

Cote 291

Chapter 291: Soaring to the Skies

When Kaoru returned, he happened to see Nagumo take first place.

The other's physical prowess was equally strong.

"Hey, what were you doing just now?" Totsuka Yahiko looked at him with dissatisfaction.

He had actually sneaked off to meet Sakayanagi while no one was paying attention.

Due to Sakayanagi Arisu's health condition, the school considered her absent.

She had no ranking to speak of—no points deducted, but none added either.

"I asked her to help keep score," Kaoru gave a reasonable explanation. "Although the school calculates the points, they don't disclose the specific scores of each class, only the totals for the Red and White teams. So, I wanted her to help us tally our points."

For convenience during the competition, no one had brought their phones, making it impossible to calculate the scores themselves.

"Hmph, we're definitely in first place. There's no need to calculate anything," Totsuka Yahiko said, hands on his hips.

Even as the sixth-place finisher, he puffed out his chest when speaking of Class A's glory.

Kaoru ignored him.

The situation for the second-year students was roughly as expected.

After careful adjustments, most students from Class 2-B could secure decent rankings as long as they performed normally.

But that was the extent of it.

Catching up to Class 2-A would require more than just this.

As the boys' events concluded, the second-year girls began to take the stage.

Among them, the most striking figure was undoubtedly Kiryuin Fuka.

It was Kaoru's first time seeing her run—nimble and agile, like a hunting cheetah.

With a single explosive start, she left the others behind, crossing the finish line with wild, unrestrained laughter.

Clearly, Kiryuin Fuka was worth every bit of her 'friend fees'.

After about half an hour, the 100-meter dash finally ended, and the school promptly announced the scores for the Red and White teams.

Red Team: 2,110 points. White Team: 2,006 points.

Although the Red Team was in the lead, the gap between the two sides wasn't too wide.

The next event was the hurdles race.

According to the school's rules, knocking over or touching a hurdle would incur time penalties—0.5 seconds for the former and 0.3 seconds for the latter.

These penalties would be added to the participant's final time.

Ten hurdles were already set up on the track.

Accidentally knocking one over meant a 0.5-second penalty; two would cost a full second.

Without careful attention, running too fast would be pointless.

Among the girls competing, Kaoru spotted Horikita Suzune and Airi Sakura.

The former wore a stern expression, as if someone owed her millions, while the latter was visibly nervous and uneasy—an idol with the personality of a social recluse.

For some reason, when Airi Sakura met Kaoru's gaze, she seemed to calm down a little.

The race began quickly.

Unsurprisingly, Airi Sakura fell behind early, while Horikita Suzune battled a student from Class C for first place.

The opponent was faster, clearly a trained athlete, and crossed the finish line just ahead of Horikita Suzune.

Kaoru observed the entire process calmly.

If the previous event was just a warm-up, the real competition was now beginning to take shape.

As expected, Class C consistently secured higher rankings than Class A or Class D in the subsequent events, even snatching away the originally planned feeding targets from the other classes.

The third event was the pole-toppling competition.

Like warriors from the Warring States period, the first-year classes gathered on the field, each forming their own battle formations.

The rules were simple: the first team to topple two poles would win.

Katsuragi and Hirata strategized, alternating between offense and defense.

Class A would defend their high pole to prevent it from being knocked over by the boys from Classes B and C.

Meanwhile, Class D would charge at the opposing team's high pole, aiming to secure the first victory.

"We absolutely have to win! With that idiot Koenji gone, we can only rely on ourselves!" Sudou roared before leading the charge.

"Woo-hoo!"

"Let's soar to victory!"

The boys of Class D followed him, surging forward like a tidal wave toward the White Team's formation.

The White Team's defense was handled by Class B, who stood firm like an immovable mountain near their high pole, while Class C took on the offensive.

Since attacking teams weren't allowed to collide with each other, nor were they permitted to throw punches or kicks, Class D and Class C naturally split their vanguards, each charging toward the opposing base.

Kaoru, stationed near the high pole, caught sight of Ryuuen sinister grin and instinctively took a step back.

The next moment, Class C's vanguard crashed violently into Class A's defensive wall.

The two classes pushed against each other, creating a momentary stalemate.

But soon, someone shattered the deadlock.

Albert Yamada.

The towering black man said nothing, charging forward like a cannonball and slamming into Class A's defensive line.

Kaoru immediately felt their formation waver, the high pole swaying precariously.

"W-Wait a minute! It's totally unfair to have that guy in this event!" Totsuka Yahiko panicked.

"Get him off the field! He's stronger than a wild boar from my hometown!"

"Stay calm! Hold the line, and we'll find a way!" Katsuragi shouted.

While Class C was attacking them, their own teammates were also assaulting Class B's formation.

If they could just hold out against Class C, they could still win.

However, Albert Yamada was like an armored tank, effortlessly tearing through Class A's defenses as if they were nothing.

Soon after, Class C's violent members broke through Class A's line.

Then, someone suddenly kicked towards Kaoru.

Kaoru reacted swiftly, dodging to the side and narrowly avoiding the sneak attack.

But before he could identify the culprit, a heavy thud sounded from behind.

Thud!

The students guarding the high pole finally gave way.

Their strength was no match for Albert's—after just a few collisions, the Red Team's high pole toppled to the ground.

"Hahaha! Looks like I've got this in the bag today, Mitoma!" Ryuen Kakeru taunted before leading Class C back to the White Team's base.

Kaoru frowned.

He wasn't exactly skilled in brawling.

"Dammit, this is so unfair!" Totsuka Yahiko fumed.

Katsuragi offered a few words of encouragement—the second round was about to begin.

Sudou and the others grumbled as they returned to defend their high pole, while Class A took on the offensive this time.

The White Team's defense remained Class B, with Ryuen leading Class C in an assault against Class D.

As the attacking side, Kaoru followed behind the group as they charged forward, only to be blocked by Kanzaki, among others.

Although Kaoru had intended to slack off, Class B still sent four or five students after him, surrounding him the moment they met and leaving him almost completely immobilized.

"Charge! Damn it, this useless body—move already!"

No matter how much Totsuka Yahiko shouted, Class A clearly lacked a breakthrough player.

Only Kito managed to push close to Class B's pole, but with no backup from his classmates, he was quickly forced back by Class B's counterattack.

"It's over! Look, Class D's defense is collapsing!" someone yelled in panic.

"What do we do?!"

Katsuragi turned his head just in time to see the pole creak and crash to the ground.

Chapter 292: We'll Win, Right, Ayanokoji?

"Damn it, what the hell are you guys doing?! Hold the line!"

Sudou was furious—not only had their offense failed, but they had also been ambushed by Class C during their defense.

Someone had attacked him outright, showing no mercy.

In the end, he watched as Ryuen personally struck at him.

If not for the need to protect their pole, he would have lunged at Ryuen right then and there.

But even after enduring it, Class D's pole still fell, and the Red Team suffered another crushing defeat.

Faced with Sudou's rage, the boys of Class D shrank back, not daring to utter a word.

Class A had some complaints, but they had felt the full force of Class C's assault. Losing wasn't shameful—after all, they simply couldn't match their opponents physically.

On another note, the girls' ball-throwing competition was also underway, with Kamuro Masumi proving the most terrifying.

Almost no one could stop her, and she effortlessly secured victory for the Red Team.

At least that gave Class A some consolation.

Soon after, the next event was about to begin—tug-of-war.

The rules were similar to the pole-toppling competition: winning two rounds meant victory.

Katsuragi had already discussed the details with Class D.

They decided to mix the boys from both classes and arrange their positions based on height differences.

Kaoru stood in the back row, with Ayanokoji Kiyotaka right in front of him—an awkward position, to say the least.

"Sorry about the last match. If only we'd held out a little longer," Ayanokoji said, initiating the conversation.

"It's fine. But we'll win this time, right, Ayanokoji?" Kaoru replied casually.

Ayanokoji hesitated for a moment before answering uncertainly.

"We should win... right?"

"Of course we'll win!" Sudou, standing ahead of them, barked angrily after overhearing their exchange.

Meanwhile, Classes B and C were still scrambling to arrange their positions, looking disorganized.

Clearly, they hadn't coordinated beforehand, resulting in a chaotic formation.

Soon, the teacher acting as referee confirmed that both sides were ready and blew the whistle, signaling the start of the match.

Kaoru pulled lightly, sensing that the opposing side's resistance was weak and crumbling.

Before long, they completely collapsed toward the combined force of Classes A and D.

"Victory for the Red Team!" the referee immediately announced the result of the first round.

"Whooo!"

Seeing Class D's excitement, the boys of Class A also felt a surge of satisfaction.

They hadn't expected the first round to be this easy.

Perhaps dissatisfied with their performance, the opposing team changed their formation.

Kaoru silently tightened his grip on the rope.

In a direct clash like this, knowing the lineup beforehand didn't mean much.

Soon, he could feel the opposing side's strength increasing—it was getting harder to pull.

His teammates around him were red-faced, clearly struggling.

The students at the front couldn't hold on any longer, and the agonized shouts of Ike Kanji and the others could already be heard.

"Hold the line, damn it!" Sudou roared, veins bulging in his neck.

Before long, Class A and Class D lost the second round.

Everyone's expressions were grim.

It must have been the formation issue earlier.

Kaoru glanced at Ayanokoji in front of him—the guy wasn't even breathing hard, slacking off more skillfully than he was.

No matter how much Sudou cursed and ranted, the third round was about to begin—the decisive moment that would determine victory or defeat.

"We have to win this tug-of-war! If anyone dares to slack off, I'll—"

Before he could finish, Sudou faceplanted into the dirt.

Not just him, but most of the boys suddenly stumbled and fell.

Since Kaoru had let go of the rope early, he only staggered slightly from the impact of Ayanokoji bumping into him and didn't end up on the ground like the others.

"Hehehe, trash belongs on the ground. Perfect. Consider this match's victory a gift to you," Ryuen said with a wide grin, casually tossing the rope aside.

Class C had suddenly released their grip during the tug-of-war, catching most people off guard—even Class B was affected.

Hearing Ryuen's words, Sudou nearly lost his temper.

"Tch, Mitoma, you didn't fall. You let go too, didn't you?" Ryuen stared at Kaoru as if he was uncovering a big secret.

"You avoided me in the pole-toppling match too. What are you afraid of? Slacking off like this won't do, Mitoma. Today's an official competition—you should at least try to entertain me."

"If it's a fair match, I'd be happy to. I just don't want to deal with any 'unexpected accidents,'" Kaoru replied.

Ryuen laughed loudly, unbothered by the fact that his intentions had been guessed.

If the other side could figure it out, it meant they understood the game just as well.

"It's useless, Mitoma. I've seen through all your tricks. No matter how much you struggle, you'll only roll around in the garbage, becoming tools for my amusement. Hahaha!"

Leaving behind his unrestrained laughter, he led the Class C boys back to the White Team's waiting area.

"That bastard!" Sudou clenched his fists. How could anyone tolerate such provocation?

"Don't act recklessly. He's deliberately trying to provoke us," Katsuragi remained surprisingly calm at this moment.

"Don't give them an easy foul. Let's just focus on competing properly."

Though his words made sense, everyone still felt stifled—especially the self-proclaimed elite Class A.

Some began grumbling about Classes C and D, and it wouldn't be long before they turned their dissatisfaction toward Katsuragi's approach.

Kaoru returned to the rest area, observing the second-year competitions that followed.

So far, five events had taken place, four of which were for the boys.

Kiryuin Fuka was highly active in the girls' division—nimble and agile, with only a few girls barely keeping up.

Yet even they couldn't stop Kiryūin's relentless charge as she continued racking up points.

In contrast, the boys' matches were far more intense and deadlocked.

Perhaps not anticipating Class 2-B's betrayal, Class 2-A was clearly unprepared and took several hits.

However, they quickly regained their footing.

Since Class 2-B's teammates had chosen to side with Class 2-A, they didn't even need to throw the match—just quietly slacking off in team events was enough to force Class 2-B into a two-against-one situation.

Still, Kaoru had considered Class 2-C's position.

Seeing this scene now, he couldn't help but recall a saying.

Whoever is winning, they'll support.

At the moment, there was no sign of Nagumo Miyabi's downfall, so Class 2-C chose to side with Class 2-A.

Kaoru thought for a moment, then quietly activated a reward he had brought from the previous world.

[Character Control Joystick : Once activated, the user can freely manipulate the target's movements for 3 minutes.]

[Please note, this item is a consumable supernatural object. Once its usage count is depleted, it will no longer possess any supernatural effects!]

[Remaining uses: 0/1]

[Exchange successful. We wish you a pleasant experience!]

Chapter 293: The Beautiful Illusion Shatters

As the competition progressed, Nagumo Miyabi's initial frustration quickly dissipated.

Kiriyama Ikuyo's betrayal had not only caught him off guard but also left the students of Class 2-B equally stunned.

Many appeared bewildered before taking the field, as their assigned order hadn't changed drastically.

However, they soon realized their positions corresponded directly with those of Class 2-A.

Even if they weren't particularly strong themselves, they were matched against one or two weaker students from Class 2-A, allowing them to secure relatively high rankings.

Though this should have been a cause for celebration, the students of Class 2-B felt strangely disoriented.

They speculated that Kiriya Ikuyo had somehow obtained Class 2-A's competition roster.

But how had he managed that?

Moreover, how did their leader still have the audacity to challenge Nagumo Miyabi head-on?

For a moment, the students of Class 2-B felt an unfamiliar distance from their leader.

Too many uncertainties lingered, making them hesitant about whether to cooperate with Kiriya Ikuyo.

He didn't even explain what the future held for them.

Classes 2-C and 2-D were equally shocked but quickly made a decisive choice—to help Nagumo suppress the rebellion.

If they performed well, perhaps he might even grant them a transfer to Class A.

Thus, in reality, Class 2-B was now fighting one against three.

The only reason they hadn't collapsed immediately was that Class 2-B had originally been recognized as the school's former Class A students, maintaining a consistently high overall standard.

Additionally, their tailored strategy against Class 2-A in the competition roster allowed them to hold out a little longer.

However, the tide was gradually turning in favor of Class 2-A, and Nagumo ultimate victory seemed increasingly likely.

During the obstacle race, Nagumo stood in the fourth lane, right beside Kiriya Ikuyo.

"What did Mitoma offer you?" Nagumo didn't turn his head, his tone indifferent.

"With your personality, you wouldn't act recklessly, Kiriya."

"The Student Council President's term is ending soon. I simply couldn't let you run wild any longer," Kiriya Ikuyo replied calmly. "

Also, it was me who agreed to Mitoma-kun's conditions."

Nagumo scoffed coldly. "Run wild? Underperforming students deserve to be eliminated. The school's relief measures are the real joke. Not just those—I'll also propose abolishing the class transfer conditions."

"Abolish the transfer conditions?" Kiriya was genuinely surprised.

"Though twenty million Personal Points is a lot, it's not impossible to gather," Nagumo said mockingly.

"Look at them. For just twenty million, these losers would betray their own class without hesitation, all for a chance to move to Class A. Do you really think the school intended for such people to graduate from Class A?"

Kiriya was momentarily speechless.

Hadn't he been the one to promise this very condition to the second-year students?

"If you abolish the transfer conditions, aren't you afraid of being called a traitor who breaks his word?"

"Hehehe, I don't need evaluations from a bunch of useless people. Even if they make it to Class A, they might still get eliminated," Nagumo Miyabi smiled faintly. "But don't worry, I merely made a suggestion to the school. Whether they adopt it or not is beyond me."

Kiriyama Ikuyo forced himself to stay calm and said in a low voice.

"How much more do you intend to change?"

"Good question. I've actually been pondering this myself—what truly defines meritocracy? Is it others' evaluations of you?"

Kiriyama didn't answer immediately, instead turning to stare at him as if waiting for him to continue.

"Do you know how strong a crocodile's bite force is, Kiriyama?"

"I've heard it's stronger than most animals."

"A crocodile's bite force depends on its jaw muscles and bones. Their unique tooth structure allows even a 4-meter-long crocodile to achieve an astonishing bite force of 2 tons."

At this point, Nagumo sighed.

"But no matter how amazed humans are, crocodiles didn't evolve their bite force for human approval. Their purpose is to survive in nature and become apex predators."

Kiriyama understood—the most extreme form of meritocracy was individual supremacy, the so-called law of the jungle where the strong prey on the weak.

"Only when you stand as an apex predator will praises surround you. Their evaluations merely follow your strength—the stronger you are, the more firmly people remember you. Conversely, no one cares about the weak, nor do they need to."

As the competition was about to begin, Nagumo wore a thick smile.

"From now on, I'll ensure this school only welcomes students who understand and accept this truth. Those who drag others down should voluntarily drop out."

"In your eyes, even classmates you've spent so much time with can become trash?" Kiriya asked.

"My class will only consist of valuable students," Nagumo glanced sideways. "In comparison, you're too soft, Kiriya. Willing to give up Class A's position for one or two classmates."

"I believe in my classmates," Kiriya said firmly.

Even when he suddenly charged ahead, though most of Class 2-B was confused, they still followed him—only a few slacked off.

"Hmph, whether it's you or Horikita-senpai, you're all weaklings," Nagumo sneered.

"Don't tell me you think Mitoma can help you? You saw the last match—he can't even take care of himself now."

"Did he?" Kiriya appeared calm but was inwardly anxious.

Though Class 1-A had several outstanding students, it was limited to them—the rest seemed targeted and performed averagely.

"Hehe, then let's wait and see."

Nagumo assumed a starting stance, his gaze fixed ahead, ready to dash at any moment.

The obstacle race didn't just require speed—it demanded zero mistakes, with no delays at any hurdle.

Having practiced repeatedly, he knew the course inside out.

There was no chance of error.

Kiriyama Ikuyo felt a slight tension.

He didn't understand why Kaoru had arranged for him to be in the same group as Nagumo, but with a mix of unease and trust in the other, he prepared himself nonetheless.

Whoosh—

With the sound of the whistle, several dark figures dashed forward, with Nagumo Miyabi taking the lead while Kiriyama Ikuyo lagged behind.

As the first obstacle drew nearer, Nagumo's lips curled slightly upward, his eyes burning with a lion-like intensity.

Thud!

The balance beam rolled a few times, causing Kiriyama to pause momentarily, his steps slowing as he stared at Nagumo lying on the ground, a flicker of confusion flashing in his eyes.

Nagumo was equally bewildered.

Had he tripped over his own foot and fallen?

Stay calm, he had to stay calm.

Even if all eyes were on him, he needed to compose himself, get up quickly, and keep moving forward.

Thud!

Kiriyama leaped over the balance beam, catching a glimpse of Nagumo lying dazed on the ground, seemingly questioning his own body.

"Impossible..." Nagumo stared at his hands in disbelief.

How could he have fallen? It felt as though someone had been controlling him.

Instinctively, he glanced around.

The entire field was eerily silent, countless piercing gazes fixed on him, and he could almost hear mocking laughter.

Nagumo's face darkened.

He stood up, fists clenched so tightly his nails dug into his palms, veins throbbing on his forehead, his entire body burning with rage.

How could he have made such a mistake here?

Under the watchful eyes of everyone, he had fallen—twice?

Nagumo felt his blood boiling, the surrounding stares unbearably sharp and painful, sharper than needles, as if thousands were whispering his name.

The next moment, he charged forward like an enraged lion, nearly bulldozing through the balance beam before scaling the climbing net, overtaking numerous students along the way.

Kiriyama, who had been in first place, was quickly caught up to, and Nagumo surpassed him at the very last moment.

"Miyabi, where did you fall? Are you hurt—" Asahina Nazuna rushed over, her face full of worry, but her words were abruptly cut off.

"I'm fine!" Nagumo snapped, glaring at her, the veins on his neck bulging, his expression twisted with fury.

"How can you be fine? You were running so fast, and you fell—"

"I said I'm not hurt! And I came in first—that's all that matters. Stop talking and do your job, Nazuna!" Nagumo's gaze bore into her.

"Get back to your position. Don't tell me a single Kiryuin has all of you at a loss!"

Asahina stared at him in disbelief.

She had only come to check on him, and this was how he spoke to her?

"No, you need to come to the medical—"

"I said enough, Nazuna."

Nagumo didn't bother continuing.

He turned and walked away without a second glance.

"Don't give me that attitude!" Asahina shouted at his retreating back.

"Do whatever you want! I don't care anymore!"

With that, she stormed off in a huff.

Kiriyama witnessed the entire scene, his expression subtly shifting.

How bizarre—Nagumo humiliating himself in public?

When he returned to the area of Class 2-B, someone immediately approached him.

"Hey, Kiriyama, was it you who smeared lubricant on Nagumo's shoes?"

"I don't even have that stuff, and there's no way I could've done it."

"Then what happened?"

"I don't know."

"Tsk tsk, I always said Nagumo isn't anything special. Just a regular person like the rest of us—gets hungry, needs to eat, tires out, needs sleep, and can even trip while running."

"Mikidani, cut it out."

Though Kiriyama Ikuyo tried to stop his classmates from mocking Nagumo, their laughter drowned out his voice completely.

It was as if a year's worth of pent-up frustration had finally been released.

The entire class was filled with a lively, almost gleeful atmosphere.

And it wasn't just Class 2-B—soft chuckles could also be heard from the other two classes.

Amid the two heavy thuds of Nagumo's fall, not only had the illusion of his perfection shattered, but the weight on their shoulders had also been lifted.

So Nagumo Miyabi was capable of making ridiculous mistakes too?

Even though he had still taken first place, no one cared anymore.

Chapter 294: I Want Candy Too

Nagumo was completely stunned.

The mistake he had just made filled him with unbearable humiliation.

His mind burned with fury, robbing him of all calm and reason.

When he saw Asahina Nazuna, he instinctively wanted to avoid her.

He couldn't bear to hear even a single word of concern from his childhood friend—each one would only force him to relive the scene, a torment worse than death.

So he coldly brushed past Asahina Nazuna.

He also couldn't face the gazes of his classmates.

Shutting out all voices, he initially thought of retreating to the restroom to collect himself, but the idea of running away only made him grit his teeth and stay.

Alone in the corner, he sat in silence, glaring coldly at the field.

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After today, there might be more scheming individuals emerging among the second-year students.

Kaoru withdrew his gaze—this was enough.

No mistake could leave a more indelible impression than what had just happened.

No matter how Nagumo tried to establish his authority in the future, someone would inevitably recall today's events.

Still, it felt a bit underhanded.

Reflecting on his actions so far, Kaoru acknowledged that this was simply who he was.

So perhaps it didn't matter.

"Kamuro, are you feeling alright?"

"Do you expect me to be unwell?" Kamuro Masumi replied with slight irritation.

She was already in a foul mood, and for some reason, girls had been crowding around her, chattering incessantly, making her extremely uncomfortable.

Now that the commotion had died down and she'd finally gotten some peace, here came Kaoru, inserting himself into her space.

"Well, the school is trying to cram over a dozen events into a single day. I just thought you might be exhausted." Kaoru rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a piece of candy.

"Here, have a White Rabbit Creamy Candy. No need to thank me."

With that, he tossed the candy toward Kamuro.

"White Rabbit Creamy Candy?"

It was the first time Kamuro had heard of such a thing.

Curious, she examined the candy in her hand, only to find it was just an ordinary hard candy with plain packaging—nothing special about it.

"How thoughtful of you."

"I just don't want to see my three-legged race partner collapsing on the field."

"Talking to you is exhausting. All you ever do is mock people."

"That's called being a tsundere."

"..."

Still, she was tired.

The consecutive competitions, the physical exertion, and dealing with the girls' overwhelming enthusiasm had left Kamuro feeling drained.

"What kind of candy?"

Suddenly, Kushida Kikyo's voice chimed in from the side.

"Mitoma-kun, are you hiding something tasty?"

Before Kaoru could respond, his arm was immediately seized by a pair of soft breast pressing tightly against him.

The sweet, girlish scent that followed was enough to stir any healthy young man.

"What are you doing here? Isn't the girls' obstacle race coming up soon?"

"Hehe, I came running as soon as I heard there was something delicious." Kushida tilted her head up, narrowing her eyes and lowering her voice.

"Did you watch my race earlier?"

Has she been getting bolder lately?

"I did. Fourth place, second place, and fifth place." Kaoru paused, then added, "More impressive than I expected—in every sense."

"Oh, it wasn't that impressive. Just a stroke of luck, really. And I owe a lot to everyone's help." Kushida smiled brightly while discreetly pinching him—she understood exactly what he meant.

"If you two want to flirt, take it somewhere else. Don't do it in front of me." Kamuro's expression was cold, though the candy puffing her cheek made her look more like an irritated squirrel.

"Sorry, sorry! But Mitoma-kun and I aren't a couple." Kushida released Kaoru's arm, though she didn't seem displeased by the assumption.

"Friends don't act like that," Kamuro remarked flatly.

"We're close friends," Kushida corrected cheerfully.

"Tch." Kamuro turned away, refusing to engage further.

She'd never been good at handling girls like this.

"Got any more candy?" Kushida held out her small palm toward Kaoru.

"Nope," said Kaoru. "If you want, I can buy you more during lunch break."

Kushida pouted. "We can just eat at lunchtime."

"We can't leave now, so how about I treat you to a drink? There's a vending machine in the rest area," Kaoru suggested.

"I want black tea," Kushida replied, then added, "Actually, never mind. I'll just go with you."

The two walked toward the vending machine.

After a short while, Kushida quietly asked, "I think she probably has feelings for you."

"You mean Kamuro?"

"If she didn't care, she wouldn't have gotten angry."

"You seem to know a lot about this stuff?"

"Don't joke around. I get love consultations all the time—at least a hundred, if not a thousand," Kushida scoffed.

"You think I just go around smiling all day? A girl's world is way more complicated than you think. One wrong move, and you could end up with enemies."

"Didn't you say you wouldn't interfere in my business?" Kaoru glanced at the envious looks around them.

"And now, clinging to a guy's arm in front of everyone—your image is ruined, isn't it?"

"Not at all. With you around, things are easier for me," Kushida mused. "For example, ever since we got closer, no guys dare to harass me anymore. The confessions have stopped too."

"Who harassed you?" Kaoru asked.

"Plenty. Guys from the next class, upperclassmen..." Kushida counted on her fingers with a grin.

"Your slave is pretty popular, you know."

"I was thinking, maybe when you accept a confession, I could just order you to pee—"

Before Kaoru could finish, Kushida punched him without hesitation, her ears turning red.

"One more word, and I'll kill you."

"Sorry."

"Having a master like you—I despise you deeply."

"Like master, like slave i guess."

"..."

After a while, Kaoru sipped his drink, his gaze fixed on the nearby competition—a fierce battle between third-year classes.

"Maybe it's just me, but I feel like we're being watched," Kushida suddenly said.

"A lot of people in class are complaining that Class C stole their rankings. Did something unexpected happen?"

"Probably because the entry list got leaked," Kaoru replied calmly.

"Oh." Kushida fell silent.

She didn't care about this at all—she only mentioned it to warn him.

After a brief pause, Kushida spoke again.

"Horikita seems off."

Kaoru took another sip of his drink.

Of course he knew—he'd been watching the match the whole time.

Chapter 295: One-on-One Duel

The competition continued.

In the girls' division, Kamuro performance grew increasingly dominant, overshadowing everyone else.

After all, she had two stacked buff effects—she only grew stronger the longer she fought.

Kaoru silently watched as Horikita Suzune took the stage.

Though she was highly motivated and more physically capable than the average student, that didn't mean she could sweep the entire competition.

Soon, the results of the obstacle race were announced—Horikita Suzune took second place.

Although it was a pretty good result, a hint of unwillingness flashed across her face.

Kaoru didn't watch any longer—the boys' three-legged race was about to begin.

His teammate was Hashimoto Masayoshi, and their physical abilities were fairly evenly matched.

From Class C, their opponents were Ryuen Kakeru and Ishizaki Daichi.

The two sides met again on the track.

"Mitoma, you better start running for your life later!" Ryuen said to him.

"Pray that your teamwork is better and your speed faster than mine, or you'll regret it immediately."

"Wait, I'm innocent here," Hashimoto Masayoshi raised his hands, signaling he wouldn't get involved in their fight.

"Don't be stupid. We're tied together now," Kaoru replied before asking, "Did you take the money?"

Ryuuen shot him a sidelong glance.

"Trying to turn me against them?"

"No, I just want to know if we can split it. Then I'll cooperate with you—we can make money together." Kaoru thought his expression must have looked sincere.

Ryuuen was momentarily speechless before raising an eyebrow.

"You'd betray your class for Personal Points?"

"I'd have to see how much you're offering to compensate me." Kaoru didn't even flinch as he said this right in front of Hashimoto.

Hashimoto stared at his teammate with a deadpan expression.

Why were these guys getting more and more unreliable?

"Cunning bastard," Ryuuen muttered, shifting his focus back to preparing for the starting position.

Before the race began, Kaoru subtly whispered to Hashimoto,

"No matter what happens later, don't panic. Just do exactly as I say."

Hashimoto froze for a moment, but then the starting whistle blew.

With no time to think, he sprinted forward alongside Kaoru.

Not long after they started running, Ryuuen quickly closed in.

The distance between them was so tight they could hear each other's heavy breathing.

Hashimoto frowned.

Even though the three-legged race naturally made movement awkward, this was way too close—it almost felt intentional.

Then, he suddenly noticed a smirk forming on Ryuen's lips.

"Brake," Kaoru said abruptly.

Luckily, Hashimoto reacted fast—otherwise, he might not have kept up with Kaoru's sudden slowdown, causing them to trip over each other.

Whoosh!

Two figures flashed right past Hashimoto, missing them by mere centimeters.

It was like a boulder had suddenly appeared on the track, vanishing just as quickly.

His heart pounded violently in delayed shock.

"Too bad. I thought catching you off guard might work, but I guess I overestimated you," Ryuen chuckled at the two behind him.

Deliberately bumping into opponents mid-race was undeniably bold.

"Hey, that's going too far! Aren't you afraid I'll report you?" Hashimoto rarely got angry, but this time, he couldn't help it.

If they had collided, both sides could've been injured.

"But we didn't crash, did we?" Ryuen shrugged. "Still, this works too—someone's already nearing the finish line."

Because of their sudden braking, students from Class B and Class D overtook them and were about to cross the finish line.

"Feel free to do as you please. You'll regret it one day." Kaoru's expression remained unchanged.

"It's no big deal—I can play along with you."

"Heh, what a coincidence. I'm more than happy to keep playing with you too." Ryuen showed no signs of panic, instead grinning even wider.

In the end, Class C secured third place, while Class A came in fourth.

Upon returning to Class A's area, Kamuro Masumi had barely approached Kaoru when he spoke first:

"Be careful in the next event. No matter what happens, just keep running. Don't let anyone catch up to you."

Kamuro blinked, then frowned. "You noticed Class C is targeting us too?"

It wasn't just her—students from both Class A and Class D were gradually realizing the same thing.

"Not sure, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious."

"Right."

Kaoru then dismissed Karuizawa and Kushida, who had come over, before observing the second-years.

The atmosphere there was oddly tense.

Nagumo stood with a cold expression, silent, while the students of Class 2-A around him remained equally quiet.

In contrast, Class 2-B seemed fired up with competitive spirit.

Meanwhile, Class 2-C and Class 2-D had grown strangely ambiguous—no longer working as diligently for Nagumo as before, occasionally even flashing peculiar smiles.

While the second-years were restrained, the third-years were outright brazen.

Many pointed and laughed openly at Class 2-A, their jeering never letting up.

In comparison, the first-years, largely unaware of student council affairs or upperclassmen dynamics, remained unfazed.

After all, aside from Nagumo, a few other students had also fallen during the race.

Soon after, the girls' three-legged race began.

True to form, Class C's girls targeted Kamuro, attempting to replicate Ryuen's earlier tactics.

Unfortunately for them, they failed miserably, tumbling to the ground in a clumsy heap.

Kamuro easily secured first place.

Next was the piggyback fight, starting with the girls' division.

Just like in the previous event, Class C's girls completely ignored other teams, relentlessly attacking Kamuro's group.

Had the referees not been watching, they might have even resorted to outright physical violence.

Kamuro wasn't exactly skilled in group brawls.

Sacrificing herself, she managed—with her teammates' help—to take down three of Class C's teams.

With Kamuro out of the picture, Class A only managed second place, while Class B took first.

Though not one for underhanded tactics, Ichinose, as team leader, seized the opportunity during the chaos between Classes A and C to eliminate both A and D.

With the girls' events concluded, it was time for the boys' piggyback fight.

The moment Kaoru entered the fray, Ryuen flashed him a grin.

Sure enough, with a wave of Ryuen's hand, all of Class C's "horses" charged straight at Kaoru.

"Target Mitoma from Class A!" someone shouted.

"Take down their leader in single combat!"

Hearing this, Kaoru quietly maneuvered his "horse" into the midst of Class A and D's formations, standing firm like an unshakable mountain.

"Damn it! We've got our own target—Ryuuen from Class C!" Sudou yelled, then patted Ayanokoji, who was carrying him, urging him to charge into enemy lines.

Chapter 296: This Alone Is Not Enough

"Damn it, this is against the rules! I'm going to tell this to the teacher!"

Shortly after the match ended, Sudou wore an expression of fury.

His crucial defeat in the final moments had caused Class D to lose the cavalry battle.

Hirata Yosuke grabbed his arm to dissuade him.

"Don't do this. Right now, it's just suspicion. We don't have any solid evidence."

"But he used hair wax—that's blatant cheating! This wasn't even an equipment-based event!" Sudou couldn't let it go.

"Besides, this guy already hit me during the pole-toppling competition earlier. He's been breaking the rules from the start!"

Hirata sighed.

He understood Sudou feelings.

Anyone would be furious after taking down three cavalry units, only to lose to the opposing commander's cheating in the final showdown.

"Sudou-kun, we all feel the same way. But right now, we should stay calm and think things through—"

"Shut up! Being around you guys is so damn disappointing!"

Sudou seemed unable to contain his rage any longer.

He violently kicked a nearby chair, the loud crash drawing the attention of many classmates.

The perpetrator then stormed out of Class D's area.

Hirata thought he was heading to confront Class C and moved to stop him, but instead, Sudou left the athletic field entirely.

"My, my. It seems Class D has already fallen apart."

At this moment, Sakayanagi withdrew her gaze from Class D's direction and leisurely turned to Katsuragi.

Seated properly on a folding chair, she wore a hat that shimmered faintly white under the clear sunlight.

Her slender waist was clad in the same gym uniform as everyone else, yet despite the outfit's restrictive nature, her legs displayed healthy, vibrant contours.

For some reason, she had come down from the spectator stands to Class A's waiting area.

"Though unfortunate, the competition ultimately depends on our own efforts," Katsuragi said.

"Is that so?" Sakayanagi smiled sweetly. "That wasn't what you said earlier, was it?"

Katsuragi tensed—she was clearly about to attack his decision-making errors.

However, Sakayanagi suddenly pulled out her phone and handed it to Hashimoto Masayoshi beside her.

"These are the scoring results Mitoma-kun asked me to tally. What do you think our current ranking is, Katsuragi-kun?"

Katsuragi abruptly looked toward Kaoru, who had been observing the upperclassmen's matches nearby.

Hearing his name, Kaoru turned to face them.

Not just Kaoru—even Class A students who hadn't been paying attention began gathering around.

"Fufu, could you announce it for everyone, Hashimoto-kun?" Sakayanagi Arisu chuckled.

"Class 1-A, one thousand four hundred thirty—"

Hashimoto Masayoshi had barely started when Sakayanagi Arisu interrupted.

"Just the final rankings will do, Hashimoto-kun."

"First place: Class C. Second place: Class B. Third place: Class A. Fourth place: Class D."

After speaking, Hashimoto Masayoshi glanced around and noticed everyone's expressions had frozen.

They clearly hadn't anticipated this outcome.

"We're... third?" someone muttered in disbelief.

"That can't be right. Don't we have several exceptionally strong competitors?"

"Based on the current individual competition points, we are indeed in third place," Sakayanagi Arisu said with a smile.

"The team competition only calculates the winning groups, so I didn't include my scores in the class tally."

Even though students like Kamuro, Kito, and Hashimoto had exceptional physical abilities, they could only secure first place in individual events.

The other students were gradually dragging them down.

"Has anyone noticed something unusual?" Hashimoto spoke up.

"In today's matches, our competition order seemed to have been targeted. Students with strong physical abilities were suppressed by even stronger opponents, and the points we originally planned to secure for Class D were snatched away by our rivals."

The students of Class A exchanged glances, and soon some began to chime in.

"That's right! I could have taken first place, but a student from Class C suddenly caught up to me."

"It must be Class C—they always play dirty!"

"And also..."

Not all of these complaints were due to the leaked competition schedule, but given this rare opportunity to shift blame, they naturally attributed their failures to being sabotaged.

Katsuragi found the situation troublesome.

It was clear this was aimed at him, and the timing of the attack was deliberate.

"While I don't deny Katsuragi-kun's capabilities, at this point, we must abandon our cooperative strategy with Class D," Hashimoto Masayoshi took the lead in challenging him.

"Not only that, I suspect someone in our class leaked our information, causing us significant losses."

The mention of leaked information unsettled Class A students, and suspicious glances were cast among classmates before ultimately settling on Katsuragi.

Since he was the one who personally submitted the competition schedule, he should know who leaked it.

Sakayanagi smiled faintly.

By striking first, she ensured the suspicion wouldn't fall on her.

"Maybe it was a student from Class D who accidentally leaked it—it might not be someone from our class," Kaoru interjected unexpectedly.

"The world is unpredictable. Even a saint can't foresee everything—otherwise, there wouldn't be a word like 'accident.'"

"Fufufu, Mitoma-kun, what do you think we should do to salvage the situation now?" Sakayanagi asked with a subtly mischievous smile.

In this context, "salvage" wasn't exactly a positive term.

Once everyone accepted this phrasing, it would imply Katsuragi decisions during the sports festival had been a complete failure—effectively admitting he had made the wrong choices for Class A.

"Sometimes, effort doesn't guarantee victory," Kaoru unexpectedly voiced a rather pessimistic view.

Sakayanagi was slightly surprised. "Mitoma-kun, do you think we're already beyond saving?"

"Didn't I ask you to record the scores for the first-years only?" Kaoru countered.

"Why don't you share the upperclassmen's results with everyone?"

Hashimoto glanced at the girl beside him.

She pressed her lips together, then smiled.

"It's fine, Hashimoto-kun. Go ahead and read it."

Hashimoto continued, "For the second-years, first place is Class A, second is Class B, third is Class D, and fourth is Class C."

"Is that satisfactory?" Sakayanagi stared directly at Kaoru.

"Could you please read it again—the point differences between them," Kaoru said calmly.

"If I recall correctly, the gap between Class 2-B and Class 2-A is only about thirty points, and Class 3-B is also closely trailing Class 3-A."

Sakayanagi Arisu's smile faded as she quietly observed him.

"In other words, even if we secure first place among the first-years, we could still lose in the inter-grade competition and forfeit 100 points."

Kaoru glanced around the room.

Some seemed ready to argue but ultimately stayed silent, realizing that merely being the top first-year class might not be enough in the face of these facts.

Watching this, Sakayanagi's eyes flickered slightly, her gaze fixed solely on him.

With just this, he had effortlessly dismantled her first wave of challenges.

Chapter 297: Meeting the Parents

Though satisfied with his response, Sakayanagi had no intention of backing down.

Besides, she was the one who had recorded these scores—no one understood them better than her.

"Hehehe, Mitoma-kun is right. Even if we ultimately win, the upperclassmen might drag us down, causing us to lose the competition anyway."

Here, Sakayanagi cast a half-smiling, half-mocking look at Kaoru, her eyes glinting with a hint of provocation.

"However, the fact remains that we're currently under attack from Class C, and Class D is already in chaos. In your and Katsuragi-kun's opinion, what should we do?"

His earlier words had merely sidestepped the issue, but now that she emphasized it again, the surrounding attention inevitably refocused on Kaoru and Katsuragi.

"What else can we do? Dump Class D as deadweight and focus all our efforts on crushing Class C!" Totsuka Yahiko blurted out immediately, eager to shield Katsuragi.

"Dropping Class D is easy, but how do we handle the upcoming matches?" Hashimoto Masayoshi countered.

"Besides, our competition order is already fixed. Even if we know someone leaked it, there's nothing we can do."

Soon after, Shinji Matoba also spoke up. "The next event is an individual competition, so abandoning Class D shouldn't matter much. But wouldn't that be tantamount to betrayal in a way?"

"Protecting Class A is the priority right now!" Totsuka shot back.

"Fine, we can discard Class D. But how do we deal with Classes B and C?" Hashimoto paused. "If the group competition points also count toward the class totals, then the White Team has already pulled ahead of us by a significant margin."

Totsuka fell silent—he was never one for deep thinking.

"Don't panic. The afternoon event is an assigned-points competition, where the stakes are higher than in the group matches. This is our chance." Kaoru's tone grew slightly firmer toward the end.

Perhaps it was his calm demeanor, but the others looked at him in mild surprise, instinctively feeling a little reassured—yet also puzzled.

"What chance?" Hashimoto asked.

"The group competition doesn't allow substitutions, but the school permits us to use substitutes in the assigned-points matches—for 100,000 Personal Points per person." Kaoru scanned the room.

"Our lineup may have been leaked, but that doesn't mean we'll lose."

His voice was eerily composed, as if he had anticipated this very scenario.

"Will substitutes really work?"

"It doesn't seem impossible—we just need to reshuffle the order!"

"But who should we have as substitutes?"

"We can't possibly replace our ace, can we?"

"..."

In an instant, voices of all kinds rose around them.

Amidst the chatter, Sakayanagi remained silent, her gaze fixed steadily on Kaoru.

After a while, she finally spoke.

"Mitoma-kun, since you came up with this strategy, you must have already thought about how to proceed, right?"

At once, all eyes turned to Kaoru, awaiting his response.

"Assuming Class C's lineup was based on ours, then we now also know Class C's lineup," Kaoru said, pausing briefly.

"So, if we take a guess and gamble a little, we might just turn the situation around."

His suggestion made many of them brighten—it did sound reasonable.

Not stopping there, Kaoru went on to name the substitutes and the order they should be rearranged in, concluding that it was merely his personal suggestion.

Yet, in this situation, no one could think of a better alternative, and they instinctively trusted his substitution strategy.

More importantly, Kaoru appeared far calmer than the rest, who were all somewhat flustered—after all, this was the first time they had encountered such a scenario.

Thus, Sakayanagi's counterattack was effortlessly suppressed once again.

Since the 200-meter race was next, Class A didn't dwell on the discussion and quickly prepared for the upcoming event.

Before long, Kaoru secured first place.

As soon as he returned to his spot, Sakayanagi invited him for a walk.

"Isn't it a bit inappropriate to leave now?"

"Fufufu, who would care? After this race, it's lunch break anyway. Besides, you have nothing else to do—why not accompany me for a little rest?"

"Haven't you been resting in the spectator stands this whole time?"

"How rude. Mitoma-kun, you really aren't very popular with girls, are you?"

Under Sakayanagi's thinly veiled threat, Kaoru had no choice but to follow her out of the track field.

It was nearly early autumn, and a cool breeze drifted through the air.

Under the warm sunlight, the shadows of the trees lining the path swayed gently, while wisps of clouds, as if brushed across the sky, drifted overhead—creating an atmosphere of serene tranquility.

Sakayanagi walked slowly, her cane tapping lightly against the ground.

Rather than seeming hindered, it was more like the measured steps of a queen's high heels.

Her petite body gave her the air of a little princess, as if she had been born to be cradled in her parents' arms and proudly shown off to others.

"Morishita-san was right—your gaze is quite blatant," she remarked, pausing slightly.

"But at the same time, it's strange. Even though it feels indecent, it doesn't disgust me."

"I've never been sneaking glances at any of you. I've always looked openly," Kaoru corrected her.

"Besides, there's a kind of gaze called 'compassion.'"

"Are you saying you feel compassion for me?" Sakayanagi's lips curled in a faint, ambiguous smile.

"More like a master caring for his maid. After all, you look adorable when you're trying your best—even if you're plotting mischief against your master."

"Do you enjoy master-servant roleplay?" Sakayanagi suddenly recalled the time he had smacked her ass.

In many contexts, such an act often symbolized a superior disciplining their subordinate.

Despite her efforts to suppress the memory, a faint blush still crept onto her cheeks.

Fortunately, this instinctive shyness didn't send her into a fluster.

Kaoru nodded without hesitation.

"Because I was really looking forward to Sakayanagi's... service."

Truthfully, Sakayanagi Arisu wanted to know how he could say such things so calmly—and more importantly, why he felt no shame licking a girl's feet.

"Setting aside Mitoma-kun's... preferences for now," Sakayanagi murmured softly, "perhaps in the future, I will be the one to become your master. You've probably already guessed—I was the one who leaked the competition roster."

It wasn't just Kaoru who had observed Class A's situation.

She, too, had been watching closely.

After some time, she noticed Kaoru diligently following his training routine and even proposing cooperation with Class D.

That was when she fully grasped his intentions.

If Kaoru was thinking along those lines, why not take advantage of it?

"Nothing surprising about it. Both you and I know their current state. If they aren't disciplined now, they'll only become harder to manage later," Kaoru said, gazing at the quiet campus.

"Honestly, ever since the school year started, everyone seems obsessed with hierarchy—Class A must be stronger than Class B, Class B stronger than the rest, and some even show outright hostility toward others."

Sakayanagi listened quietly before speaking up.

"Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever asked for your thoughts on this school?"

A faint smile played on her lips.

"Though I've asked you something similar before, I'd like to hear your current perspective."

Kaoru's thoughts tangled for a moment.

He knew Sakayanagi was probing for his interpretation of ANHS "meritocracy"—and what he intended to do about it in the future.

Sakayanagi didn't rush him.

The two walked slowly across the empty campus, the only sound between them the whisper of the wind.

After a while, Kaoru finally spoke. "Some people are born with innate talent. No matter what they do, they become the center of attention. To most, people like that are what you'd call geniuses."

"Geniuses can accomplish things most can't. No matter how fast a field mouse runs, it can't escape an owl's hunt. The former is just another face in the crowd, while the latter is the genius everyone admires."

"For society, the more of the latter, the better. In an era of declining birth rates, I'm sure those in power think the same—hence the creation of ANHS. But if all they wanted were geniuses, the school could've just set an impossibly high entrance exam like other elite institutions."

"Yet this school admits plenty of ordinary students—those without any special talents, just your average high schoolers. I've often wondered, why? To make them experience the gap between geniuses and mediocrity firsthand?"

Sakayanagi watched him intently, her gaze unwavering, listening with rapt attention.

"Though I've never met your father directly, I've tried to deduce his intentions," Kaoru said suddenly.

"ANHS goal must be to cultivate geniuses—to transform mediocrity into brilliance. That's the power of growth. Even after our bodies stop developing, our abilities don't. Even the greatest genius will stagnate if they remain unchanged. In the end, those ordinary students might just become the new geniuses."

Just like raising Pokémon, starting off strong is impressive, but it doesn't guarantee lasting dominance—growth potential matters just as much.

Sakayanagi Arisu smiled faintly, a glimmer of light flickering in her eyes as she murmured softly, "Mitoma-kun, you're quite concerned about your classmates. I thought you'd be more coldhearted."

"That may be so, but whether anyone will truly transform in the end—I'm not certain about that," said Kaoru.

"After all, in some people's eyes, strength is just numbers on paper—something that can be quantified and evaluated."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a cheerful voice sounded from behind.

"Well, well, it seems this student has quite some opinions about our school's methods."

Kaoru's eyelid twitched slightly.

Before he could turn around, Sakayanagi Arisu beside him furrowed her brows and complained.

"Didn't you promise not to talk to me at school?"

"Not at all. I'm just rather interested in this student here. It's rare to meet a junior who shares similar views with me," the other party retorted with remarkable skill in making excuses.

Kaoru turned his head silently and saw a middle-aged man standing before him.

The slight upward curve of his lips gave him an elegant and gentle demeanor, exuding an approachable aura—like a patient and persuasive teacher.

Sakayanagi Arisu sighed and then introduced, "This is such a headache. Mitoma-kun, this is my father."

Yes, and also the current chairman of this school.

Chapter 298: You Two Aren't Dating, Are You?

Should he greet him as "Uncle" or respectfully address him as "Chairman Sakayanagi"?

To be honest, Kaoru had looked into the man's background—albeit just through online searches—but he had a general idea of the man's standing.

His ancestors seemed to have been part of the aristocracy, and though he had recently faced some setbacks in politics, his father had been the first chairman who founded this elite school—Sakayanagi Arisu's grandfather.

Though Japan had once suffered a crushing defeat and the American had overseen the dismantling of many old traditions, the core of Japan hadn't changed much.

Those in power were still the old aristocracy—the so-called hereditary politicians.

In the past, they had amassed vast wealth, and even now, they continued to secure political seats through financial influence.

And Sakayanagi Narumori had inherited his family's status, with the elite school now under his control.

Kaoru was deeply interested in this man—not just because he was Sakayanagi Arisu's father.

"Since we've met today, won't you introduce this student to me?" Sakayanagi Narumori smiled warmly at his daughter.

He had happened to see the two leaving the spectator stands earlier and decided to follow them.

"You already said you were interested in him," Sakayanagi Arisu pouted.

"I'm sure you know more about Mitoma-kun's situation than I do—including his past."

"That's quite harsh on your father. While we do investigate students' basic information during enrollment, I don't go through every single file."

Hearing this, Kaoru's mind stirred slightly—the school had investigated students' backgrounds?

Perhaps sensing his reaction, Sakayanagi Narumori cast a glance at him, his smile unwavering.

Kaoru reacted swiftly, greeting him proactively, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Chairman Sakayanagi. I'm Kaoru Mitoma, a classmate of your daughter's."

"Ah, hello. I believe you did something rather remarkable back in April or May, didn't you?" Sakayanagi Narumori maintained his cheerful expression, showing no trace of sternness.

"My apologies for causing trouble for the school," Kaoru replied with a hint of remorse.

"Don't worry about it. Being able to do these things shows you're not a student bound by convention, and I won't criticize you for that." Sakayanagi Narumori paused for a moment.

"However, breaking conventions is one thing, while acting recklessly is another. Without rules to constrain behavior, this place would simply become a lawless playground."

"I've heard the school has thousands of relevant rules. As long as students ask questions, teachers will provide corresponding answers. Under these circumstances, I don't think anyone would dare act recklessly."

"Rules are just rules. After all, my father's wish was to nurture the future hope of this country."

"Haven't many graduates already become active frontline contributors?"

Sakayanagi Narumori suddenly smiled.

Glancing at his daughter, he remarked with amusement, "Your classmate here is quite adept at reading people. He reminds me of a junior from a few years back."

He had intended to remind Kaoru that upholding rules was preferable to breaking them, only for Kaoru to subtly imply that his rules were already comprehensive, leaving little room for further exploitation.

Later, in response to his musings, Kaoru pointed out that many graduates of ANHS were already making their mark as the new generation across various industries.

Though these remarks bordered on flattery, they struck just the right balance—not excessive enough to irritate Sakayanagi Narumori.

In other words, Sakayanagi found their conversation refreshingly natural.

For a high school student to engage with the chairman in this manner was already commendable.

"He's far more than just good at reading people," Sakayanagi Arisu murmured cryptically.

No one understood Kaoru better than she did.

Kaoru looked slightly embarrassed, momentarily at a loss for words.

"Honestly, if I didn't know he had no children, I might have suspected you were his illegitimate son," Sakayanagi Narumori mused.

Noticing Kaoru's puzzled expression, he added, "You must have taken our school's entrance exam too, right?"

Kaoru nearly shook his head.

He'd been forcibly inserted here by the Wish Machine—how could he have taken any entrance exam?

But Narumori didn't wait for his answer. "This school conducts preliminary investigations on all prospective junior high students nationwide. Only those meeting our criteria are permitted to enroll. The interview and written exam are mere formalities—no matter how low the scores, qualified candidates will be admitted."

So they investigated students' backgrounds in advance.

No wonder some students with pitifully low scores still gained admission.

"Does that mean I also met the criteria?" Kaoru already had some inkling—otherwise, students like Totsuka Yahiko wouldn't have ended up in Class A.

"Indeed. After reviewing your records, I determined you satisfied our enrollment requirements." Sakayanagi Narumori smiled faintly.

"And it seems my judgment wasn't mistaken."

"Why tell me all this?" Kaoru realized the chairman shouldn't be sharing such information with an ordinary student.

"You're already a student of ANHS now. Even if I didn't tell you today, you'd eventually find out." Sakayanagi Narumori gazed deeply at Kaoru—a look that clearly wasn't directed at an average student.

Yet he soon turned to Sakayanagi Arisu, hesitating momentarily as a father's natural concern for his daughter surfaced in his eyes.

"By the way, you two aren't dating, are you?"

"You're talking too much, Father." Sakayanagi Arisu's delicate face turned cold.

"Did you follow us here because you're worried about your daughter's love life?"

Sakayanagi Narumori showed no embarrassment whatsoever, instead bursting into laughter.

"Haha, how could I not? My Arisu is naturally adorable. As a father, of course I'm curious about who might win her heart."

Somehow, it felt like this father was using loud laughter to mask his nervousness, afraid of hearing a certain answer.

"This is embarrassing. Please stop, Father." Sakayanagi Arisu sighed.

"Even if Mitoma-kun and I aren't dating, your daughter still deserves some privacy."

"Good, that's good." Sakayanagi Narumori unconsciously let out a relieved sigh before realizing the person in question was present.

With an awkward smile, he said, "You two take your time. We'll meet again another day."

Watching his retreating figure, Kaoru couldn't help but glance at Sakayanagi Arisu beside him.

With a father like that, the difficulty level of pursuing this girl seemed to have increased significantly.

"Were you nervous just now?" Sakayanagi Arisu suddenly asked.

"Was I?" Kaoru appeared surprised.

"You seemed afraid of something. Your shoulders were tense." She pointed out his earlier reaction.

"..." Kaoru didn't know how to respond.

Any guy would feel nervous when facing a girl's parent, wouldn't they?

Especially when they licked said daughter's feet.

The mere thought made him feel guilty.

"My father has always been good to me since childhood. He's kind-hearted and wouldn't do anything extreme, so don't worry." Sakayanagi Arisu flashed a mischievous smile.

"As long as you behave and listen to me, I definitely won't tell him."

This girl completely understood what he was thinking.

They must have been remembering the same incident just now.

Chapter 299: Sweating Profusely

"Go ahead and tell him. I kind of miss that feeling anyway."

Kaoru sneakily glanced at her ass.

Often, whether a threat worked depended entirely on how shameless the person being threatened was.

"Pervert." Sakayanagi Arisu's ears grew warm. In all her years, not only had no one ever spanked her, but no man had even touched her before.

She'd initially been angry, but seeing his "thick-skinned" expression made her find it incredibly amusing.

It was as if he had two personalities—one maintaining a proper image, while the other was cunning, scheming, and lecherous.

"What were we talking about earlier?" Sakayanagi Arisu unconsciously paused.

Their previously smooth conversation had been abruptly interrupted, and the atmosphere between them had grown peculiar.

Come to think of it, could that be considered their first parental meeting?

"We were discussing my views on ANHS, but your father seemed to share similar opinions?" Kaoru had wanted to talk more with Sakayanagi Narumori, but the man hadn't been interested.

"Actually, my father was greatly influenced by my grandfather. He deeply admired him and voluntarily took over this school." Sakayanagi Arisu revealed these little-known secrets.

"Although this school is a nationally-operated special high school, its original purpose wasn't pure at all. Mitoma-kun, are you familiar with political factions?"

"I know a little." Kaoru had met some ministers before—though that was in his previous world.

"My father and grandfather belonged to the same faction. Especially my grandfather—he had direct access to many ministers back then and was a trusted confidant of a certain influential figure," Sakayanagi Arisu said.

"Perhaps due to his background in the education system, or maybe seeking some political capital, my grandfather proposed the concept of Meritocracy, which was eventually adopted by the higher-ups.

Over the years of implementation, it seems to have become one of the most promising directions for educational reform."

Kaoru understood the reasoning.

Regardless of merits, graduates from Class A could freely choose between employment and further education, with the condition that they would be entirely absorbed by either the government or major corporations.

This essentially meant ANHS was cultivating a new generation for the government and big businesses.

These individuals would later gain access to more societal resources, and the higher their status climbed, the more it would prove ANHS superiority.

With politicians deliberately promoting it, what might have been a six out of ten achievement could easily be exaggerated to a nine or even a perfect ten.

"However, my father has been under considerable pressure lately. Not only are people questioning whether Kouiku's system is too conservative—having remained unchanged all these years—but they're also pushing for further reforms."

Sakayanagi let out a deep sigh.

In truth, these criticisms had reached even higher authorities, and even those within the same faction weren't above attacking one another.

"Moreover, someone has established an educational institution positioned as a rival to ANHS. Though I absolutely refuse to acknowledge it as a proper educational institution—it's nothing more than an assembly line."

"An assembly line?"

"They start cultivating so-called geniuses from infancy. Through relentless competition, they select the most talented children and keep them there until adulthood—unless they're eliminated in earlier stages. Those children are forbidden from leaving, never even getting a glimpse of the outside world."

Kaoru was stunned.

Raising geniuses from infancy? Had Japan's competition really escalated to this extent?

"Have I mentioned Ayanokouji-kun to you before?" Sakayanagi smiled faintly. "He's one of the geniuses produced there. They call him their 'Masterpiece,' the greatest achievement of the fourth generation."

"Was he the only one who made it to the end?" Kaoru asked.

"As far as I know, yes. Though I have no idea how he managed to escape," Sakayanagi replied.

"I don't see anything particularly special about him," Kaoru admitted bluntly.

"Having broken free from that cage, he must be intensely curious about everything in the outside world—like a two- or three-year-old child eager to explore. I originally intended to force him into action, to personally bury this artificial genius... until I met you."

"You know him well?" Kaoru pressed.

"We met once as children. I suppose you could say we're childhood friends." Sakayanagi deliberately emphasized the last phrase, her eyes glinting with teasing amusement.

"Satisfied with that answer?"

"So, were you one of the eliminated candidates?"

For a split second, Sakayanagi fell silent.

Shouldn't he be getting angry or jealous?

Instead, it seemed she was the one about to lose her temper.

"I am a true genius," the girl said flatly. "Unlike Ayanokouji-kun, I've never lost since the day I was born. No matter what I learn, I master it quickly and surpass even my teachers."

"So, I'll soon have a very clever little maid?" Kaoru sounded surprised, her words couldn't help but evoke wild imaginations.

Sakayanagi Arisu nearly raised her cane to hit him, but restrained herself due to her upbringing, suppressing her irritation with a deep breath.

"Do you really think you'll get your way during the sports festival?"

"Unless Ayanokōji-kun single-handedly defeats everyone, I can't imagine any other unexpected outcome."

"Hehehe, you want to pressure Class A, but why can't I take advantage of the situation?" Sakayanagi narrowed her eyes.

"After all, it was you and Katsuragi-kun who made the decisions. The failure of those decisions led to Class A's defeat in the sports festival. You can manipulate public opinion, but so can I."

It was ultimately a matter of narrative control—the same event could be framed from different perspectives.

Sakayanagi wanted to preemptively define the sports festival's failure as Katsuragi Kouhei's incompetence.

After all, Class A's defeat needed someone to take the blame.

"You were the one who leaked the participation list, weren't you?" Kaoru asked.

"Was I?" Sakayanagi smiled sweetly at him.

She had anticipated this, so she had used a disposable account to send the information to Nagumo Miyabi and deleted it afterward.

"Please don't make baseless accusations, Mitoma-kun."

She had also guessed that Kaoru might try to shift the blame onto her—claiming she was the one who leaked the list, leading to Class A's crushing defeat.

So, Sakayanagi took matters into her own hands, then immediately launched a preemptive strike against Katsuragi to block Kaoru from doing the same.

"I thought putting you in charge of scorekeeping would keep you quiet, but you're still clinging to this," Kaoru said, sounding somewhat exasperated.

"I'm the one who's surprised. Out of nowhere, you assign me to announce scores—were you trying to reassure everyone?" Sakayanagi was delighted to see him troubled, her smile growing wider.

Falling from first to third place—how could that possibly reassure anyone?

"Let's drop this topic. Weren't we just talking about Advanced Nurturing High School and Ayanokoji-kun?" Kaoru sidestepped Sakayanagi's provocation.

"We've already finished that conversation. What else do you want to know, Mitoma-kun?" Sakayanagi blinked.

"Could it be... you're curious about my past with Ayanokoji-kun?"

"Probably just hearsay." Kaoru gave her a sidelong glance. "The man himself might not even know you exist. You're the only one going on about 'masterpiece' this and 'masterpiece' that."

Sakayanagi's temper flared.

Even though she knew he was retaliating, it still put her in a foul mood.

"You're right. Ayanokoji-kun doesn't know me. I only know him—I once saw him through a glass window when we were children." Sakayanagi tilted her chin up slightly, revealing the graceful curve of her neck, pale and swan-like.

"But that doesn't change my desire to destroy him. I will crush the White Room."

Unbeknownst to many, she harbored an exceptionally prideful side—one that bordered on arrogance.

"Mitoma-kun?"

For some reason, Sakayanagi was now staring at him with a terrifying gaze.

"I was just thinking about whether I should help you target Ayanokoji-kun in the future," Kaoru replied calmly.

"Hehe, no need. I'll enjoy him after I defeat you."

A faint, unnatural flush appeared on Sakayanagi Arisu's face.

"So far, our battles have been quite enjoyable—I've liked them very much. The only downside is how displeased they make me."

'Are you the top recipient of the Contradiction Literature Award?'

"Let's grab something to eat first, or I might faint during the match this afternoon," Kaoru said as he headed toward the cafeteria.

Sakayanagi naturally followed but continued along the way, "To be honest, I'm curious. You usually don't practice seriously, yet your performance improved quite a bit today—that's understandable. But Kamuro-san performance today was truly unusual."

"We should keep that talk between us. Otherwise, the other classes might force Kamuro to take a drug test," Kaoru said with a stern expression.

"Even if there were stimulants, someone like Kamuro would never take such things," Sakayanagi Arisu continued, seemingly oblivious to his joke.

"Even with the excuse that her body is still developing and hasn't reached its physical limits, it's hard to justify. It's like someone who usually only scores passing grades in math suddenly getting full marks—cheating is the only plausible explanation."

"But everyone saw her run that fast with their own eyes. There's no room for cheating, right?" Kaoru chimed in.

Sakayanagi smiled faintly. "I know. That's why I plan to have Kamuro run again afterward. If her performance remains unchanged, then her body must have extraordinary potential."

Kaoru broke into a cold sweat, feeling as though Sakayanagi had seen through something.

"Do you have a better idea, Mitoma-kun?"

"No."

"Ah, I almost forgot—Nagumo-kun from the second year also fell, didn't he?" Sakayanagi recalled the scene.

"Given how agile he usually is, it's unlikely he'd lose his balance on the beam, let alone fall twice in a row."

"What would you like to eat?" Kaoru asked as they arrived at the cafeteria.

"You order for me," Sakayanagi replied, gazing at him with amusement.

"I can't handle spicy food, and keep the portion small."

Kaoru operated the self-service machine at the counter while the girl stood behind him, watching his back with a faint, knowing smile.

"Say, Mitoma-kun, what do you think of the second years?"

Chapter 300: Someday, I'll Make You Step on Me

Sometimes, Kaoru Mitoma couldn't help but wonder if women were equipped with some kind of radar.

Now, sitting face-to-face with her, he noticed the faint smile floating on her lips.

Her crutch leaned against the seat beside her, and the gentle rise of her chest beneath the white short-sleeved shirt looked soft and delicate, like a small, rolling hill.

Even though she wasn't doing anything, it stirred a protective instinct in him—yet at the same time, her composed demeanor made him want to disrupt that calm, to see her flustered and desperate, to shatter her poise.

Kaoru lifted his paper cup.

The set meal he'd ordered included juice, and as he took a sip, the sweet-and-sour taste lingered on his tongue, carrying a hint of summer's fading coolness.

"Though I haven't witnessed your conflicts firsthand, Nagumo-senpai seems to harbor a lot of hostility toward you. And right now, the second years appear to be in chaos for some reason."

Sakayanagi sat with perfect posture.

Even in the student cafeteria, she carried herself as if they were sharing a candlelit dinner—despite it being broad daylight with no candles in sight.

Still, her athletic wear was a far cry from her usual school uniform.

Normally, she carried herself like a little princess, exuding an air of effortless superiority.

But now, she seemed cuter and more fragile.

The thin short-sleeved shirt subtly revealed her figure, the sleeves exposing her pale arms.

Perhaps it was this very detail that made Kaoru glance at her a little longer than necessary.

"Mitoma-kun, you don't actually think the first year is already settled, do you?" Her gaze sharpened, clearly displeased, as if she felt slighted by his dismissive attitude.

"I don't underestimate you, but we'll inevitably face off against the second-years sooner or later," Kaoru said.

"Take today's sports festival as an example—I don't think it's an isolated incident. In the future, we might become teammates or enemies with upperclassmen."

"So, you're betting on Class 2-B?" Sakayanagi Arisu asked with mild curiosity. "Normally, most people would choose Nagumo-senpai, wouldn't they? He's already taken control of his entire year and is practically guaranteed to be the next student council president. I've also heard he has a substantial amount of Personal Points. Why did you pick Kiriya instead?"

"How much do you know about Nagumo-senpai?" Kaoru inquired.

"Rumor has it he used to be quite the troublemaker—a pervert just like you," Sakayanagi blinked playfully.

"Though it seems he's cleaned up his act recently."

"Whether he's reformed or not, that alone makes peaceful coexistence impossible. What if he takes a liking to you?" Kaoru said with utmost seriousness.

Sakayanagi smirked teasingly.

"Are you admitting you're a lolicon now?"

"Rather than questioning whether I'm a lolicon, perhaps you should reflect on why you're so petite." Kaoru had always found it perplexing—while it was true that lolicons liked lolis, shouldn't lolis occasionally ponder why they were lolis in the first place?

Sakayanagi froze momentarily before flushing with irritation.

She was developing, thank you very much!

"How rude. Take that back immediately."

"If I'm already a lolicon, can't I at least say it?"

"Heh, this is exactly what I dislike about you. Whenever you want to avoid a topic, you either dodge it or divert attention."

"I don't want another lolicon taking an interest in you."

"Enough. This joke has gone too far."

Sakayanagi was genuinely annoyed now.

She'd only been teasing, yet he kept throwing the word "loli" around as if she were some tiny child.

"Angry?" Kaoru asked. "If you're displeased, you can step on me."

Sakayanagi found herself torn between irritation and amusement.

Clearly, nothing was more shameless than a pervert doubling down—his skin was far too thick.

"Heheh, is that what Mitoma-kun wants? For me to step on you?"

As she spoke, the girl extended her leg, lightly raising her toes to hook around Kaoru's calf in an unseen spot, like a kitten rubbing against its owner.

"That expression is disgusting—it makes me want to crush you like a bug," Sakayanagi's lips curled slightly.

"But Mitoma-kun hasn't earned the privilege of receiving such a rewa—Eek!"

Her words cut off abruptly as a strange sound escaped her lips.

Her entire body shuddered violently!

Then, with a soft clack, her shoe fell to the floor.

Kaoru had firmly grasped the mischievous feet beneath the table—the smooth, delicate ankle and bonelessly soft toes.

A single light scratch was enough to send the girl opposite him trembling uncontrollably.

"L-Let go...!"

Flushing crimson, Sakayanagi glared at him, regret washing over her.

She'd gotten too carried away, completely forgetting he'd never submit obediently.

This guy would never hold back!

Until now, it had always been her teasing him while he endured silently, gritting his teeth in helpless frustration, never daring to retaliate with such outrageous behavior.

Therefore, Sakayanagi Arisu once again instinctively teased Kaoru, never expecting that he would straightforwardly grab her little foot—just like how he had actually licked her feet right in front of her before, leaving her stunned for a long time.

"I'm a bit curious. Your legs... is it because of your heart condition that it affects your nerves?" Kaoru only felt that the sole in his hand was excessively warm and soft.

"But judging by your expression, it doesn't seem like a nerve issue."

As if testing Sakayanagi's reaction, he occasionally tickled the sole of her foot, causing her to tremble violently, her face flushed red as she desperately bit her lip, letting out a sweet sound from her nose.

However, considering Sakayanagi's condition, Kaoru soon stopped.

"T-The biggest issue with congenital heart disease is insufficient blood supply. The feet are the farthest from the heart..." Sakayanagi panted. "Though I still have sensation, I can't walk or run like a normal person, or else I'll fall. You could say it's underdeveloped."

Kaoru looked at the feet in his hand—pale with a hint of pink, like a delicious mangosteen, incredibly beautiful.

"Stop looking... If you keep playing around, I'll get angry." Sakayanagi lightly bit her lower lip, her eyes shimmering faintly as she stared straight at him.

Kaoru silently helped her put her shoes back on.

Once she withdrew her leg, he said, "One day, I'll have these little feet step on me."

Sakayanagi nearly thought she'd misheard him.

That serious expression, those cool-sounding words—how dare he say something so perverted with such confidence?

"You hopeless foot fetishist are beyond saving."

"Other than licking your feet, what else have I done?"

"Hehehe, please don't say things like that during mealtime."

In the end, under the threat of Sakayanagi's cane, Kaoru wisely refrained from bringing up the topic of foot fetishes again.