

Cote 281

Chapter 281: The Answer

"Mitoma-kun's answer is quite serious; don't all men hope to have a harem?"

Asahina Nazuna's voice carried a hint of teasing, as if a mature and composed senpai was calmly addressing her junior's questions.

"Since childhood, I've hated tragedies and only cherished happy endings where everyone has a bright and beautiful future." Kaoru paused here.

"The premise of having a harem is that everyone is willing; if someone is unwilling and is forced together, it will only make things a tangled mess."

Asahina Nazuna was surprised; he actually wanted to discuss this topic with her.

For women, a harem was quite an inappropriate subject.

"I like happy endings just like you, Mitoma-kun, but I might prefer a one-on-one pure love route more because I don't want to share my love with anyone."

"Senpai is indeed quite innocent."

"This question isn't about innocence. If it were you, would you want to see your girlfriend have a second, or even a third, fourth boyfriend?"

"I wouldn't want that."

"So, love itself is inherently selfish."

"What if he loves you just as much?"

Asahina Nazuna frowned; she felt that Kaoru seemed to be implying something, and her mood began to grow a bit restless.

No, wait, it was that she couldn't answer this question.

While the two were conversing, Nagumo Miyabi was enjoying the company of the girls around him, like a drunken emperor lost in a dream.

A few days ago, this emperor had told her directly that he liked her.

To be honest, Asahina Nazuna didn't have much aversion to Nagumo Miyabi, let alone any feelings of affection; she just thought he was quite strong and had a prominent personal charm, more outstanding than others of the same age.

However, if it came to dating, that would require careful consideration.

"Hey, Mitoma-kun, if you had one apple and several people in front of you wanted to eat it, would you give the apple to one person alone, or would you cut it to share with everyone?"

As she spoke, Asahina Nazuna stared directly into Kaoru's eyes, unwilling to miss his reaction.

"I would buy more apples," Kaoru responded with what he thought was the most reasonable answer.

Asahina Nazuna felt a question mark appear above her head, and then she couldn't help but burst into laughter, patting Kaoru on the shoulder.

"Hahaha, you idiot! Who said you could buy more apples? Let me add to the question: if you only have one apple right now, and you must distribute it within a minute, what will you do?"

The question became even more unreasonable.

Kaoru pondered for a moment and replied, "What does Senpai want to eat?"

Asahina Nazuna's face darkened; she was the one asking the questions, not the one who needed to answer!

"The distributor is you now; you need to ask yourself what you will do, not ask me."

"I understand what you mean, senpai. Giving one person the apple alone is unfair, but regardless of your feelings, cutting the apple for everyone is also quite excessive," Kaoru said.

"Even if there's only one apple, I think we can discuss it."

Asahina Nazuna fell silent.

If they could discuss how to eat an apple, could love also be discussed together?

"The issue isn't distribution; it's why I only have one apple to give you, and not two or three. Why doesn't everyone have one?"

"..."

Asahina Nazuna's thoughts became tangled.

She couldn't think of any reason to refute Kaoru, even though his thoughts were as detestable as Nagumo's.

Since she couldn't think of anything, she simply gave up on the topic.

"How did you know we would have gym class today?"

The schedules for the two grades were different, and Asahina Nazuna was quite curious about how he knew her class's schedule.

"I checked the location and saw that you and Nagumo-senpai were in the gym, so I came to take a look," Kaoru said, his heart steady.

"Wow, isn't that a bit like a creepy stalker?" Asahina Nazuna was somewhat taken aback.

"I don't watch every day," Kaoru defended himself, noting that someone was worse than him, keeping tabs on her location every day.

"Mitoma-kun, I think first-year students should focus on their studies," Asahina Nazuna said sternly.

"You can skip class today, but who knows what more outrageous things you might do tomorrow? Even if you don't care about the class, you should at least exercise some self-restraint."

"Alright, alright, I'll head back right away." Kaoru was about to leave when he suddenly turned back.

"Don't tell Nagumo-senpai, I'm counting on you, senpai."

Asahina Nazuna watched him leave, and after a while, she returned to the gym with a nonchalant expression.

"Nazuna, let's practice again later."

Nagumo Miyabi patted the girls beside him, sending them back to practice.

"Ahaha, I'm a bit tired," Asahina Nazuna said, sitting aside. "I doubt I can keep up with Miyabi's pace; how about we switch partners?"

"What are you talking about? My partner can only be you," Nagumo Miyabi said dismissively.

"The three-legged race isn't particularly difficult, and didn't we work well together before?"

Asahina Nazuna fell silent for a moment and didn't oppose him further.

However, years of tacit understanding quickly led Nagumo Miyabi to notice her unusual demeanor, prompting him to ask her.

"Is it because of what I just did?"

Seeing Asahina Nazuna remain silent, he said impatiently.

"I've told you many times; you don't need to worry about these trivial matters. The only person I truly care about is you, and they all know that."

So, can she be at ease with this thought?

Asahina Nazuna couldn't help but recall Kaoru Mitoma from earlier; his evasive remarks left a deep impression on her, and more importantly, his last words had been said without a hint of joking, but rather with serious contemplation.

If there were only one apple, it would indeed be unfair because some would want to eat more meat, and if it were less, they would feel wronged.

As the number of people increased, the amount of meat available for distribution would decrease.

After all, they could have enjoyed one apple to their heart's content.

Asahina Nazuna hesitated for a moment and shared this question with Nagumo Miyabi.

In response, Nagumo Miyabi answered nonchalantly, "Of course, it's for you. To me, you will always be my top priority."

The answer was decisive; most girls would expect this answer, and Asahina Nazuna was no exception.

Rationally or emotionally, she didn't want to share the apple.

However, Nagumo Miyabi's actions also made her feel a twinge of unease.

Asahina Nazuna suddenly laughed self-deprecatingly.

Why was she thinking so much?

She had been led astray by Kaoru Mitoma; she and Miyabi had been childhood friends, so his apple was undoubtedly hers.

Thus, Asahina Nazuna decided to temporarily forget these thoughts, intentionally or unintentionally ignoring the girls around Nagumo Miyabi.

No, she had already grown accustomed to the presence of girls around him.

After all, they were childhood friends, and Asahina Nazuna was willing to give him more trust.

Chapter 282: Companions in Humiliation

Even after two days had passed, Kaoru Mitoma occasionally found himself reflecting on Asahina Nazuna's question.

The reason he had discussed these topics with her might have been due to some emotional resonance.

Of course, more importantly, he wanted to know Asahina Nazuna's views on Nagumo Miyabi.

It was obvious that the other party had considered Nagumo Miyabi's behavior issues but found it hard to accept, otherwise, the two might have ended up together.

However, other reasons couldn't be ruled out either.

"How rude. You promised to have coffee with me, yet you've been spacing out the whole time."

A sudden sharp pain shot through Kaoru Mitoma's calf, snapping him back to reality.

Sitting across from him, Kushida Kikyo was glaring at him in clear dissatisfaction—she must have kicked him under the table while no one was looking.

"I was thinking about how to answer you."

"Hmph, figured it out yet?" Kushida Kikyo counted off on her fingers one by one,

"Horikita, Sakayanagi, Kamuro, Sakura, Ichinose, Hasebe, Karuizawa... Tell me, you're not planning to take all of them, are you?"

"You can add one more—Kikyo-chan," Kaoru reminded her.

Kushida Kikyo shot him a sidelong glance and retorted irritably, "I never said I'd be with you. Our relationship has always been nothing more than a cold, distant master-servant dynamic."

Kaoru gave her a strange look.

How could there possibly be such a thing as a "cold, distant master-servant relationship" in this world?

"Still, I'm curious—how exactly did you pull this off?" Kushida couldn't wrap her head around it.

"Horikita makes sense, but surely the others weren't all threatened by you too?"

Kaoru took a sip of his coffee.

This again—how was he supposed to answer?

"Is this what you wanted to ask?"

"What do you mean, what I wanted to ask?" Kushida puffed up her cheeks, glaring at him.

"A master should tell their slave everything. A slave has the right to know everything about their master."

"I'm a pervert," Kaoru Mitoma answered succinctly.

Kushida kicked him under the table again, completely devoid of the angelic demeanor she was supposed to have.

Seeing Kaoru wince slightly seemed to lift her mood.

Her expression brightened, and she leaned in, whispering, "You did something dirty with Horikita again, didn't you?"

"We do it every week," Kaoru replied calmly.

He had known from the start that Kushida hadn't invited him to the café just for idle chatter.

"Disgusting." Kushida's face flushed, though her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"The sports festival is about to start, and I still haven't seen her in a gym uniform. Can you take me along?"

"Are you sure you're not a lesbian?" Kaoru asked skeptically.

"Say that again and I'll bite you to death!" Kushida snapped back without hesitation.

"The point isn't her wearing a gym uniform—it's watching her put one on and then get played with by a man until she's a complete mess."

"Pervert," Kaoru shot back, a rare counterattack from him.

For her to say something like that in public—this little angel was beyond saving.

"You're the pervert, not me. I'm not the one doing it," Kushida retorted, her face burning red.

But realizing she was getting a little too worked up, she lowered her voice.

"I've thought of a brilliant plan. Didn't you say she'd never accept being humiliated in front of others?"

"I did say that. What about it?" Kaoru felt a flicker of curiosity.

Judging by her expression, she seemed to be brewing some outrageous scheme.

"Ahem, what do you think would happen if she had a companion?" Kushida knew her cheeks were burning, but she had to continue.

"It's embarrassing in front of outsiders, but when you think about having a companion who's equally humiliated, doesn't that make it easier to accept?"

Kaoru fully understood her meaning and remained silent for a long time.

"N-no, I'm not asking you to actually discipline me. I just want to watch from the sidelines... or maybe let me discipline Horikita too. I'd be happy with that."

"Is that your request?"

"Is it strange?"

"Not strange, I'm just a bit curious about your history with Suzune."

"There's no history between us—nothing compared to you. You're already calling her 'Suzune' now." Kushida took a sip of coffee, the bitterness lingering on her tongue.

"It's just irritation, that's all."

Kaoru studied her for a moment before speaking.

"I can agree to that. In return, you should tell me about your past."

"What's this? Does my attitude toward Horikita bother you that much?" Kushida replied stiffly.

"I want to know about Kikyo-chan's past, that's all." Kaoru paused.

"Consider it me taking back what I said earlier. I'm interested in your little friendship game."

Kushida pursed her lips, but deep down, she knew this was precisely what had brought them together.

Back on the rooftop that day, Kaoru had keenly noticed how obsessively she cared about her image and had outright blackmailed her.

Unlike back then, she now felt it wouldn't matter even if she told Kaoru everything.

After a semester of interaction, she had come to understand him well enough.

There was no doubt—this man was indeed a lecher.

Yet he had an innate sense of boundaries, making things feel more like playful teasing than actual humiliation or degradation.

In other words, Kushida sometimes felt like they were flirting.

What astonished her even more was that despite having every opportunity to make a move, Kaoru had never pushed things further.

Every time she thought about it, her feelings became indescribably complicated.

Honestly, even a boyfriend wouldn't show this much restraint—to the point where she'd started questioning her own appeal.

Fortunately, Kaoru had recently proven himself otherwise.

Just as Kushida was about to speak, she suddenly spotted a figure in the distance and immediately shifted her expression, flashing a pleasantly surprised smile as she greeted them.

"Oh! What a coincidence, Hasebe-san! Fancy running into you here!"

At her voice, Kaoru instinctively turned and saw Hasebe Haruka standing not far behind them.

"What a coincidence! Are you and Mitoma-kun on a date?" Hasebe Haruka clearly seemed just as surprised.

"Ahaha, it's so crowded right now—why don't you join us, Hasebe-san?"

Though Kushida had no intention of competing for any man, she also wouldn't deny her relationship with Kaoru.

After all, they were master and slave.

"Eh, is that really okay? I wouldn't be interrupting anything?" Hasebe tilted her head.

"Not at all! If it's just you, it's fine." Kushida maintained her smile.

She wanted to test Hasebe a little.

And so, before Kaoru could even interject, the two girls had already settled the matter between themselves.

Although it was a shared table, Hasebe naturally wouldn't sit next to him, instead taking a seat beside Kushida.

The coffee she had been holding was now placed on the table, faint wisps of steam rising from it.

Chapter 283: A Good Friend Is Oneself

This was the first time Kaoru Mitoma had seen the two of them together face to face.

One was all smiles, radiating the youthful energy typical of their age, while the other listened with keen interest, occasionally chiming in with a comment.

Both were exceptionally striking girls, yet their images were entirely different.

Kushida Kikyo came across like a friendly classmate seated nearby, always eager to share her experiences.

Her innocent, adorable smile made people instinctively want to get closer to her.

Moreover, this little angel had an exquisitely delicate face, her porcelain-like skin glowing with a flawless, smooth luster—so tender it seemed as if it could be bruised with a touch.

Her petite nose practically begged to be pinched, and her soft lips kept chattering away, occasionally breaking into a giggle.

When certain topics came up, she would display just the right amount of tender empathy, offering gentle words of comfort.

With her extraordinary emotional intelligence, she never let the atmosphere turn awkward, nor did she ever make others feel uncomfortable.

A woman like this could probably play with men as easily as training a dog, Kaoru silently mused.

Hasebe Haruka, on the other hand, didn't possess such exaggerated approachability.

At first glance, she gave the impression of being somewhat hard to approach.

But after a brief exchange, one would quickly realize her emotional intelligence might not be any lower than Kushida Kikyo's.

If it were Horikita Suzune, the conversation would likely have turned awkward by now, and Airi Sakura certainly wouldn't have been able to keep up.

Only Hasebe could sit here so effortlessly, chatting animatedly with Kushida.

Kaoru noticed that whenever Hasebe encountered a topic she wasn't comfortable with, she would subtly steer the conversation away or simply drop it altogether, smoothly introducing a new subject to avoid any awkwardness.

Anyone meeting her for the first time would probably be instantly distracted by the 'pikachu' on her chest, making it hard to notice her little conversational maneuvers.

That said, Kaoru had to admit his eyes had indeed been momentarily captivated—she was really big, even larger than Kushida, and likely no smaller than Ichinose Honami.

"Hasebe-san, aren't you going to the library today?" Kushida asked casually.

"There's a book I want to buy, so I'll be stopping by the bookstore later before heading back to read," Hasebe replied, stirring her coffee.

She had added quite a bit of sugar, and the steaming cup seemed to emit a sweet, rich aroma.

"All by yourself again?" Kushida said. "I'm free right now—want me to come with you?"

"I'd love to say yes, Koko-chan, but what about the person across from you?" Hasebe teased her, her gaze shifting pointedly towards Kaoru.

"I told you, Mitoma-kun and I just happened to run into each other here," Kushida denied, her cheeks flushing red on their own accord.

She had probably rehearsed this expression quite a few times.

"How suspicious," Hasebe said with a knowing smirk. "This is the first time I've seen you make a face like that, Koko-chan."

Kaoru interjected them, "I'm a bit curious—you two seem really close?"

'Koko-chan, just hearing it feels different. It's not like others calling her Kikyo-chan—this is a special nickname, almost like an exclusive pet name.'

"Hasebe-san and I occasionally hang out together," Kushida Kikyo said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"But we get along really well, so I'd say we're pretty good friends."

"Speaking of which, Koko-chan still keeps calling me 'Hasebe-san'," Hasebe said with a somewhat resentful look.

"Even though I've told her it's fine to just use my first name."

"Ahaa, sorry, sorry! I'll be more careful!" Kushida immediately apologized while subtly glancing at someone.

"Seems I was overthinking it. I always thought Hasebe-san didn't have any close friends," Kaoru Mitoma remarked, observing their affectionate interaction.

"Even if you're handsome, isn't that a bit rude to say about a girl?" Hasebe pouted slightly.

"Though I don't share many interests with classmates, Koko-chan is different."

Kushida secretly flashed Kaoru a victory sign—this was the natural charm of an angel.

Unaware of their silent exchange, Hasebe proudly added, "Actually, besides Koko-chan, I have another very close friend."

"Who?"

"She's standing right in front of you."

"..."

Kaoru looked at Hasebe across the table.

She deliberately straightened her posture, chest nearly touching the table, chin slightly raised with pride.

"Surprising. This friend looks just like you."

"What do you mean 'looks like me'?" Hasebe glared before continuing.

"No matter who it is, your first friend should always be yourself. Only by understanding yourself can you make a second friend."

Kaoru was taken aback—she wasn't just a ditzy girl with big breasts after all.

"Is this wisdom Hasebe-san gained from books?" Kushida's eyes sparkled.

"Strictly speaking, I read books precisely for moments like this," Hasebe said sternly before immediately cracking up at her own seriousness.

"After getting to know Hasebe-san better, could I become your friend too?" Kaoru asked.

Hasebe glanced sideways before readily agreeing.

"Sure! We can be friends right now. Actually, I'd love having a Class A friend. Would you treat me sometimes?"

"No problem. I can pay you a monthly friendship fee," Kaoru winked.

Hasebe nearly spat out her coffee.

A "friendship fee" sounded terrifying—like she was some bully extorting classmates.

"N-no need! I was just joking."

"Relax, so was I."

"Ahaha, Mitoma-kun's jokes are really something..."

"..."

After chatting awhile, Kaoru seized the moment to suggest exchanging contact info, which Hasebe naturally agreed to.

Thus, they smoothly became connected friends.

Finishing her coffee, Hasebe decided not to intrude further and soon left the café—likely heading to the bookstore.

"So you're still stuck at this stage? And here I thought you'd already started licking boots." Kushida Kikyo grinned playfully as she looked at Kaoru.

"I thought you said you wouldn't help me?" Kaoru was well aware that if Kushida hadn't greeted her first, or if she had shown even a hint of displeasure earlier, things wouldn't have gone so smoothly.

"I wasn't helping you. She already saw me—I couldn't just ignore her, so I had to greet her first." Kushida sighed.

"That's the part I hate the most. I have to react immediately and can't show even a trace of unhappiness, or else they'll start suspecting right away."

"But you looked like you were genuinely happy." Kaoru could tell from Kushida's reaction—though her smile was somewhat performative, she might not actually dislike it.

Even if she deliberately crafted her approachability, some things required deceiving herself first.

In response, Kushida simply shot him a glare.

"Only a creep would stare that closely."

Chapter 284: Keeping Promises

After Hasebe Haruka's interruption, the original topic seemed difficult to continue, and Kushida showed no intention of circling back.

The café buzzed with noise as students from various classes laughed and chatted freely.

Kaoru even spotted students from Class A and Class D together, occasionally discussing practice sessions.

Perhaps the shared training had fostered friendships, allowing some students to become friends.

Still, the occasional stares directed at him and Kushida felt uncomfortably piercing.

Fortunately, Kushida quickly grew tired of the coffee, and the two left the café.

As Kaoru glanced toward the dormitory stairs and was about to speak, Kushida suddenly said.

"Sorry, but can I borrow your phone?"

Kaoru handed it over.

"What do you need it for?"

"Hasebe reminded me earlier—you're Class A's big spender now, so you should've been the one paying." As she operated his phone, she realized it had no passcode, easily accessing the apps inside.

"One, two, three... W-Wait, am I seeing this right? Why do you have millions of points?!"

The number on the screen left Kushida completely stunned.

She had assumed Kaoru might have three or four hundred thousand at most—but this was ten times that!

'What was going on? Where did he even get this much Personal Points?'

"If you want, I can transfer half to you." Kaoru didn't mind.

After all, Morishita Ai's account balance was even more terrifying than his.

"W-Why would you give it to me?!" Kushida glared at him sharply, clutching the phone protectively as if guarding against a thief.

"Give me half today, then another girl tomorrow, is that it?"

"You're the only one I've told about this." Kaoru felt unfairly accused.

Hearing him say that, Kushida Kikyo felt much better, though she couldn't help lecturing him.

"I don't know how you got all these Personal Points, but it's best not to tell others. It's too eye-catching—what if someone asks to borrow money from you?"

Kaoru Mitoma almost told her that Class A currently had no shortage of funds, but then it occurred to him that Kushida Kikyo was still a Class D student, surrounded by penniless classmates.

No wonder she was worried about people borrowing money.

"Since you have so many points, I might as well buy everything I want. No need to save for you." Kushida Kikyo muttered while deftly clicking through the webpage.

"Speaking of which, this school is so strange. They forbid us from contacting the outside world but allow us to use the internet and shop online."

Kaoru leaned in to see what she was doing and was met with an indecent webpage, watching as she expertly added items to the cart.

"Am I seeing this right?"

"We can use these on Horikita later. By the way, do you think cat ears are cute?"

"The more you act like this, the more I want to use them on you."

"Pervert."

"Kikyo, do you really have the right to say that to me now?"

"It's not like I'm the only one playing."

"..."

After finishing her selections, Kushida Kikyo handed the phone back to Kaoru and instructed.

"If you think it's not enough, you can add more. Everything will be delivered to your dorm."

Kaoru checked the total price—it was definitely beyond what she could afford.

"How many points do you have left?"

"Why are you suddenly asking that?" Kushida Kikyo frowned.

"I may envy your points, but I don't want to beg some from you."

Even though their relationship was strange now, Kushida didn't feel she had any right to dictate how he spent his money.

Besides, asking him for money made her feel inferior.

Having Kaoru pay was just part of their game.

At most, she could give him something in return.

"I know what you mean. Honestly, I don't care much about these points. If you don't take them, I'll just give them to someone else eventually."

"Hahaha, so you're planning to keep other women too, huh?"

"Please, Kikyo-sama give me a chance to let my points be part of your life."

Kushida Kikyo was momentarily speechless.

How could he say something like that with a straight face?

A moment later, when Kaoru transferred 200,000 Personal Points to her.

"Idiot."

Kaoru didn't explain anything.

He knew Class D's living conditions would revert to how they were at the start of the term next month.

He couldn't just stand by and watch Kushida go hungry.

Come to think of it, he'd also have to find a way to support Karuizawa Kei, Airi Sakura, and Haruka Hasebe—otherwise, they'd all be stuck eating Vegetable Set Meals for a month.

"Oh, I almost forgot—where's my reward?" Kaoru belatedly remembered.

He recalled Kushida Kikyo promising him a reward earlier, and he'd been looking forward to it for a few minutes today.

"You really are a pervert." Kushida Kikyo scoffed.

"Don't get your hopes up too much about the reward. The final say is mine."

"At least give me a hint?" Kaoru looked at her pleadingly.

Kushida Kikyo rolled her eyes and said mercilessly, "Go back and wait for my message. I'll let you know when it's time."

This was simply too agonizing, especially after seeing what he had just ordered.

Kaoru Mitoma could already feel himself getting restless—this girl was far too alluring.

However, since Kushida Kikyo didn't want to talk about it, Kaoru had no intention of forcing her here.

There was plenty of time ahead; no need to rush.

With that thought, Kaoru bid her a quick "see you later" and turned to head up the stairs.

"Kaoru."

Her voice suddenly chased after him.

Reflexively turning around, Kaoru felt something soft press lightly against his cheek—a fleeting, warm touch.

By the time he regained his senses, Kushida stood with her hands behind her back, a faint blush on her pretty face, yet wearing a sly smile.

"That's your reward. I keep my promises."

Not giving him a chance to respond, she spun on her heel, her steps light as a deer's, and disappeared into the crowd near the elevator.

Kaoru touched his cheek.

Had anyone seen that?

He wasn't quite sure.

As the sports festival drew closer, many classes had already submitted their participation forms to the school.

Naturally, this included Class A and Class D of the first-year students.

Because of this, Nagumo Miyabi soon received a copy of the participation forms—not the originals, but a perfect replica recreated from someone's memory.

After a quick glance, he immediately summoned a pawn he had kept in reserve for the entire semester.

Thus, in the student council office, a familiar scene unfolded before Nagumo once more.

Standing in his line of sight was a lovely girl, just like before.

The only difference was that now, both of them were fully aware of what the other was thinking.

"No need to be nervous. Horikita-senpai is out on business and won't be back for a while. I thought we could take this time to have a little chat."

With that, Nagumo flashed a refined, gentlemanly smile.

"Does the vice president need something from me?" Ichinose Honami, however, skipped the pleasantries and cut straight to the point.

"If it's nothing urgent, I should get back to practice with everyone else."

Nagumo raised an eyebrow.

She seemed a bit sharp with him today?

Chapter 285: Are You Really That Upright Now?

"Haha, Ichinose, I'd much prefer it if you called me 'senpai' instead of 'vice president.'"

Leaning back into the plush sofa, Nagumo narrowed his eyes slightly, studying the girl before him with admiration.

Even her loose jacket and blouse couldn't hide the graceful curves of her figure.

"Don't just stand there. People might think I'm scolding my junior. Sit down and talk for a bit."

Ichinose shook her head at his invitation and replied bluntly, "I really don't have much time. If you have something to say, please get to the point. Do you need me to do something?"

Nagumo wasn't angered.

He was always patient and tolerant with those who interested him.

Smiling, he said, "Fine, I won't force you. But I hope you'll at least listen to me out of gratitude—after all, I was the one who got you into the student council in the first place."

The more he spoke, the more Ichinose Honami was reminded of that scene.

If Kaoru hadn't intervened midway, her future might not have turned out well.

Not only joining the student council, but Nagumo Miyabi also reminded her of something else.

"You've spent a semester here by now, haven't you? How do you feel about it, Ichinose?"

"Though I've encountered quite a few strange things, I think coming here might be the best decision I've made so far." Ichinose Honami took a deep breath.

No matter who stood before her, she would answer this way.

"The students in Class B, those from other classes, even the upperclassmen—everyone has been very kind to me. I'm truly grateful to them."

Nagumo Miyabi asked with interest, "Does that not include me, your upperclassman?"

"In a certain sense, I'm deeply grateful to you as well, Nagumo-senpai." Ichinose Honami's mind flashed with the image of another person, and her cheeks flushed slightly.

"Heh, I'll gladly accept my kouhai's gratitude." Nagumo Miyabi grinned, revealing a row of white teeth, as if satisfied.

"But gratitude alone isn't enough. As your senpai, I intend to keep looking after my adorable kouhai."

A faint unease crept into Ichinose Honami's heart, but she quickly steadied herself.

She was no longer the timid rabbit she once was—she had learned many things since then.

"How many points separate your Class B from Class A?" Nagumo Miyabi suddenly asked.

Ichinose Honami felt she had guessed his intentions but answered calmly.

"A little over seven hundred."

"Hah, that's quite a worrying gap. Unless you win several exams in a row, catching up to Class A will be nearly impossible." Nagumo lowered his voice, as if revealing a shocking secret.

"The first semester was the school's tutorial phase for you all. If you didn't seize the opportunity then, the exams from now on will only make it harder to close the distance."

Ichinose Honami fell silent for a moment.

"We'll do our best."

"No, no, no. Just doing your best isn't enough. I understand your mindset perfectly—because I was once a Class B student too, chasing after Class A just like you."

At this point, Nagumo Miyabi showed a rare hint of nostalgia, his voice distant.

"We also went through the uninhabited island exam, running and fighting across the island. Under the laws of survival in nature, the only way to live is to do whatever it takes."

"Ichinose, if you don't adopt a life-or-death mentality, do you really think you can lead your class to the top? Can you defeat the current Class A? Can you win against Mitoma?"

"I..."

"Think carefully before answering. You're the leader of your class—everyone is watching you."

"..."

There was no denying that Nagumo Miyabi's words were persuasive.

And in this meritocratic school, most people had only one goal.

Ichinose Honami found it hard to reject his words because surpassing Class A was indeed her classmates' objective—one they would strive for over the next two years.

Precisely because of this, she found herself wavering.

Noticing her hesitation, Nagumo Miyabi curled his lips in a barely perceptible smirk and pressed further.

"Have you submitted your competition roster yet?"

"It's already decided. We'll turn it in tomorrow," Ichinose Honami replied. Nagumo Miyabi leisurely took out his phone, tapped a few times, and a ding sounded.

"Perfect timing. Take a look, Ichinose. I'll solve your worries, and all you have to do is accept this."

Watching Ichinose Honami lower her head, he felt a surge of satisfaction.

This was his power—undeniable and absolute.

Just as expected, Ichinose Honami's expression stiffened the moment she saw the contents of the email, as if she had witnessed something unbelievable.

"This... is the participation list for Class A and Class D?"

"Correct. Someone sent it to me. Can't tell you who, though."

"Why... why would you give me something like this?"

"As I said earlier, as your senior, it's only natural for me to look out for my juniors. In return, all you have to do is seize the opportunity, climb to Class A, and that'll be enough to satisfy me."

"..."

Her silence didn't faze him.

Many people became fearful after witnessing his strength.

However, after waiting for a long moment, Nagumo didn't get the answer he wanted. His brow furrowed.

"What are you hesitating for?"

"I refuse."

Her voice was so soft that Nagumo didn't catch it at first.

"What did you say?"

"I said, I won't take it!" Ichinose raised her voice slightly, her eyes shining with resolve.

"This kind of thing shouldn't exist here. I won't accept your 'kindness.' Thank you!"

Nagumo froze for a moment.

Seeing that she wasn't joking, his face burned.

What he thought would be an easy victory had suddenly turned against him.

Every word he'd just spoken now felt like a ridiculous clown act, with the audience even whistling in mockery.

In an instant, his anger transformed into an icy smile.

"Ichinose, let me give you some advice. In this school, you can't survive on just integrity. Do you even realize what you're doing?"

"I know. The vice president wants me to help you defeat Mitoma-kun, right?" Ichinose said calmly.

"Because you resent him but can't act directly, so you're trying to use us instead."

Nagumo laughed in frustration, dropping all pretense.

"Since you already know, aren't we allies on the same side? Why refuse? Or is it because you're close to him that you can't bring yourself to do it?"

"You're right. Mitoma-kun and I are close." Ichinose admitted openly before shifting her tone.

"But that's not why I'm holding back. This method of fighting isn't for me. I want to face him fairly."

Nagumo felt a vein throbbing in his forehead.

He deeply regretted ever indulging these first-years.

"Ichinose... do you really think you're being righteous right now?"

His voice at that moment was like a demon's whisper from the abyss.

A faint breeze stirred the curtains outside, but Ichinose only felt a chill seep into her bones.

"You clearly had no qualms about stealing in the past—going so far as to do anything for your sister's birthday. Why can't you do the same now?" He paused.

"Or do you think you've already been forgiven?"

Chapter 286: Must Keep Moving Forward

No matter how many times she told herself it was all in the past, her body still trembled.

Her stiff muscles seemed to have lost all strength to move, and she could hear her own heartbeat clearly.

A chill spread through her entire body, making Ichinose Honami instinctively hug her arms tightly, as if doing so could help her desperately avoid recalling those scenes.

Yet some memories were destined to remain etched deep in her soul, clinging like maggots to bone—agonizing to the point of making her feel nauseous and dizzy.

Her stomach churned, a sour taste filled her mouth, her fingers turned icy, and even her fingertips shook.

Facing Nagumo Miyabi's indifferent expression, Ichinose Honami instinctively wanted to flee, but her legs inexplicably gave out.

Her face paled slightly.

She knew what she was afraid of.

She knew she had done wrong.

She knew she couldn't forgive herself.

She knew she had unresolved guilt.

And she knew, most of all, that she lacked the confidence to confront the choices she had made back then.

The store clerk had forgiven her.

After hitting her, her mother had cried and apologized, saying she shouldn't have fallen ill and been hospitalized, that it was her fault Ichinose had turned out this way.

During her leave from school, her younger sister had knocked on her door and apologized too.

Sometimes, she wondered if she should just let it go—after all, it seemed like no one else held it against her.

But whenever she thought that, a deafening roar would suddenly jolt Ichinose Honami awake.

Was she trying to deny her own mistakes?

No, that wasn't it.

She just wanted to be stronger.

She just wanted to face her mistakes head-on and, in the end, bravely overcome them.

It was like standing on a glass bridge high in the air.

Logically, she knew she wouldn't fall, yet she couldn't help but look down at the empty space beneath her feet, overwhelmed by fear—unable to move forward, yet equally unable to retreat.

The memories she thought had been buried now surged back, and Ichinose Honami felt as though her chest were being constricted, making it hard to breathe.

Self-loathing filled her mind.

"Heh, I'd love for others to see this expression of yours. The beloved Ichinose—a thief. I wonder what they'd think," Nagumo Miyabi said, tilting his chin up as he leaned back against the sofa, watching her expression with satisfaction, a pleased smile playing on his lips.

"...Are you threatening me?"

"Just a friendly reminder. Honestly, I'm even more curious now—how did you manage to deal with Mitoma? He knows you're a thief too, doesn't he?"

"That's none of your business."

"Is that so?" Nagumo Miyabi glanced at her chest with a somewhat ambiguous gaze.

"I thought you might have used some underhanded methods to make Mitoma comply, given that he seems like a lecherous guy."

In an instant, Ichinose Honami shot him an extremely sharp look.

"Please don't make jokes like that, Nagumo-senpai."

"Alright, alright, I get it." Nagumo endured her piercing stare, raising the opposite eyebrow with a smirk.

"But what are you going to do now?"

Ichinose's breathing grew rapid. She had made another mistake—assuming everyone could be trusted.

In reality, some people had no bottom line at all.

"Do as I say." Nagumo's voice turned icy. "Either everyone finds out about your past crimes and you return to your old life, or you lead your currently trusting classmates to climb to Class A."

Seemingly two choices, but in truth, there was only one path to follow.

Honestly, Nagumo couldn't understand Ichinose's mindset.

He wasn't forcing her to do anything bad—this was mutually beneficial. Why refuse?

How ridiculous.

Did she truly believe in a fair and honorable showdown?

In a life-or-death struggle, even the dirtiest tricks from childhood fights were fair game.

Anything to win.

He believed Ichinose would make the right choice because, in the end, only people like that survived.

"I..." Ichinose's lips trembled slightly, her shoulders shaking as if bearing immense pain.

"...I want to change myself."

Nagumo frowned.

What kind of answer was this? That wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"Even if I run or ignore it, I know my past mistakes won't disappear. Not because I must constantly repent or condemn my sins..."

As she spoke, tears welled up in the girl's eyes, as if she might break down crying any second.

"I... I have to face the truth. I have to accept who I am. I must always remember I'm not perfect." She looked at her right hand, slowly placing it over her heart.

"A mistake is a mistake. Hiding it won't make it vanish. I'm someone who once stole, and I'll remember that firmly as I move forward—because someone will accept me. Someone won't care about my sins."

Instantly, Nagumo's expression darkened.

"Heh. You think someone will forgive you? That your crimes will just fade away?"

"I don't want to run anymore. Fear won't solve anything—it'll only drag me deeper." Ichinose paused.

"And... I don't want to make another mistake with you."

Nagumo felt a vein throbbing in his forehead, his teeth grinding as he spat out a near-hiss.

"I don't understand you at all. How could this entry form possibly harm you?"

"Undeniably, it might be the walkthrough for this sports festival, but—" Ichinose took a deep breath,

"I don't want to become like you people. Doing anything for victory in a single exam... I don't want my relationships to turn into life-or-death rivalries."

"Fine, fine, just wait and see, Ichinose. Clinging to such naive thoughts, you and your class will eventually drown in this ridiculous dream!"

Nagumo Miyabi could barely contain himself.

He couldn't understand why this girl wasn't afraid of her crimes being exposed, why she could reject him so easily.

"Thank you, senpai. I'll be going now." Ichinose Honami gave him a slight nod before walking out of the office door.

Bang—

After she left, Nagumo kicked the desk in front of him, his face dark with anger.

What should have been a straightforward matter had turned out like this—where exactly had things gone wrong?

He couldn't comprehend why dealing with a first-year junior could be so troublesome.

After a long while, Nagumo finally calmed down and regained his usual composure.

He picked up his phone and sent a message to Ryuen Kakeru.

If Class 1-B wouldn't cooperate, it didn't matter.

He still had Ryuen's Class 1-C.

Either way, he could make Kaoru Mitoma's life miserable.

Seeing Ryuuken's reply improved Nagumo's mood considerably.

This was the power he was supposed to wield—he didn't even need to step in himself, as there were always people willing to handle his dirty work.

Chapter 287: The Producer Who's Good at Therapeutic Conversation

Meanwhile, Kaoru Mitoma soon received a call from his girlfriend.

Her voice on the other end sounded somewhat subdued.

"Your class's competition roster has been leaked."

Kaoru was surprised—not because of the roster itself, but because Ichinose Honami had actually told him about it.

"Why are you telling me this?" Kaoru's voice softened. "You didn't have to refuse. Everyone in Class B wants to graduate from Class A, don't they?"

Ichinose was silent for a moment before murmuring, "Sometimes, I often think back to when we first met. I wonder what would have happened if I'd mustered the courage back then to tell you 'I refuse.'"

"Did Nagumo say something to you?" Kaoru guessed what she must have gone through today, and his mood soured.

Even though he knew this was a necessary process, it pained him that she had to face her inner demons alone.

"He tried to blackmail me, just like you did. It's ridiculous." Ichinose seemed to be speaking from her room.

"I thought I'd moved past it, that I could finally step back into the sunlight, but in the end, I still couldn't stop trembling."

"I'll come to see you."

"No, I... I want to be alone for a while."

"Actually, I've always wanted to talk to you about your past, but I never found the right opportunity before."

Kaoru could hear her holding her breath—just slightly.

She asked cautiously, "Kaoru... what did you want to talk about?"

"Your little sister is adorable, isn't she?"

"Yes, I think she's the cutest little sister in the world."

"Then that's enough."

Clearly, Ichinose was taken aback.

"That's all that matters," Kaoru repeated. "You have the cutest little sister in the world, and she has an older sister who loves her deeply. That's already enough."

"But... it's not the same. Back then, it was because of that..." Her words were quickly interrupted as Kaoru Mitoma asked in confusion.

"This sister went so far as to acknowledge her mistakes and even kowtowed to apologize to the clerk for her sake. Isn't that enough?"

Ichinose Honami froze.

Was that really enough?

"I think there's no more heart-stirring gift than a sister leading by example. Did she ever say sorry to you?" Kaoru spoke softly. "When you gathered the courage to leave home and come to this school, did she encourage you or smile at you?"

As he spoke, Ichinose couldn't help but recall the image of her younger sister waving goodbye.

She had seemed so happy, as if finally at peace.

"But... but I... I can't forgive myself. I can't help thinking how someone like me can just go on laughing and chatting with everyone as if nothing happened. What if I make more mistakes and betray everyone's trust again?"

This was the root of Ichinose Honami's pain.

She couldn't forgive herself.

Often, what seemed trivial to others made it hard for them to understand the person involved, sometimes even adding fuel to the fire.

What haunted the person wasn't the incident itself, but who they had been at the time.

"This is enough," Kaoru murmured. "With that mindset, I don't think Honami will make the same mistake again."

"But..." Ichinose Honami repeated the word, as if by instinct.

"Haven't you already refused?" Kaoru suddenly said.

Ichinose Honami didn't know how to respond. Her thoughts were a tangled mess, so she could only give a soft "Mm."

"So today, Honami has changed. At the very least, you can now tell me back then, 'Drop dead, you creep,' and I'd have to slink away with my tail between my legs."

She hadn't meant to laugh, but his deadpan tone made it impossible to hold back.

Ichinose pursed her lips—this pervert actually had some self-awareness.

"Honestly, I'm happy. Because the first person you called was me. That means I've been a pretty reliable boyfriend, enough for you to think of me instinctively."

Hearing this, Ichinose's cheeks flushed.

What did he mean by "reliable"? Did doing bad things to her count as being reliable?

"I think someone's been quite popular with the ladies lately. Care to explain?"

"That's too sudden a change of topic," Kaoru evaded. "Maybe I should take back what I just said."

"Coward."

They chatted idly for a while, and strangely, her mood gradually returned to normal, as if the person who had been so down earlier wasn't her at all.

Before she knew it, hours had passed.

Only when her phone was nearly out of battery did Ichinose snap out of it, realizing what Kaoru had done.

She lightly bit her lower lip, warmth spreading in her chest.

"Kaoru... do you think I'm an idiot?" she whispered.

"I wouldn't date an idiot," Kaoru paused. "Unless you think I'm one too?"

"But I refused Nagumo-senpai's proposal. With your competition forms, I might've been able to catch up to Class A, you know?" Ichinose put on a stern face.

"To reach that goal, I should've done whatever it took to defeat you all."

"The Honami I know isn't like this," Kaoru replied simply.

"Why?" Ichinose Honami found herself genuinely curious.

"Because you possess a uniqueness that none of us have. Abandoning your distinctiveness to excessively pursue what we have would only make you lose what makes you one-of-a-kind."

This was an evaluation Ichinose Honami had never heard before.

She even felt somewhat embarrassed, wondering how Kaoru could praise someone so earnestly with a straight face.

"Besides, Honami doesn't need to change anything. As long as you can learn something useful at this school, that's enough," Kaoru continued. "Society doesn't just need Class A—it needs people like you too."

Though ANHS deliberately elevated Class A's status, reality was often more complex.

If Class A represented small-town overachievers, then society naturally needed such people—but that didn't mean they were the only ones needed.

Students like Ichinose Honami could thrive just as easily in society.

The only difference might be a lower starting point compared to Class A students, burdened with the stigma of being "rejected" by Koudo Ikusei.

Moreover, Kaoru completely understood why Ichinose Honami had refused Nagumo Miyabi.

While it might seem incomprehensible to others, it ultimately came down to one thing:

Principles.

Once you abandon what you've always considered fundamental, you'll soon find yourself willing to abandon more—one thing after another.

Most of the time, principles collapse entirely this way.

After surrendering them once, maintaining them becomes far harder.

Whether in his previous world or his past life, Kaoru had witnessed too many people's downfalls.

"Kaoru," Ichinose Honami called his name softly, her voice oddly sweet.

"Are you worried about your classmates?" Kaoru assumed she was concerned about Class B students learning about her past.

"No, it's enough. Having you with me is enough."

For some reason, Ichinose Honami echoed the same words back to him.

Chapter 288: Opening Ceremony

Though Ichinose had advised Kaoru to quickly change the competition roster before hanging up, the forms had already been submitted.

Kaoru explained it was impossible now.

Since Class A's roster was tied to Class D's, they had to be submitted together.

As time passed, September's sports festival finally commenced.

The weather had gradually cooled, the summer heat mostly dissipated.

A golden slit split the morning clouds as a refreshing breeze swept across the athletic field.

After preparations the previous day, various sports equipment now filled the grounds—data-recording scoreboards, cameras for incident documentation, temporary rest area cabins, and teachers supervising the entire event.

With limited time, the school skipped an opening ceremony, simply having students march past the podium so administrators could observe them.

Walking in formation, Kaoru inadvertently glanced upward and spotted the man seated at the podium's center, an identification plate before him:

Sakayanagi Narumori.

The current chairman of this school was not particularly striking in stature, with a rather gentle demeanor.

Despite coming from a prestigious family, he didn't give off any air of superiority and would unconsciously smile when looking at the students.

It was said that ANHS had been founded by his father, and he himself had only taken over the position as chairman in recent years, succeeding his father.

Today was likely the first time Kaoru had seen him in person.

Kaoru averted his gaze because his daughter was sitting in the spectator stands, silently observing the entire sports festival.

He had expected Sakayanagi Narumori to say a few words of encouragement to the students, but after the principal finished speaking, the chairman simply announced the official start of today's competition.

Despite there being only a few hundred students, the schedule for the day seemed rather tight, with 13 events in total.

Following a brief explanation of the basic rules by third-year student Fujimaki, each grade quickly moved into their respective zones—the Red and White teams—where they would remain separate except during competitions, including the first-year students.

Events like the 100-meter dash seemed to start with the first-years, followed by the second-years and then the third-years.

The order began with the boys, then the girls, then switched to girls first in the next event before returning to boys, only to switch back again shortly after.

It felt oddly chaotic, like the haphazard scheduling of holidays in a certain Eastern superpower, all crammed together.

Since Kaoru was in the fifth group, he leisurely went through his warm-up routine while glancing toward the second-year area out of the corner of his eye.

There, he could see Nagumo Miyabi wearing an expression of extreme displeasure, as if he had just eaten something vile, while those around him treaded carefully, not daring to make a sound.

Clearly, Kaoru's tactics had worked.

The day before, under the pretense of publicly announcing the competition roster, Nagumo had demanded that all second-years submit their participation forms, intending to reveal the finalized lineup at the very last moment.

His plan had been sound—given his influence, no second-year would have dared to defy him.

However, Kiriya Ikuyo had submitted his form only to make an emergency revision at the last minute, citing that several classmates were feeling unwell and needed to switch their event order.

When Kiriya handed in the revised roster, Nagumo nearly lost his composure.

He had already finalized the lineup and submitted it to the school, completely caught off guard by Kiriya's maneuver.

There was no doubt about it—under normal circumstances, Kiriya would never have dared to pull such a stunt, nor was this sly tactic her style.

It could only have been Kaoru Mitoma.

Realizing this, Nagumo had all but confirmed one fact.

Just as he intended to teach Kaoru a lesson, Kaoru similarly wanted to overturn him.

The key point was that Kaoru had been secretly approaching his childhood friend.

All in all, the more Nagumo Miyabi thought about it, the more disgusted he felt.

He could accept being a playboy himself, viewing women as expendable, but he absolutely could not tolerate his childhood friend becoming someone else's expendable.

Thus, on the day the sports festival officially began, Nagumo Miyabi was in an exceptionally foul mood, his gaze fixed intently on the first-year students.

Under his stare, Kaoru had already finished his warm-up, his expression unchanged.

On the competition field, a short whistle blew, and a black figure instantly shot out from the track, overwhelmingly leading by several body lengths before charging past the finish line in first place.

That figure was none other than Sudou Ken from Class D.

Kaoru could already hear the cheers from Class D, especially the shouts from boys like Ike Kanji.

"This guy is way too terrifying!" Totsuka Yahiko exclaimed in shock.

Even though he had seen it many times before, he still couldn't help but be stunned.

Not just the first-years—even students from other grades showed expressions of surprise.

This was likely the effect Class D wanted: to make a stunning impression right from the start.

Kaoru watched Sudou triumphant demeanor and wondered whether he should use the Imitator Game on him to steal that terrifying strength.

The original plan also included Kouenji Rosuke, Kito Hayato, Yamada Albert, and Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

However, Kouenji Rosuke hadn't participated in practice, and today he seemed unwilling to compete, pretending to be sick in the rest cabin.

Kaoru couldn't accurately gauge his abilities.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was similar.

Though he usually attended practice, he mostly just went through the motions.

Kaoru had relied solely on his observational skills to determine that Ayanokoji had undergone formal physical training and possessed explosive power, which was why he had been added to the list.

However, he didn't know whether Ayanokoji's physical abilities could match Sudou Ken's.

As for Kito Hayato and Yamada Albert, the former wasn't as fearsome as Sudou Ken, while the latter also seemed unlikely to catch up to him.

Kaoru sighed.

He had made up his mind—he couldn't take unnecessary risks.

Class A's ranking needed to be second or third.

Soon, it was finally his turn to compete.

Each class sent two students.

The one paired with Kaoru from Class A was a boy named Machida Koji, a member of Katsuragi's faction.

Kaoru assumed a standard starting position.

A few seconds before the teacher blew the whistle, for some reason, a sudden cheer came from the side.

This school didn't even prepare for the opening ceremony, let alone arrange cheerleaders, so the unexpected shout nearly made Kaoru miss the whistle.

Still, by exerting a bit of his true strength, he ultimately secured first place, while his classmate Machida Koji came in fourth.

After the race, Kaoru scanned the first-year crowd, but no matter how hard he looked, he couldn't find the student who had cheered.

It was as if it had been his imagination.

No—even if someone had really shouted, it probably hadn't been for him, right?

The moment Kaoru returned to Class A's group, he noticed his classmates staring at him as if they had seen a ghost.

Chapter 289: A Stunning Impression

"You actually can run very fast, weren't you?"

Since the girls' group competition hadn't started yet, Kamuro Masumi had witnessed the entire previous race and couldn't help but comment to Kaoru.

"Maybe I just performed well on the spot," Kaoru said modestly on the surface, though he was actually quite confident in his physical abilities—otherwise, he wouldn't have been running around so freely on the uninhabited island.

"No, no, you were seriously fast," someone interjected. "Not as exaggerated as Sudo from Class D, but definitely super fast!"

Kamuro seemed to think of something and asked suspiciously, "You don't usually hold back during practice, do you?"

"We're not kids anymore—who would hide their strength? Like I said, practice isn't an actual competition, so there's no need to go all out."

Faced with Kaoru's confident rebuttal, Kamuro was momentarily left speechless.

"Whatever, do what you want."

It wasn't like she cared about what Kaoru was thinking anyway!

By now, the competition had moved on to the seventh group, which included Ayanokoji Kiyotaka and Hirata Yosuke, while Class A had Totsuka Yahiko and Shigemoto Take.

Kaoru glanced toward Class C's side.

Since the White and Red teams were separated by the track, his view was slightly obstructed, but he could still make out the students Class C had sent for the race.

There didn't seem to be any particularly strong opponents.

He recalled the intel Shiho Manabe had provided.

The teacher acting as referee soon blew the whistle, and the boys in the seventh group immediately dashed toward the finish line.

Perhaps because their skill levels were relatively even, there wasn't any extreme gap in distance.

In the end, Hirata Yosuke took first place, while Ayanokoji Kiyotaka came in fifth—a result that left Kaoru utterly speechless.

With only eight participants in the group, Ayanokoji had landed right in the middle, perfectly average.

Kaoru decisively gave up on him and turned his attention back to Kamuro.

"Kamuro, have you ever imagined yourself stunning everyone at some point?"

"Huh?"

Kamuro seemed completely lost, forcing him to repeat himself.

"So you're the type who stays low-key normally but suddenly shocks everyone in competition? That's your thing? Gross. Don't lump me in with you."

"I think you've got real potential," Kaoru said with exaggerated seriousness.

"I've observed you—your physical abilities are easily the best among the girls in our class."

This wasn't a lie.

Kamuro's athleticism was well-known, even slightly better than Horikita Suzune's.

"Obviously. I don't hold back during practice," Kamuro scoffed. "My performance now is exactly what I always do."

"I remember Katsuragi placed you in a group where you could easily take first, right?" Kaoru asked.

Kamuro nodded.

She didn't particularly care about rankings, but since it concerned the class, she didn't mind the arrangement.

With the first-year boys' races finished, it was now the girls' turn.

Kaoru gave Kamuro a quick "Good luck," which earned him a strange look from her.

[Exchange "Imitator Game"?]

[Warning: This is a consumable supernatural skill. Once all uses are exhausted, it will lose its supernatural effects!]

[Remaining uses: 0/1]

[Exchange successful. Enjoy!]

Kamuro Masumi, who was walking toward the track, suddenly felt a tingling numbness spread through her body, as if something had quietly slipped inside her.

Her entire being felt strangely light and floaty.

At the same time, Sudou Ken felt an odd itch, as though something had brushed against him.

However, he paid it no mind and instead stormed angrily toward the rest cabin, intent on confronting Kouenji, who he believed was feigning illness.

Whoosh—

The moment the whistle blew, Kamuro realized something was wrong with her body.

Because she was moving way too fast!

It was unbelievable—her body felt impossibly light, as if she had been swept into a whirlwind.

With a rushing gust of wind, she charged past the finish line at an unstoppable speed, so fast that she couldn't even hear the noise around her—only the frantic pounding of her own heartbeat.

The sheer explosive force made it impossible for her to stop immediately.

She skidded forward for over ten meters before gradually slowing down, her entire body heating up like an overloaded machine.

Wait... wait, what the hell was happening?

Not only was Kamuro completely bewildered, but the surrounding students were equally stunned.

While no one was surprised that Kamuro had taken first place, this kind of speed was far beyond her usual performance.

Then, the entire field erupted into loud cheers—especially from Class A.

Kamuro felt extremely uncomfortable.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on her, their gazes scorching and piercing.

"An astonishing breakthrough. Impressive," Kaoru appeared beside her at some point, giving her a thumbs-up.

"What's so impressive? I don't even know what just happened," Kamuro muttered, her thoughts in disarray.

She couldn't understand why her abilities had suddenly skyrocketed like this.

"How's your body feeling?" Kaoru asked. "Is your heart racing? Could your breathing keep up with your pace just now? Any dizziness? Can you see clearly?"

Faced with his barrage of questions, Kamuro only grew more confused.

"I... I don't know. I feel fine, just... weird. Like I have endless energy."

"Then there's no problem."

"Let me catch my breath... This is too strange..."

By the time Kamuro returned to Class A's waiting area, the girls had already swarmed around her, chattering excitedly about how she had managed to run so fast.

Even girls from other classes crowded over—this was the first time they had seen a female student run at such an incredible speed, rivaling even Sudou's earlier performance.

Kamuro had no idea how to handle them.

After all, she was just as lost.

Kaoru glanced toward Class C's side again, where a faint commotion seemed to be brewing.

What they had assumed was just a decent contender had unexpectedly turned into a superhorse.

Without a doubt, with strength comparable to Sudou Ken's, Kamuro could dominate the girls' division effortlessly—no class would be able to counter her.

If the Imitator Game had been used on a weaker participant instead, it might have disrupted Class C's strategy even more effectively.

Still, such a sudden and exaggerated improvement was just too absurd.

Since Kamuro was already one of Class A's top contenders, a temporary breakthrough could at least be somewhat justified—enough for people to accept the change without too much suspicion.

As he watched the competition unfold, Kaoru silently calculated the scores.

In the shadows where no one was paying attention, Class C had already begun employing a dirty tactic.

A top performer against a mid performer, a mid performer against a low performer, and a low performer against a top-tier performer—from the process alone, the gap wouldn't widen too drastically, making it seem unremarkable.

Yet, looking at the results, Class C's points were steadily accumulating.

The reason it hadn't drawn much attention was simply because Class C had too few top and mid-tier performers, failing to stand out in the early events.

On top of that, the stunning performances of Sudou Ken and Kamuro Masumi had further diverted attention away from Class C.

Chapter 290: Quite the Fighting Spirit

Meanwhile, Ryuen Kakeru had witnessed Kamuro Masumi and Sudou Ken's speed firsthand, his brows furrowing tightly as a sense of unease settled in.

"Hey, Ibuki, don't lose," he said to Ibuki Mio, who was about to step onto the track.

"Save that line for the next person," Ibuki Mio retorted without turning back.

There was no way she would lose—especially not to someone she had already defeated once before.

"Heh, quite the fighting spirit," Ryuen muttered, though his gaze remained fixed on Class A's direction.

No matter how many top-tier competitors they had, victory would ultimately be determined by total points.

Ibuki took her position on the track, with Horikita Suzune standing just two or three meters away. Their eyes met briefly.

They had clashed head-on during the uninhabited island exam—a brutal, no-holds-barred fight where Horikita, despite running a high fever, had stubbornly held her own against Ibuki for several minutes.

Though the battle had ended with Horikita collapsing unconscious, her tenacity had left a deep impression on Ibuki.

Now, the two faced each other again—this time on the racetrack.

Ibuki glanced at Horikita, who was taking deep breaths before settling into a flawless starting stance, completely ignoring Ibuki's presence.

This irritated Ibuki.

How dare this loser act so dismissive? If she had beaten her once, she could do it a hundred more times today.

Unaware of Ibuki's thoughts, Horikita kept replaying the earlier scene in her mind—Kamuro charging toward the finish line like an unstoppable force, igniting her own competitive spirit.

She could do it too.

She absolutely could.

Because soon, she would be competing on the same stage as her brother.

She wanted to run that fast.

She wanted to impress him.

Whoosh—

As the runners burst from the starting line, Kaoru quietly made his way to the spectator stands.

This was the final heat for the girls' division and the last 100-meter dash of the first-year events.

His movement went mostly unnoticed, as most eyes were glued to the track, where Horikita and Ibuki were neck-and-neck, their close race stirring tension among the onlookers.

However, Ryuen, who had been closely monitoring Class A, quickly picked up on the shift.

The spectator stands weren't empty—employees from the Keyaki Mall, having heard about the sports festival, had taken time off to watch.

The school hadn't stopped them, and now they were thoroughly engrossed, occasionally waving to the students below.

Of course, there were exceptions among the spectators.

Ryuen spotted Kaoru approaching Sakayanagi.

She wore a faint smile as the two exchanged words, and after a moment, Sakayanagi pulled out her phone.

Since it was a competition, most participating students hadn't brought their phones.

Ryuen didn't think Sakayanagi intended to contact someone—he just found it strange.

The moment he received the competition roster from Nagumo Miyabi, Ryuen realized who had prepared it.

Yet, the mastermind behind it was chatting and laughing with Kaoru, making it impossible to guess what she was scheming.

Katsuragi was currently ostracizing Sakayanagi—Ryuen knew this.

That was precisely why he had chosen to cooperate with Sakayanagi during the previous VIP Test, while also stirring up internal conflict within Class A.

Though Class C had ultimately lost.

Ryuen was deep in thought.

He wasn't questioning Sakayanagi abilities—he just wondered what she was planning now.

It was clear that the other party had contacted Nagumo Miyabi, who then passed the information to him, tasking him with dealing with Kaoru and Class A.

Both sides seemed to be using him as a pawn in their schemes.

Ryuen was more than happy to play the role of their blade—though his was no ordinary blade, one that also had its sights set on its employers.

"Wow, wow, wow! Ibuki is actually losing!" Ishizaki Daichi's loud exclamations from beside him abruptly interrupted Ryuen's train of thought.

On the track, Ibuki Mio was trailing behind Horikita Suzune by a body's length, panting heavily as she crossed the finish line in second place.

Perhaps hearing Ishizaki's voice, Ibuki kicked the grass in frustration, sending a small cloud of dust into the air.

She had lost to someone she had once defeated.

She had been leading at first—so how had this girl caught up to her at the last moment?

Horikita Suzune wasn't feeling much better either.

Her stamina was on par with Ibuki's, but she had remained calm.

Racing required technique, and she had simply applied what she had learned correctly.

Even so, it had been a close call.

A single misstep could have cost her the race.

Gasping for breath, she instinctively glanced toward the third-year section, hoping to catch a glimpse of her brother.

But she quickly suppressed the thought and turned away.

She wanted to stand proudly on the track and run alongside him as equals.

Instead, her gaze drifted toward Class A.

Not spotting Kaoru, she frowned slightly and scanned the area, only to see him speaking to Sakayanagi across the railing in the spectator stands.

After exchanging a few words, Kaoru turned and walked back to Class A.

Horikita bit her lower lip.

She hadn't expected him to watch her race in the first place.

But one day, she would shatter his arrogance.

Without a word, she returned to Class D's waiting area.

The first-year 100-meter dash was over, and next up were the second and third-year races.

Once all students had competed, the next event would be the hurdles.

She needed to rest properly beforehand.

"You did well. Second place is fine too," Ryuen said with a faint smile.

"You earned Class C 12 points, Ibuki."

Ibuki walked past him, pausing briefly.

"I won't lose the next race."

"I hope so. Right now, someone else is more anxious than we are." Ryuuken's eyes landed on the second-years entering the track, including Nagumo Miyabi.

"When the time comes, don't hold back."

He had no particular expectations for the girls' races.

The plan was to use weaker players to eliminate their stronger ones, then have his own stronger and mid-tier players take out their remaining competitors.

Ibuki simply wanted a rematch with Horikita Suzune.

On top of that, Class A seemed intent on feeding points to Class D, giving Class C the perfect opportunity to snatch those points for themselves.

The only headache now was how to handle Kamuro and Kaoru.

Their sudden improvement had disrupted Ryuuken's plans for them.

Still, while it was troublesome, the points from individual events weren't that significant.

He could afford to let them have those—how much could two people really take?

The real prize was the team competitions, where a single victory could net them 500 points at once!

Ryuuken Kakeru was aiming for the team competitions.

Winning a few rounds here would essentially secure the top spot in this sports festival.