest. For a fraction of a second, something flickered in his expression, disappointment, perhaps, or admiration. Then it was gone.

"Unrealistic indeed," he said. "Though not impossible."

Gertrude turned to him, her eyes sharp. "Klein." Her voice carried weight. "I'll need all the help I can get."

Merlio's gaze darkened slightly, thoughts churning behind his blank facade. "We'll see where that leads us."

Gertrude smirked, a genuine expression, rare and warming. She sat back down, her earlier tension easing. "Anyway. What are your thoughts on the school's project? From the real manual, I read that it gives a huge amount of class credit and personal credit."

Merlio sighed. "Yes. It's a great opportunity for our class." He paused, then added: "Which means it's a great opportunity for every other class as well. Expect a full contest for credits."

Gertrude nodded slowly, her expression thoughtful. Then, without warning, she snatched the sketchbook from his hands.

"Hey—"

"Whoa." She flipped through the pages, her face shifting from amusement to genuine surprise. "You've got talent."

Merlio sat still, watching her as she turned each page with increasing absorption.

"It's so detailed," she murmured. "Like a camera. Word for word... like a machine."

The sketches were precise, almost clinical. Every line measured, every shadow deliberate. The park, the trees, the distant figures, all rendered with the same detached accuracy as a technical drawing.

Merlio extended his hand. "Well? Can I have it back?"

Gertrude looked up at his monotonous face and giggled, a light, unguarded sound. "Yeah, sure." She handed the sketchbook back, her fingers brushing his for just a moment.

He tucked it away without comment.

But something in the air between them had shifted, subtle, unspoken, but present.

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Across campus, Nero and Thiesa sat in their usual corner of De Patel Rose. The café hummed with the usual activity, students chatting, studying, the clink of cups and rustle of pages. It was a hub of social energy, but the corner table remained their domain.

Thiesa munched on a slice of cake, her cheeks puffed like chipmunks, a blissful expression on her face. Nero sat across from her, his expression calm, relaxed, his attention fixed on a book titled Financial Shenanigans.

The door opened.

Blake walked in unannounced, his presence immediately shifting the atmosphere. He crossed the café with practiced ease and plopped down in the seat next to Nero, a mocking smirk playing at his lips.

Nero didn't spare him a glance. "Fuck off," he said calmly.

Blake chuckled, a low, confident sound. "I'm afraid that won't be happening."

Nero's jaw tightened, but he didn't look up. "What the hell do you want now?"

Blake's smirk faded, replaced by something more serious. "Let's put our past behind us and come to an agreement. Shall we?"

Nero finally turned, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Put our past behind us?" His voice was ice. "Do you understand the magnitude of what you're asking for?"

Blake rubbed his forehead, sighing. "Look. It was my fault the gang fell apart back then."

"A load of bullshit." Nero's words cut deep. "Your cowardice is what led to the group disbanding. What makes you think you can convince me you've changed?"

Blake raised his chin, looking down at Nero with a mixture of challenge and something else, regret, perhaps. "You're not the one to talk, you know."

Thiesa, who had been quietly observing, set down her fork. "Okay. Let's calm down." Her voice was gentle but firm. "You were both dorks back then. What matters now is winning that next project. For that, we need you both to put the past aside. At least for now."

Nero rolled his eyes, but the tension in his shoulders eased slightly. "You're getting pretty good at diplomacy, Thiesa."

Thiesa beamed, the praise clearly warming her.

Nero turned back to Blake, his pupils sharp. "She's right," Blake offered, a sly smile returning to his face.

Nero closed his book. "Okay. What do you want?"

Blake's expression hardened with purpose. "To crush the other classes in this upcoming project." He balled his fist on the table. "Let's join forces and achieve what other classes haven't."

Silence.

Thiesa looked at Nero with a wondering gaze. "What's wrong, Nero? Aren't you the brains of the gang back then?"

Nero didn't answer immediately. He tossed the book onto the table, the sound loud in the quiet corner. "Something like that." He paused. "It'll be harder than it was back then."

Blake's face crumbled slightly. "What does that mean?"

Nero folded his arms. "Think about it. Back then, we were working against complete idiots. Here, everyone is considered elite in something. In some ways, everyone here has proven they belong."

Blake rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I see."

"I'm not sure how I'll do against others who might navigate such situations better." Nero's voice was quieter now, his gaze not meeting theirs. Then he looked up, something hardening in his expression. "But leave it to me."

Blake watched him with amusement, something approving in his gaze. Thiesa giggled. "Now we're talking."

Nero stood. Thiesa followed suit, gathering her things. "I'll see you at the project, Blake."

Blake nodded. The two walked out of the café, leaving Blake alone at the table.

He leaned back, a smirk spreading across his face.

"In little games like this, always leave it to Nero." He chuckled to himself. "I have more important things to worry about."

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Across campus, under the oak tree, Merlio sat alone again. Gertrude had departed, her footsteps fading into the afternoon bustle.

He opened his sketchbook to the last page, the park rendered in precise, mechanical detail. His eyes traced the lines he had drawn, the shadows he had placed, the figures he had captured.

'Class year president', he thought. 'Unrealistic. But not impossible.'

He closed the book and looked out at the campus.

Merlio stood, tucked the sketchbook into his bag, and walked toward the bus stop.

'Interesting times ahead.'

The hall hosted every student from the first years. We hadn't been addressed yet and had been waiting for thirty minutes.

I decided to relax my shoulders after sitting upright for what looked like forever.

"You seem tired." Gertrude voiced her observation, her eyes still glued to the podium at the front of the hall.

Gertrude seemed sharper than before, and her posture showed her alert nature. She was treating this project as a proving ground.

"And I could say you're not, huh?" I said, sarcasm dripping from my voice. "Anyways, so this is it?"

Gertrude gave me a side glance, raising her brows in perplexity. "Don't tell me you're nervous, Klein."

I could sense she wanted to tease me, but her tone quickly switched to her usual serious attitude. I might have to take this as seriously as her.

Since other classes were present, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that this project was an interclass event. Everyone would be looking to maximize their personal credit earnings.

Just as I was contemplating, a man with grey hair walked to the podium with a sheet of paper. He donned a dark grey suit and a black long-sleeve underneath. He had the expression of someone similar in my life...

...Expectant.

"Good morning, everyone." He greeted, and everyone responded uniformly.

"Good morning, sir."

"My name is Jeffery Anderson. I'll be the one introducing you to the long-awaited Project." He announced, picking his words slowly and clearly for those at the back to understand.

From my vision, Flint leaned forward with narrowing eyes, as did Gertrude. Emilia had her same smug look, as did Hanman, who wore his confident expression.

The silence built as the tension increased with every page Mr. Jeffrey flipped on his sheet of paper.

And admittedly, I felt the pressure of the overwhelming tension. A bit hurried to understand what this event might be about.

"Today, Class A, Class B, Class C, and Class D will be participating in...

The Fragments Project."

A beat of silence followed as the words settled in the air. I folded my arms at the name and what it could suggest regarding the nature of the project.

Gertrude beside me whispered quietly. "The Fragments?" Her mind was already racing, so I tapped her.

She looked at me with wide eyes.

"You're overthinking it. You'll miss the actual rules of this game."

Gertrude looked down at her feet. "Yeah..."

It seemed she was the one being anxious here. I wondered how she'd react if she were our class representative. At least she knew that she wasn't yet fit for that role and that Flint was the perfect candidate.

Flint, on the other hand, sat with a calm face as he awaited the rules of the project.

"This project will have a duration of seven days, one week. Students receive incomplete statements called 'premises.' By combining premises with other students, they form complete 'narratives.' Correct narratives earn personal credit. Incorrect narratives cost personal credit. Classes can also compete to solve the overarching narrative for a massive reward."

Behind Mr. Jeffrey, the screen bloomed to life, showing each term and its meaning.

The word premise in this case meant the bits of information that formed a narrative, or, as Mr. Jeffrey put it, a plot line.

Mr. Jeffrey continued his explanation. "For a deeper understanding: two premises that logically combine into a coherent statement are called an individual narrative."

The terms individual narrative, premise, and narrative appeared on the screen behind Mr. Jeffrey.

"The master story that connects all four classes requires all four key premises. This is called the overarching narrative." He circled the words on the screen using a stylus. "A key premise is a

special premise held by each class. It plays a crucial role as it connects each class's own narrative to form the overarching narrative."

Gertrude nodded her head in understanding, while Caspian in front of me scratched his head in confusion.

Perhaps it was the numerous terms, but it wasn't that hard to memorize. To put it simply: two premises form an individual narrative. All of the class's individual narratives put together form a class narrative, and each class's narrative put together forms the overarching narrative.

Mr. Jeffrey walked forward as he continued his explanation. "An individual narrative, as I've said before, requires two premises, meaning your premise and that of another. Submitting the pair to the Project Officials will check to see if it forms a logical, coherent narrative."

Mr. Jeffrey raised his hand. "If it is, you'll be rewarded 10,000 personal credit. If it's incorrect, you'll lose 5,000 personal credit."

A girl from across the hall raised her hand to question. Although the distance was far, I could make out that she had dark violet hair with visible eye bags.

"Sir Jeffrey?" she called.

The man turned to her. "Yes?"

"I have a simple question," she claimed. "What are the criteria for a logical, coherent narrative? Is it correct to assume that the school has the full narrative? Or is it that what the students formulate is the full overarching narrative?"

What a great question. She was testing the boundaries of whether the things we were to put together comprised the overarching narrative, or if the overarching narrative was already decided by the school. In other words, a fixed conclusion.

I turned to Mr. Jeffrey, who narrowed his eyes. "The overarching narrative is already fixed. You should have an absolute story that aligns with our version."

The girl twisted her pigtails. "I see..." she said, taking her seat.

Mr. Jeffrey went back to explaining the rewards and potential path.

"Now I'll be talking about the overarching narrative." He said as the words illuminated on the screen. "The overarching narrative can be made by first finding out your key premise as a class, a premise that can link your class narrative to another class."

He stopped and looked back at us. "Once you have collected each key premise, you submit your version of the overarching narrative. If it aligns with ours, then you'll be rewarded 50,000 personal credits to the winning class. Once the overarching narrative is solved, the project will end immediately."

So it seemed that this project's duration hinged on how quickly a class could solve the overarching narrative.

Also, the term 'class narrative' definitely meant adding up all the individual narratives in a class. Checking if the narrative was correct had already been established. That meant a class narrative could also be submitted, however, if wrong, we might lose credit.

The credit we'd lose in this case might not be personal credit but class credit. The school had made it clear that personal endeavors would also bring about personal sacrifices. This could apply to society as well.

If that was the case, then that meant individual narratives could be be shared with others to form a class narrative. That much was obvious. However, in doing so, you relinquished the right to submit individual narratives for personal credit.

But it made me think: why were the rewards for individual narratives pennies compared to the overarching narrative rewards? It rewarded 50,000 credits, so why 10,000 credits for an individual narrative?

At first glance, it didn't make sense. But if you reframed it from a different perspective, you got a very justifiable answer. A student of a class might think that solving the overarching narrative was a race. The first to get there got the reward, and more devastatingly, the entire project ended.

The project allowed for students to earn more personal credit. However, even if this was my first project, the way this one in particular was framed guided students to make the rational decision of solving an individual narrative and submitting it quickly to get 10,000 personal credit. The reasoning? They thought that if they didn't act quickly, they wouldn't profit from the project at all.

It formed a sort of equilibrium. If students from all classes thought like this, then nobody would go after the overarching narrative, operating under the false illusion that at least one class would aim to solve it quickly. And if it was solved quickly, no more project.

It was better to pick up the little peanuts within the available time of the project instead of chasing the uncertain promise of 50,000 credits.

A bit more realistic, I had to admit.

Gertrude observed my expression. "You seem awfully deep in thought. Overwhelmed?"

"Something like that," I said lazily. "How about you?"

"I'm fine... Just curious about how Flint will approach this." She whispered low enough for only me to hear.

"Don't worry. He has this covered." I said as I turned to our class representative, three seats away from me. "Well... I hope so."

Mr. Jeffrey seemed to have wrapped up his explanation. He distributed a little booklet with more information about the project, exactly what our class needed.

After flipping through the pages, it only told us more about key premises.

"Each class's key premise equals 5,000 class credit. Collecting key premises across all four classes equals 20,000 class credit."

Such an amount would significantly boost our class credit to unknown bounds.

If that was the case, then my assumptions might be wrong, since class credit was a bonus that increased your current personal credit exponentially. This would make others at least try to solve the overarching narrative, as doing so would give your class 50,000 credits. And in that same pursuit, you'd be rewarded with 20,000 class credit. So approximately a total of 70,000 credits!

Gertrude gave me a knowing look as she skimmed through the booklet.

'What's that look on her face?' I thought.

Suddenly, her smile widened. She then faced the front as she twirled her hair.

She definitely had a plan. And with seven days, who knew what would happen. So far, my role hadn't been confirmed yet, except assistance.

I settled back into my seat, watching the other classes begin to murmur amongst themselves.

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Currently, Gertrude and I stood under the shade the large building cast. The umbrella she had given me remained in my grasp. I wondered if she wouldn't take it back. Perhaps a gift of some sort?

Or maybe she simply didn't have any need for it, seeing as she had three more umbrellas in her bag as backup. What an over-prepared person.

Students had been given their own premises, so the event had already begun. Other classes were already strategizing, I could see clusters of students huddled together, comparing cards, whispering.

Gertrude folded her hands, thinking quietly before she pitched her idea. However, I already had an answer to whatever she might propose, though not in a traditional sense, but more as a question.

She turned to face me. "Okay, I think I've got it." She raised her index finger with a sharp gaze. "This project might seem deceptively simple, right? But that's not the case here."

I raised my eyebrows, hesitant to ask my question. It would be better to hear her vision first.

"There are four classes, yes? And each class has a class narrative. I assume you know what that means, Klein?"

"Of course."

Gertrude nodded. "The booklets provided nothing about class narratives. However, we can infer that it's similar to individual narratives, except in this case, the narrative must be shared with the whole class to form the class narrative."

She walked in front of me, her long skirt swerving with the movement. "The point is that if an individual narrative can be penalized per wrong answer, then so can class credit."

I closed my eyes as I let the breeze play with my hair. "That much is obvious, yes?"

Gertrude chuckled. "Of course. But it seems you're missing the implications." She raised her index finger once more. "Think about it. If submitting an individual narrative, which includes two premises, is wrong, then both parties will have 5,000 deducted from their personal credit accounts."

Gertrude was looking beyond the surface. That was good. Contrary to my assumption that every student in the class would act rationally, she was highlighting the penalties of wrong individual narratives as too harsh. With 5,000 deducted per wrong entry, if you got it wrong twice, your personal credit balance would be cut in half.

And that was even assuming everyone received the usual 20,000 from the sum of class and personal credit. Some classes, like ours, already had students who had spent some of their credit. They couldn't afford to make guesses with their premises.

"That's quite obvious from the looks of it," I said. "Students are given two options: share their individual narrative with the class to form a class narrative, or take the risk of making a submission of their individual narrative alone."

Gertrude nodded slowly. Then I posed the question that had been nagging at me.

"Although, isn't it strange? The whole point of this project is that we're stringing together a broken narrative through cooperation. Yet individual narratives can be wrong. That conflicts with the fact that the school said they already have a fixed conclusion. Naturally, that means the individual narratives are fixed as well, just needing to be put together in the right order."

I revealed my premise, given to me by the Project Officials. It came in the form of a card with a brief sentence:

"Everything was in order.'

The number '22' sat at the bottom right of the card. The school logo was printed behind it, along with a QR code.

Interestingly enough, the QR code was cut off by the edge on the left. So therefore, by combining your premise with another premise, you could scan the complete code for submission.

However, I doubted the QR codes were different. If they were, students would need to find the ones that matched the halves of their codes to get the correct narrative. A clever addition.

Gertrude looked at the card and asked, "Is that all?" She tilted her head.

"Think about it," I said. "If making a narrative is that easy, then why the implication of wrong answers? That would be a contradiction."

I pointed at the card. "The cards are numbered as well. Meaning, I have to find either the subsequent number or the previous number. That is, number '21' or '23'."

"In other words, you have more options than those who start the narrative itself."

I nodded. "Furthermore, the numbers and the premises all point to something. Given the clear contradiction between it being simple and having wrong individual narratives, there's only one explanation."

I paused, letting the weight settle.

"There is a conflicting narrative that dilutes the original version."

Gertrude's eyes widened in shock. Then she began bombarding me with questions.

"Wait, what do you mean? A conflicting narrative?"

I folded my arms and hummed in affirmation.

"Yes. A conflicting narrative. Remember that it's explicitly stated that if your individual narrative is wrong, you'll be penalized with 5,000 personal credit deducted from your student account."

I turned to face her fully. "If that's the case, that means something can go wrong with your premise itself. That calls for a conflicting premise, which, upon stringing together with another conflicting premise, gives you a conflicting narrative."

Gertrude furrowed her brows with a perplexed expression. I couldn't blame her. That was a bit wordy. Granted, there wasn't any official verification of my words. But the implications of what could make a narrative wrong were obvious.

And I was guessing there was also a hierarchy, given the structure:

Individual Narrative > Class Narrative > Overarching Narrative

I tapped my feet softly, each click resounding against the pavement. Gertrude clapped her hands with an enlightened expression.

"I think I've got it," she claimed. "And we aren't going for any cheap changes for rewards. We're going for the winning reward!"

I stared at her blankly, running through several approaches she could be considering. No matter how I looked at it, we would still need the rest of the class to cooperate.

"I believe in whatever you're planning, Gertrude. Although I have to ask, how exactly are you going to get the others on board with your idea?"

Gertrude balled her fist, then released it. "Well, we'll need Flint for that. He's our class representative."

Indeed. I couldn't approach him myself. His intuition was too sharp, throwing him off with my grades during the last assessment test had been a last-ditch effort.

But you, Gertrude. You are my front. My face.

For now, at least.

I groaned, stretching my arms as I heard my bones crack. It seemed like my eight hours of sleep hadn't been enough. Mr. Ashworth had finished his lessons for today, as had the other subjects we'd endured.

I hadn't expected the project to feel like this. Classes continued on as usual. Though it made sense, halting school activities for a project would only stunt the growth of students.

"Can I have your attention, everyone?"

I looked up to see Flint Woods, his expression serious yet somehow warm and welcoming. So it seemed he had come forward to address the class regarding the project.

I glanced at Gertrude. She could barely contain herself, she wanted to present her idea.

"As you all know, this is our first project, and we have a huge opportunity to increase our class credit!"

It made me wonder if class credit could also be reduced.

"I have a few ideas. However, hearing from you first will satisfy my curiosity about others' perspectives on this project."

Flint was suggesting an interactive meeting. With twenty of us seated, at least a few students had ideas. I already anticipated who would speak first.

"I have one, Flint!" Gertrude chuckled to herself with a proud smile.

Now I was curious about her approach.

"Go on, Gertrude." Flint gave the go-ahead. The rest of the classroom fell dead quiet.

"First, I have to ask that we're all on the same page about not going for individual narrative rewards?" Gertrude asked.

The class was quiet. Glances were exchanged. Positions shifted in seats. This wouldn't do. We couldn't read minds, we needed some sort of agreement.

"I'm not sure." Dorian spoke up, his tone hesitant. "It's a race to who has the necessary information to solve the overarching narrative. And so far, regarding numbers, Class A has the advantage. That means they'd most likely solve it first."

As expected of Dorian. Honest and practical. Even if his academic intelligence was lacking, he could see reality for what it was. I hoped he would maintain that outlook.

"It may seem that way," Gertrude countered. "However, Class A is thinking the same thing. They aren't sure they'll be the first to solve the overarching narrative. And if that's the case, then everyone would go for the rational decision and pursue individual narratives."

Wait. That was my proposition to her from yesterday. Truly, a politician in the making.

Dorian nodded, enlightened. Gertrude pressed further. "Now, if every class goes for individual narrative rewards, then the class that pursues the overarching narrative will face much less aggressive competition."

Good job, Gertrude. However, that was an assumption that every class would act rationally. In reality, things didn't always go as calculated. Other classes might have different motives.

The most rational decision was to maximize profits. Therefore, the overarching narrative would indeed be attempted by multiple classes.

It was a matter of knowing what your class was capable of, and knowing which outcome benefited you more.

"So you're saying we should aim for overarching narrative rewards?" Flint asked to confirm.

"Exactly. Our class economy is already devastated as it is."

Flint rubbed his chin thoughtfully. After a few minutes of silence, he directed his attention back to the class.

"I see we have an agreement, everyone?" Flint asked.

The silence was that of confirmation. Then a girl sighed. I knew exactly who it was.

"Yeah, yeah. But how exactly do you plan to approach this, Gertrude? Not every class is going to sit around, you know?" Emilia asked with a dismissive tone, examining her fingernails.

Gertrude's voice remained calm. "I propose we find the person with the premise numbered 26. That should be the first number in our narrative."

Winston Montgomery raised his hand with his signature eerie smile. "How exactly are you sure the numbers go in that order?"

"Class A's total premises are 25. I counted yesterday during the briefing. Logically, if the narrative started with their class and premises are numbered sequentially, then Class B should continue with 26, correct?" Gertrude clarified.

However, her words didn't make complete sense. I had shown her my card yesterday. I had also explained the concept of conflicting narratives being possible.

"I don't think that's correct," Flora joined the conversation. "I have number 18. It wouldn't make sense for 26 to be the number our class should start with."

Gertrude's expression grew intense as she thought. Then her eyes lit up with another realization.

"I'm sorry. I apologize," she said. "It seems our class is scattered with Class A's premises. If that's the case, then this is far more complicated than I thought."

Emilia scoffed. "Why all the assumptions?" She threw her card onto the table. "Just reveal your premise."

Indeed. That was the correct approach instead of abstract reasoning.

Everyone dropped their premises on their tables. Everyone except Hanman Durant. His arms were folded.

Gertrude furrowed her brows. "Is there a problem, Hanman?"

The male didn't spare her a glance. I wondered, was this the beginning of a problem brewing in our class?

"Hey! Are you going to say something?" Emilia pressed.

Hanman didn't respond. His eyes remained closed, his expression stoic.

Flint rubbed the back of his head and asked with sincere tone, "May we know your reasons for refusing to share your premise, Hanman?"

Hanman hummed, a deep bass that filled the room. Then he spoke.

"I see no guarantee that any of you can solve the overarching narrative. With that said, I'd rather share my premise with someone whose premise completes mine and make a submission for individual narrative rewards." He unfolded his crossed leg, then crossed them again.

Strange. That was all I could comment on this guy's behavior.

"Well, that all starts with everyone cooperating, something you aren't willing to do because you're not sure we can?" Gertrude's voice began to rise.

Hanman stood and packed his things. Seemingly done with this debacle.

Gertrude pressed her lips together in frustration. Emilia rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath, "What a prick."

Hanman had already been isolated. Doing this would further build the wall, blocking any connections he might have with anyone in the future.

Frankly, I struggled to see what more he could gain from individual credit than what the class as a whole could achieve by solving the overarching narrative.

Surprisingly, Flint took his seat, making no move to stop Hanman.

Very few understood the implications of what Hanman was doing. Gertrude was about to voice her concerns, but seeing that none of the capable students were intervening, she just watched in confusion.

As Hanman walked out, Flint clapped his hands again.

"Alright, everyone. I'll talk to him. For now, let's focus on making sense of our class narrative, yes?"

Everyone agreed to Flint's words, and we divided ourselves into groups of five. That way, four in each group could quickly find their matches, and the last odd premise would have to group with another odd premise.

However, as soon as everyone formed their groups, we quickly noticed something that confirmed my theory.

The numbers repeated themselves.

For example, Flora's number 18 was also in the hands of Emily Swerve.

The premises were odd as well. Flora's version read:

'and plowed into the sofa beside me.'

Emily's version read:

'I plowed beside her on the sofa.'

Both were numbered 18.

Emily tilted her head. Flora looked equally confused.

"It seems this is why Class A's premises ended at number 15," Emilia analyzed. "The numbers are repeated. However, the premises are different."

Everyone gathered around the tables to examine the cards. Looking at their own, they found their numbers repeated as well, but with premises that were similar yet distinctly different.

Gertrude glanced at me, as if asking me to make sense of this. But to be honest, this wasn't my problem.

However, I had confirmed the existence of conflicting narratives.

Gertrude walked to me and dragged me to the corner of the classroom. "So that explains why you're numbered 22?"

I glanced at the class, then back at her. "Obviously." I folded my arms. "I'm sure you can see the implications of conflicting narratives?"

"Of course!" Gertrude puffed her cheek. "But what's the point of conflicting narratives? The cards are numbered. Flora could just go look for number 17 or 19."

I tapped my foot slowly. "Well, it does eliminate the possibility of conflicting narratives diluting and making individual narratives wrong. However, it then raises a crucial question."

"That is?"

"What kind of other narratives would the other classes use?"

"Huh...?" Gertrude recoiled, then her expression shifted into something calculated. "Wait. You're implying that it doesn't matter whether it's the original narrative or the conflicting narrative, if the majority of classes chooses either, that becomes the correct one?"

I nodded in affirmation. "Yes. There isn't a single correct narrative. Just two different but similar stories, each with details that support itself. When paired incorrectly, they'll make your individual narrative, and ultimately your class narrative, unfit for the overarching narrative."

Gertrude pieced together the details. "So if Class C went with the conflicting version, then our version would be incorrect, if the other two classes, Class A and Class D, went with a narrative that supports Class C's?"

I nodded again, my social output dying with time.

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Back at the class, Flint seemed to have discovered the person with number 16. Now everything was crystal clear.

The premise for number 16 read: 'The receipt in her hand.'

Gertrude then proposed that we identify both narratives within our class. If we approached it that way, we could quickly adapt to the demands and join the majority, ultimately solving the overarching narrative.

In doing so, the two narratives could be thought of as both a defense and an attack mechanism within this system.

I was sure Gertrude could see the implications of how this could be put into action.

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Now I wondered: what were the other classes like?

I would need to tag along with someone else. Flint was still lingering on my radar, and asking him directly about his connections outside of Class A would be far too suspicious.

I would have to act accordingly.

"Merlio, we have to take the initiative here!" Gertrude urged.

"What? Isn't that what we're already doing?" I asked.

Her brisk steps covered the distance of the stretching hallway. The lecture building had three floors, each containing a class's homeroom. From the looks of it, Gertrude walked to the staircase and made her way to the utmost top. I followed behind her, avoiding the temptation to look up at her skirt as it swayed with every motion.

"Oh, I see," I started.

Gertrude sighed. "So we're going to scout the other classes?"

"Class A, to be specific," she clarified.

"Oh, I see..."

My mind wandered to many things, especially what Class A looked like. Not the classroom itself, but the students. This would probably be my first time interacting with another class.

As we reached the top floor, Gertrude and I stopped and exchanged glances. To our right was the homeroom teachers' office and another office belonging to the Class Advisor. To our left was the classroom. Class A.

We exchanged glances once more for reassurance. The noise coming from Class A was something I hadn't heard for a while, not since before the assessment test. It was oddly refreshing.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Gertrude walked past me.

As we pushed the door open, the noise ceased.

The students all went quiet. I could hear my own breathing. Eyes bored holes into Gertrude and me, sizing us up.

Gertrude took a deep breath and stepped forward. But before she could complete her motion, a tall guy with a broad frame appeared out of nowhere. His shaved head, earring on his right ear, and deep, threatening eyes were nothing to scoff at. In short, intimidating would fit nicely as his middle name.

He blocked our path, his hand in a jacket with the school's crest on the chest. It seemed he was part of the football club.

Gertrude furrowed her brows, but the situation grew more tense as two more students walked toward us, all wearing the same jacket. I supposed the term "jocks" would fit them perfectly.

I took a step backward, in case I was served a meal I wasn't hungry for. Gertrude, on the other hand, was quite resilient, folding her arms and tapping her foot.

"Let them in, Delaware."

A bored voice came from somewhere behind the classroom.

Delaware, as I'd come to know this gentleman's name, didn't give way immediately. But ultimately, he walked back to his seat, his circle following him.

"Hmmm...!"

Gertrude and I turned our attention to the back of the classroom. A boy with very dark crimson hair and pale skin hummed loudly enough that it echoed.

"He's got a good voice," I muttered.

"Now's not the time, Klein," Gertrude reprimanded.

It seemed my attempt at loosening her up had been taken literally. Besides, this was the best time to make fun of them. They felt like a forced mafia group.

So this was the first impression of Class A.

The crimson-haired guy raised his hand, gesturing for us to come to his position.

Gertrude rolled her eyes, but she did as she was told. I followed closely.

"Good afternoon—"

"Who the hell said you should come here as well?" He pointed at me, drawing looks in my direction.

I froze in my path and just stood there while Gertrude walked forward. From my vantage point, I observed his circle. A guy with ginger hair sat with sharp eyes and dark circles beneath them. He wore nothing but a black neck vest and the school's trousers, busy with a magazine he was reading. A girl beside him wore a boy's uniform and was eating chocolate. That definitely wasn't unusual.

"I was talking to the chick," he chuckled. "Anyways, how can I help you?"

"Nothing much. I just came to see Class A's approach to this project." Gertrude scanned the room. "Unfortunately, it seems we've drawn quite a lot of attention."

The crimson male chuckled deeply. "So in other words, you're gathering intel on us, huh?"

"Something like that."

He sized up Gertrude and rubbed his chin. "Hmmm... That takes a lot of balls," he commented after a long thought. "But why our class exactly?"

"Why not?"

Two parties, each trying not to reveal a speck of information about themselves.

"The name's Blake Shelton," he said as he leaned back in his seat. "And I don't like you putting your nose in things that aren't your concern."

"It will be eventually. Once you decide to cooperate with the other classes to solve the overarching narrative."

"Hahahaha, no." He ended his sentence anticlimactically.

He was definitely their leader, alright.

"Tell me, why should I waste my time with you? Are you the leader of your class? If so, then you can give me your key premise and we can start talking."

Gertrude rolled her eyes. "No, I am not the leader of my class. I'm just doing my part to see if Class A would cooperate."

"Oh, trust me. We will eventually. But the time isn't right yet." He stood up and dusted his blazer. His appearance came into full view now. His trousers sagged slightly, and his height reached about 6'1"—a bit below the shaved dude who stood at 6'3". He folded his blazer around his elbow, and his inner shirt was white.

"You do know that as soon as the overarching narrative is solved, your class, which has been taking its sweet time, will lose?"

Blake just chuckled. "I'm getting bored of these two. Get them out of here." He waved his hand.

I wasn't told twice before I found myself outside. Gertrude scraped her feet against the floor, disappointed that she hadn't gotten any useful information.

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"Ahhh..." Gertrude groaned. "Well, that was useless."

I dropped the empty can of orange juice and popped open a new one. "Not really. If you picked up on the cues, you'd get a vague idea of what's going on."

Gertrude looked at me with expectant eyes. "Really?"

"I can't promise anything, but let's go over it again, yeah?"

She shrugged, seemingly done with trying to piece together the encounter.

"First, the leader of Class A is definitely Blake. That much is obvious. However, the class representative wasn't present. And we know that a class needs a rep. My assumption is that Blake is the most fit for that role, but he didn't declare himself the rep. Instead, he has someone else act as the figurehead."

"Well, what are you getting at, Merlio?"

"I'm not sure myself, but Blake is definitely avoiding the spotlight."

"Yeah, but wouldn't having the rep address us be more beneficial to him, assuming he's avoiding exposure?"

"I think so too. But we have to realize that from Blake's perspective, we're probably not worth hiding from. If we report back that Blake is the leader and we're contradicted by the rep Blake has planted to represent his class, then our information is invalid. Paired with the fact that he doesn't see us as a threat..."

"Maybe we're looking too much into this." Gertrude rubbed her temples.

"I understand. But here's the crucial part."

Gertrude stopped and looked at me.

"Class A already has a strategy in motion."

Gertrude stepped back. "What?! How do you know that?"

I rubbed my neck. "He seemed quite confident. And dismissive. Plus, he emphasized taking his time."

*Don't be fooled, Gertrude. That part is meant to make us relax. One moment our guards are down, and the next, the project gets closed.*

I looked down at my loafers. Raindrops were hitting the soles of my shoes. I promptly opened my newly claimed umbrella, gifted by Gertrude.

Gertrude seemed quiet, overthinking. I turned and tapped her shoulder.

"Are you alright, Gertrude?"

"Y-yeah... I'm fine, Klein."

"Good. Do your part and take your time with whatever strategies our class has agreed upon."

She looked up at me with shimmering pupils. The rain was starting to grow heavy.

"Um... Merlio."

"Hmm?"

"I didn't bring my umbrella."

"That's bad."

"I know, you dumbass!"

I took note of the predicament of her situation. And I got insulted. I was hurt.

"Glad you know," I said as I started walking away.

"Huh? Merlio!"

I stopped in my tracks and turned again toward Gertrude with a playful smile.

"Come in here." I offered a spot under my stolen umbrella.

She ran through the rain and squeezed herself under the umbrella beside me. The scent of her hair shampoo became very noticeable.

"You could have added the magic word, dumbass."

Gertrude glared at me. "You thought I wouldn't know this is my umbrella? You thief!"

"Correction. You forgot about it, and I simply held on to it. I'm accounting for gaps in your short memory."

And so we bantered our way through the walkways that led to the next bus stop.

I imagined a reality where I could be normal.

But this wasn't that reality.

And somewhere beneath the stolen umbrella, walking through the rain with Gertrude by my side, I wasn't sure I wanted it to be.

It was lunch break. Plates, cups, and chattering filled the cafeteria. I looked at my total credit balance on the school's app on my device. The numbers glared at me through the screen:

18,000 PC

I wasn't naturally a big spender, so it was understandable that my personal credit hadn't been affected much. I started with 10,000 credits, and with the recent deposit of 8,000, a combination of 4,000 class credit and 4,000 personal credit, this was where I stood.

I placed my phone back in my pocket. I wasn't here for food. My eyes were on my sketchpad as I captured a scene of the cafeteria: the students, the surrounding chaos, the flow of bodies.

As soon as I committed my observations to paper, I heard a thud on my table.

I looked up to see Emilia Honor and her entourage. Emilia, with her signature smug smile, made herself comfortable and sat in the chair facing me. Emily Swerve, Chad Blare, and Flora flanked her.

What did I do?

As I began contemplating whether I had offended this group, Flora called out to me. "Good morning, Merlio!"

My anxiety melted at her warmth. She took a seat beside Emilia, who just stared at me with that same smug look.

I wasn't sure if I had mentioned this before, but I'm not a movie enthusiast. Still, they reminded me of characters from a franchise called Mean Girls.

"Hello, Flora..." I glanced at the other girls with a cautious gaze. "Is this the part where you say, 'I know your secret, and if you don't do as I say, you'll get it exposed'?"

Emilia giggled, her face still smug. Mocking, to be honest. "Your secret?" She leaned forward. "Do you have one you want to share, perhaps?"

Yet again, I scanned the table before I replied carefully. "Not any that I know of, no."

Emily tilted her head with a puzzling expression. "So what? We can't just sit with our classmate?"

I raised my hand, deflecting any accusations. "That's not what I said. But I do know I don't fit your criteria of interest, no?"

They exchanged glances, except for Emilia, who still had her gaze fixed on me. After a few seconds, they started giggling.

I sat there dumbfounded and confused. What was the whole point of coming to my table? What did they want? Why were they being cryptic?

Whatever it was, Emilia did not share the same sentiment as the others. Was she still hung up on the fact that I hadn't been expelled?

"Say, Merlio, right?" Emilia inquired, twisting her pale blonde hair. "You seem awfully close to Gertrude."

*Oh. I see what this is about.*

I looked at Flora, who had a smug look on her face as well, adjusting her glasses.

"Yes. Problem?"

The girls' expressions morphed into surprise, eyes widening.

"Oh my~" Chad Blare exclaimed.

Emilia shook her head and smacked her lips. "So you're not even hiding it, huh?"

Ah. How do I defend myself from the imminent onslaught of teasing about dating Gertrude?

"What's there to hide? She's interesting to speak to. I see no reason why our acquaintance should be hidden." I tried to pick my words carefully, as any other implications could paint the wrong picture.

"Oh, so you're not dating?" Flora asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think I'll have the time for that anytime soon."

Emilia scoffed. "Yeah, it's not like you're banging anytime soon."

Ouch.

"Emilia, language?" Flora puffed her cheek at the pale blonde girl.

"It's not like I said 'fuck' or anything." Flora glared at her more intensely this time. "Okay, fine, I'll shut up."

What a strange exchange. I wondered why Flora would hang around them. At first glance, you'd automatically assume she was a bit mean as well. But from our few conversations, I found her quite friendly.

She should be aware that hanging around with Emilia would make people see her as harsh, no? She was smart, so she definitely knew that much. Yet she chose to be with them.

I looked at the four of them as they talked about random things that would be too graphic for children, Flora doing her best to reprimand them.

Perhaps Flora was the planet that Emilia orbited, not the other way around.

"How are the endeavors for the project coming along?" I asked as I turned back to my sketchpad.

"Oh yeah, I was part of the group that sorted out the other version of the narrative."

I looked up at Flora. Her expression shifted into exaggerated tiredness.

"You sorted them out?"

"Yeah, not only was she part of the group, she basically did half the work," Emily added.

My pen spun around my finger. "Well, it is Flora after all," I said with an awkward smile. "Besides, that means we can start negotiating with other classes to combine narratives, correct?"

Emilia nodded. Flora, however, rubbed her neck sheepishly.

"Yeah, that would be great. Except I'm having trouble with a particular premise..."

"I wonder how troublesome it must be if it's giving you problems, Flora," I said in a worried voice.

Flora pushed up her glasses and brought out a notebook. She flipped the page to a passage.

"Here's what I could come up with."

I took a look at the notebook. One page was divided into two sections, two similar sets of premises. However, upon closer inspection, they had distinct differences.

She pointed at premise 33 on the right side. On it was written:

'she dialed channel, 56'

On the conflicting narrative, premise 33 read:

'She dialed channel 566.'

"It says the same thing, but with different numbers. The issue is, I don't know which belongs to which narrative."

Emilia glanced at me expectantly.

I leaned back in my seat and hummed. "Let me see the notebook again." I examined the premises of the two narratives, and I noticed something. The two narratives were told from different perspectives.

Premise 16:

'A receipt in her hand'

The other premise 16:

'and dropped the receipt'

Premise 17:

'She dropped it on the coffee table'

The other premise 17:

'on the coffee table in the middle.'

From premise 16 stringing with premise 17, we got:

'A receipt in her hand. She dropped it on the coffee table.'

The other premise 16 and 17 gave us:

'and dropped the receipt on the coffee table'

When you compared the two sentences, you quickly noticed the difference in structure.

Sentence 1 had two independent units: a nominative absolute (A receipt in her hand) followed by a full independent clause (She dropped it on the coffee table).

Sentence 2 was a verb phrase (dropped the receipt...) with an implied subject from a previous clause (She walked in and dropped the receipt…).

You could also notice the pronoun versus full noun phrase.

My eyes focused on the sentences as I brought my thoughts together.

Sentence 1 used "it" (pronoun) to refer to the receipt.

Sentence 2 used "the receipt" (full noun phrase) again.

This meant:

Sentence 1 assumed the receipt was already activated in the discourse (through the absolute phrase), so "it" was fine.

Sentence 2 might be the first mention of the receipt in that clause, so the full noun was needed.

But let's look at this holistically.

I turned to Flora, my voice calm and measured. "The two sentences imply different narratives."

Flora narrowed her eyes at my words. "Yeah, but how did you come to that conclusion, Merlio?"

"Take a look at the very first premises from our class, 16 and 17. It says: 'A receipt in her hand. She dropped it on the coffee table.' " I pointed at the other 16 and 17. "While this one is: 'and dropped the receipt on the coffee table.' "

Flora rested her head on her chin. "Oh yeah, I can see it now." She beamed. "Both have distinct narrative distances."

"Yeah..." I closed my eyes as I continued. "To be more specific, the first sentence is like a camera close-up. A close third-person, almost cinematic or focalized through the character. The other feels like a police report."

I wrote down on the other page:

'She entered the room and dropped the receipt on the coffee table.'

"Something like this. A sequential narration, if you will."

Flora nodded enthusiastically.

"But there's a problem with this sentence," said Blare. "It could be something like 'I entered the room and dropped the receipt on the coffee table.' Same detachment, different perspective."

"That's true. I was just making an example." I went back to Flora's initial confusion. "So, Flora, do you get the picture now?"

Flora nodded slowly before she began reasoning out loud. "Yes. Prior to premise 33, we get information about what channel the two characters were about to put on. However, on premise 33, we get two different numbers."

She wrote the number 56 on an empty page. "If we go with the deduction that there are two characters, that means each narrative is told by each character."

Everyone nodded in understanding. Flora pressed on. "Well, that could translate to the number 566 being the one told by the other narrative."

"I apologize, but that's what my brain power could come up with." Pseudo-tears formed around her eyes. Emilia consoled her with teasing, and Flora quickly recovered.

"So far, we know there are two characters, but we don't know which character input 56 or whoever put 566."

The answer wasn't hard to come to. Simply put, the two narrators noted that the other input 56 and 566. The problem was the sentence was exactly the same.

To find this answer, we'd have to look back at the premises prior.

I brought back the notebook and read the premises before number 33.

Original Narrative (Premises 27-32):

27. Finally, it was time for Charlie Charms.

28. The show was always on today at 4:00.

29. Deborah didn't like the show itself.

30. but she liked the host.

31. Charlie had charm.

32. No pun intended.

These were all in the original narrative. Although we couldn't solve who was who given the limited information, we could try to make sense of premise 33.

This narrative gave more information than the conflicting narrative. But here was the most relevant information from the conflicting side:

Conflicting Narrative (Premises 27-32):

27. I was reading an article about Charlie Charms.

28. He was involved in some kind of scandal.

29. The details were obscured.

30. the paper was vague, evasive.

31. but I could tell he was definitely guilty.

32. he had lost my respect.

From these, we could see the narratives weren't that similar anymore, with clear distinction that one came from a narrator with conflicting beliefs to the other.

With these premises so far, we could see that one narrator liked the Charlie Charms show. The other liked the host himself but not the show, as evidence from the first narrator's premises.

And the second narrator did not like Charlie Charms, as she read an article about the host and even said he had lost her respect. This told us that the first narrator had no knowledge of the scandal surrounding her favorite host and still assumed that the second narrator liked Charlie Charms.

However, you could piece together who dialed the channel number.

One of the narrators did not like Charlie Charms, so normally she would input a channel she preferred, since the host she once found attractive had lost her respect due to the scandal.

The first narrator liked Charlie Charms, so she would put in the correct channel.

But which was the correct channel?

There was 56 and 566.

I turned to Flora. "Do you watch television?"

"Hehehe, I don't, unfortunately. I'm more of a book person," Flora said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

"I watch tons of TV. Social media these days is very toxic," Emily said.

"Is there a talkshow channel? If so, which one is the most popular?" I asked.

"Definitely the Timmy Jared Talkshow! That guy is the most charismatic I've ever seen!"

Emily seemed to be quite a fan. My instincts told me the school had taken inspiration from real-life elements.

"What channel number is it?" I pressed further.

"If my memory isn't hazy, I think it's 126. Most entertainment channels are in the three-digit range, while two-digit channels cover lifestyle content, like reality TV shows," Emily recited from memory.

And thus, the pieces came together.

"What if the other narrator first dialed channel number 56 for lifestyle content, and the original narrator changed the input to 566?"

Emily's breath caught in her lungs. "Oh, that makes a lot of sense!" she exclaimed. "One narrator doesn't like Charlie Charms, so she puts in 56. The other narrator punches in 566!"

"Exactly. One is a reality TV show, while the latter is a talkshow," Flora chimed in.

I folded my arms and nodded in affirmation. "Yeah, seems that way."

A beat of silence followed. I opened my eyes to look at the girls staring at me with impressed looks on their faces.

"It's not that hard."

"It is, idiot," Emilia said with a smirk. "Your reasoning is very strong, although our conclusion isn't yet verified."

"Just happened to be a fan of English."

"Come on, Merlio. You cracked that thanks to your deductive abilities," Flora complimented.

"Abductive, to be precise," Blare corrected.

And so we talked about irrelevant subjects, and I exchanged contact information with the girls.

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On my way to the dorms, I looked at my contacts list. The names were mostly girls.

Hmm. I think I need to reduce my interactions with girls. I don't want to give off the idea of being something I'm not.

I pocketed my phone and walked on, the rain having stopped but the clouds still hanging overhead.

The 13th of September started vibrant. Caspian had texted me to meet up with him, and here I found myself strolling down the long pathways with him by my side.

"Check out those snares!" He pointed to a group of drummers practicing their marching.

I noticed their numbers. They seemed to be mostly second-years or third-years. I wasn't really sure. The sound of the snares rattled the air in a vibrant rhythm, the bass following in succession as they played a drumline.

"I was given this wristband by a lady in one of the shops at the Oval Plaza." Caspian showed off the stylish wear. "A thank-you because I helped her find her cat."

Caspian, though a bit rough on the outside, appreciated even the smallest things. I wouldn't even say he was quick to anger. Perhaps his encounter with the seniors had been a special case.

"I see," I muttered. "You said you wanted to hang out, yeah?"

Caspian smiled widely. "Of course. I know exactly what we should do."

"You have something in mind?" I asked.

"Yup!"

He started leading the way, and I followed closely. Prior to his text, I'd been awfully idle due to no classes today. And I had said I'd minimize my interactions with girls from my class, so asking Gertrude to hang out was out of the question. I was grateful to be tagged along with Caspian.

After a while, we reached a famous spot in the entertainment district: the baseball stadium. Beside this massive structure stood another stadium, but it was closed down for reasons I had no idea about. Though Caspian seemed to be a big fan of baseball, I could tell he was trying his luck again at getting me to join the baseball club.

In mere minutes, we found ourselves inside the pitch, the bleachers stretching past my vision. The ever-present gloomy clouds floated above our heads.

"Yo, Berlin!" Caspian called, walking to the middle of the field.

"Well, would you look at that. If it ain't Caspian!"

A senior in a yellow and blue baseball jersey called out. His eyes were small with long lashes. He stood approximately 6'2".

"Good morning, Berlin. Practice going smooth?"

Berlin, the senior, it seemed, wiped off his sweat with a handkerchief. "Mhmm!" He hummed. "Bosco over there is out of shape from the little break he took, so we're getting him back in form."

"Hey, I can hear you loud and clear over here!" The senior named Bosco said as he caught his breath.

The other seniors chuckled at his words. Caspian went ahead to shake hands with the rest of the seniors present, exchanging laughs and jokes. Somehow, it felt as if I was an odd number. I didn't seem to fit this group. Assimilation wouldn't hurt, though.

"Oh yeah, I brought a new recruit!"

And there it is. My anticipation was correct.

Caspian tilted his head, gesturing for me to come over. At that moment, I realized how far I was from the group. So I walked over.

"Yo. What's up?" I said, glancing at everyone. For a few seconds, silence followed, and I wondered if I had adopted Caspian's mannerisms incorrectly.

"What's good, man? The name's Berlin." He raised his hand, so I went low.

Clap!

"Berlin Staunton. Nice to meet ya." He completed, holding my palm tightly. I decided to squeeze back as well.

"Ahaha... ouch!" He quickly let go of my hands. "Damn, insane grip you got there, buddy."

"Sorry."

"Nah, that's crazy. I always thought Berlin had the most insane grip out of all of us!" said another senior.

Berlin chuckled sheepishly. "Say, you joining our baseball team?"

"What? I already told you he'll join!" Caspian perked his lips.

"Yeah, I know you, Caspian. You're quite forceful, to be frank."

"I gotta say, though," I raised my hand. "I have zero experience in baseball."

Everyone looked at me with disbelief. "Well, not everyone can play, but at least you're familiar with the terms, right?"

I shook my head. "Unfortunately, I'm not. I do know about pitching and batting... oh, and home run." I offered my limited knowledge of the sport.

"Sheesh," Bosco said.

Berlin shrugged. "No worries. We could tutor you, you know. It's not like we're a competitive team... yet."

Caspian waved his hands. "Yeah, I could help him with that. I won't lie, I assumed you'd be horrible at it."

Huh?

"Why did you recommend me for recruiting, then?" I asked, curiosity lacing my voice.

"I like teaching others!" he said proudly.

After a few questions about my physique and some examinations, they decided to help me become versed in the plays of baseball.

---

Later, Caspian and I strolled down the west side of the entertainment district. The silence between us was uncomfortable. I thought of many things to talk about, but each would lead to something he wasn't familiar with.

After a few minutes of deciding on a topic, I opened my mouth.

"I was surpr—"

"So you're friends with Gertrude?"

"..."

"..."

We both spoke simultaneously: "You go first."

"..."

I went quiet before I spoke again. "I think so. We haven't declared ourselves as friends, though. Probably because we were acquainted before the first meeting in class."

Caspian nodded in understanding. "Not friends yet, gotcha. Many would think the same 'cause you guys hang around a lot."

"Yeah, I get that. And you aren't the only one who's asked about that."

Caspian dug his hands into his pockets. "You want some ice cream?"

I waved my hands. "I don't think I can accept tha—"

"Relax, it's on me," he said. "Oh yeah, we just walked past some vanilla-flavored cookies. I'm a sucker for those."

He rubbed his head. "You know what? How about you go buy the ice cream ahead, and I'll go back? I'll pay you back."

I nodded. "Sure."

Since credit couldn't be withdrawn, I would have to purchase it with my student card.

We went our separate ways temporarily. My goal was to buy ice cream. And I had to admit, I wasn't a fan of sweets. I preferred something mundane on my taste buds. I was a boring man.

After purchasing two cups of ice cream, I made my way back. But I decided to cut my path short and went another way.

As I walked down the stairs, I noticed this pathway was desolate. I wondered if I might get mugged, but I had no worries. About 89% of the people on this campus were students.

"Who the hell does that bitch think she is?"

I froze. The soles of my shoes made a soft click against the pavement.

Just ahead was a girl. The darkness made it hard to make out who she was, and her back was facing me as she punched the wall.

"What a group of fucking prep queens, thinking they're above everyone else, huh?"

"Interesting," I said to myself from my hidden spot.

"Everyone in that classroom thinks they're some kind of hotshot. But none more annoying than that slut Emilia, Gertrude, and Christa!"

I dropped the cups of ice cream on the floor and peeked to see who it was. Upon closer observation, I heard another digitalized voice.

"I understand. Is there anything else you want to share, dear? I could have them expelled."

My eyes narrowed at the word: *expulsion.*

Then the girl turned. Her shoulder-length hair and thin frame. There was no doubt.

It was Mia.

Suddenly, my phone started vibrating. She snapped her attention to my direction with pinpoint accuracy. I cut the incoming call and tapped on the recording app.

"Who the hell is there?" she demanded. "Come out, you dipshit!"

"No need to raise your voice, Mia." I stepped forward, my monotonous voice and expression a stark contrast to hers.

Her face was a mess of makeup, her big playful eyes now filled with deep resentment directed at me. Her hair was disheveled, and the knuckles on her fist were bleeding profusely.

"It's just me—"

"C'mere." Her voice was playful again.

I was amazed by how quickly she could change her high-pitched tone. I walked down the stairs toward her.

Standing in front of me, she brought her hand forward. "Give it here."

"Why should I?"

"Give me the damn phone, Merlio." Her voice was calm now.

"Tell me, who's on the line, Mia?"

"You're not in the position to ask questions."

I gave her the phone. She swiped it from my grasp and told me to take a step back. After that, she threw my phone back to me. I caught it without a sweat, my gaze still fixed on her.

She arranged herself, dusted her blazer, and wiped off her makeup. Then, without warning, she leaned in very close.

"You heard that, didn't you?"

"If I didn't, then why ask for my phone?"

"That's not what I said. But the voice on my own phone?"

"..."

She leaned closer, now on her tiptoes, her breath brushing against my ear.

"Be careful. Unless I might have your little friend expelled."

She took a step back. "I don't mind you telling others what you heard about me. However, I'll do anything in my power to drag the ones I dislike down with me."

Her friendly voice was back on now, as if a switch had been flipped. It was like watching a magic trick, how she did it was unsettling.

"Please... don't do anything rash," I asked, desperation lacing my tone.

"Hmmm... Be a good boy, and I won't."

I stood and watched her turn and walk to the opposite part of the alleyway. Her figure disappeared as she made a turn to the right.

I looked up at the wall she had been punching earlier. A small dent was fractured into it, blood splattered around it.

I looked down at the phone call from earlier and saw Caspian's name on the missed calls list.

A sudden gust of wind blew.

"It's come to this, huh?"

---

I picked up the fallen cups of ice cream, both now melted, ruined,and tossed them into a nearby bin.

Mia's words echoed in my head. "I'll do anything in my power to drag the ones I dislike down with me."

The bubbly, enthusiastic girl who had proposed the study group. The social butterfly who had seemed so harmless.

A mask, I realized. She's been wearing a mask this entire time.

And now I had seen what lay beneath.

I pulled out my phone and stared at the recording app. I hadn't pressed stop in time, or had I? The screen showed a blank recording. She had deleted it before throwing the phone back.

Clever.

She hadn't just taken my phone to delete evidence. She had taken it to see if I had recorded anything. And she had found nothing, because I hadn't started recording until after she had already seen me.

Or had I?

I checked the files. There it was. A recording, but only of the conversation after she had taken my phone. The part where she threatened me. The part where her mask slipped further.

I deleted it.

Not because I was afraid of her. But because a recording of her threatening me wouldn't help anyone. It would only escalate things.

And Mia, for all her venom, had just shown me exactly who she was. Or a part of herself?

And even more of a mystery. Who's the one behind the phone?

So many questions.

Forewarned is forearmed.

I pocketed my phone and walked back toward the main path, where Caspian was probably waiting with his vanilla cookies, completely unaware of what had just transpired.