

Cote 301

Chapter 301: Half-Heartedness Leads to a Miserable Death

Lunch break was only 50 minutes long.

After finishing the 200-meter race, the students finally appeared in the cafeteria.

Meanwhile, Kaoru and Sakayanagi Arisu were strolling through the campus, both gazing at the azure sky.

The white clouds over Tokyo were no whiter than anywhere else.

"I feel like there's still so much I haven't told you, Mitoma-kun." The girl sat on a bench, slightly narrowing her eyes in contentment.

"How about we talk about your way with women?"

"No thanks. I'm more curious about Ayanokoji-kun." Kaoru stood nearby, holding a drink.

However, Sakayanagi seemed oblivious to his reluctance and continued, "Even knowing full well that you're a lecher, why do they still get close to you? That's what puzzles me. Did you do something?"

"Don't forget, you're also very close to me."

"Hehehe, because Mitoma-kun is an interesting person—enough to make up for your lecherous side."

"You'll regret it sooner or later."

"I already regretted it earlier. Lechers really are bolder than anyone."

"Are you sure you won't step on me?"

"..."

After a brief silence, Sakayanagi smiled and asked, "Other than that, what else would Mitoma-kun like me to do?"

"Right now, could you let me lie on your lap and treat me like your baby?"

"??????"

A trace of confusion flashed in Sakayanagi eyes as she suddenly couldn't comprehend what Kaoru was saying.

"Or, you could let me lick your thigh." Kaoru hesitated for a moment, "Actually, you could also call me 'trash' a few times and then let me teach you a lesson."

"Do you realize what you're saying?"

For the first time, Sakayanagi deeply felt what true disgust was—an incomprehensible revulsion that made her instinctively shrink back.

"I face this desire every day when I see you, though I'm not exactly a saint myself." Kaoru paused.

"But that look in your eyes—the way you look at me like garbage—is wonderful."

Sakayanagi fell silent.

With someone like this, it seemed the more she resisted or showed disgust, the more it excited him.

"Do you act like this with other girls too?"

"Everything in moderation."

"What a terrible man." Sakayanagi sighed, then added, "But strangely, I feel somewhat relieved. Compared to when we first met, you've become much more... lively."

"When we first met?" Kaoru didn't quite understand her meaning.

Sakayanagi nodded. "At first, your eyes looked like those of someone who'd already died—as if nothing mattered to you, your emotions buried deep."

Kaoru froze for a moment.

Back then, he had indeed just hanged himself less than minutes before suddenly reincarnating into this school.

It had taken him a full week to adjust to life here.

"Though you still hide your thoughts now, it's much better than before. At least you're increasingly free of psychological burdens when sexually harassing me."

"So you've been analyzing me all along?"

"Aren't you analyzing everyone too?"

"Did you intentionally get close to me then?"

"Let's just say your little tricks did catch my interest."

"Suddenly I feel very displeased."

"But I don't understand what Mitoma-kun is trying to do."

As she spoke, Sakayanagi fell into thought.

"You're lecherous, yet not impatient. With Kamuro-san beside you, you just interact normally, yet you flirt with other girls elsewhere. It's puzzling."

"Calling it flirting is too harsh. And what do you think I should do? Change girlfriends every week?" Kaoru showed slight dissatisfaction.

"A week is too short. A month would be barely acceptable." Sakayanagi answered with complete seriousness.

"In that case, you'll be the first." Kaoru considered, "After all, I'm a lolicon. Not having a loli girlfriend would be too frustrating."

"Bring that up again and I'll get angry." Sakayanagi poked him with her cane.

"I don't dislike your popularity with women, but I must warn you—not everyone can accept a two-timing boyfriend, myself included."

"What happens if I two-time?"

"I'll kill you."

Faced with that question, Sakayanagi's answer was decisive.

Kaoru subconsciously touched his neck, suddenly feeling it might fall off someday in the future.

"Your prey has arrived." Sakayanagi remarked abruptly.

Horikita Suzune appeared in the distance, her usually cold and beautiful face showing traces of anxiety.

Her eyes darted around as if searching for something.

"Class D is currently in last place, and you're about to send them plummeting back to their May status," Sakayanagi Arisu said calmly. (0 point)

"Though I have no right to pity them, you'd better handle this properly. Otherwise, I might just take advantage of it in the future."

"I was always the villain to begin with."

As he spoke, Kaoru slowly approached Horikita Suzune.

Perhaps sensing his approach, the girl's eyes instantly sharpened.

Then, as if remembering something, she quickly averted her gaze, lowering her eyelids slightly in an attempt to pretend she hadn't noticed him before turning to leave without a word.

"What place did you just take?" Kaoru called out to stop her.

Horikita Suzune hesitated briefly, took a deep breath, and finally turned to meet the man's gaze, feigning indifference.

"A bit of bad luck. I was 0.48 seconds behind first place."

"Blaming failure on luck?" Kaoru said softly. "The Suzune I know doesn't seem like the type to do that."

"I'm warning you again—don't call me by my first name!" Horikita Suzune snapped, her face burning with inexplicable anger as she desperately wanted to end this conversation.

"Is second place really that shameful?" Kaoru asked.

Of course it was shameful.

Her brother had been watching the competition—how could her performance have been so lackluster?

Thinking of Kamuro Masumi's stunning performance, Horikita Suzune unconsciously clenched her fists.

More than anyone, she wished she could have achieved results like that—it would have surely amazed her brother.

"Do you think you've made any progress?" Kaoru pressed further.

Horikita Suzune couldn't hold back any longer and retorted coldly, "If you want to mock me, just go ahead and laugh."

"Today, Class A will suffer its first defeat—one without any redeeming victory," Kaoru declared unexpectedly.

"As for this loss, you must have noticed it too. Class C is overtaking us."

Horikita Suzune pressed her lips together stubbornly.

"Class D hasn't lost yet. I'll go bring Sudo-kun back later. If you want to give up, that's Class A's problem."

"Then, is second place really that bad?" Kaoru Mitoma said calmly. "I've taken first place four times in a row, yet I don't feel certain of victory. Meanwhile, you as the runner-up still refuse to admit defeat. Why would I mock you?"

Horikita Suzune frowned. "I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Because Suzune once told me she wanted to stand on the same track as the Student Council President, to compete alongside him. I still remember how determined you were back then." Kaoru tone turned melancholic.

"But now I see a flustered Suzune whose first instinct upon seeing me is to run away."

Horikita felt her face burn with embarrassment as she gritted her teeth.

"I'm not running away."

"Even if Class D loses, can you still stand beside the President?" Kaoru asked.

Horikita hesitated, unsure how to answer.

No—she knew exactly what she would do, which was why she awkwardly changed the subject.

"I-I need to find Sudou-kun. With him here, Class D won't lose too badly."

Chapter 302: The Second Therapeutic Conversation Target

Despite her words, Kaoru didn't step aside.

Instead, he stated matter-of-factly.

"I'll go with you."

Horikita grew agitated, her voice tinged with anger.

"I don't need your interference! You have no right to meddle in my affairs—please leave!"

"Coming across a distressed beauty and butting in is perfectly normal. Besides, we're rivals to begin with." Kaoru shrugged.

"I think it's necessary to assess your current state—whether you still deserve to stand beside the President or even remain at this school."

"Cut the nonsense! My relationship with my brother has nothing to do with you!" Horikita spat bitterly.

"Why would he take notice of someone like you? You're just a lecherous pervert who toys with women, flirting shamelessly every day. Meanwhile, I've worked so hard, endured so much... and in the end, I have nothing to show for it?"

She had thought that cooperating with Class A would at least preserve Class D's points.

Yet now, even those were slipping away completely.

As the competition progressed, Class D's morale plummeted.

Even the usually oblivious students realized they were in trouble—Class C might be targeting them.

Sudou Ken, unable to tolerate Ryuen Kakeru's provocations and frustrated by his class's poor performance, had skipped the 200-meter race.

His current whereabouts were unknown.

Upon hearing this, Horikita nearly had a heart attack.

The moment her own event ended, she rushed out to find him.

Not because she particularly cared about Sudou himself, but because Class D couldn't afford to lose him now.

Horikita believed she had done her best—excelling in individual competitions, aiming for higher scores.

The school rewarded top-three placements with Personal Points, which could help settle her debt.

More importantly, she wanted her brother to notice her efforts!

She had even suppressed her emotions daily, strictly adhering to her commitments.

After all this, why was she still failing?

No matter how much she thought about it, Horikita couldn't find a reasonable explanation.

She hadn't done anything wrong—had she?

"Not long ago, you did something terrible to someone, yet now you can say things like 'rival,' 'whether they deserve to stay here,' and 'second place is great too' with a straight face. Are you suffering from a split personality?"

"Isn't Class D losing a good thing for you? Because they lost, this person is getting further and further from Class A. She doesn't even have any Personal Points, so you can keep toying with her at your leisure. And if you get bored, you can just have her expelled later."

"Let her cling to unrealistic fantasies—thinking she can get closer to Class A, thinking she can earn her brother's approval—then crush her hopes and kick her out. Haven't you ever thought of doing that?"

"Anyway, you were planning to have me expelled from the start, weren't you? Enjoying the sight of me struggling, tormenting me in private, relishing my unwilling yet compliant expressions. I've had enough of your two-faced nature—sometimes kind, sometimes cruel. If you've got the guts, go ahead and expel me. Either make me leave or let me go right now."

As if venting the frustration and disgust she had long suppressed, Horikita Suzune poured out the thoughts buried deep in her heart.

She nearly cried, her shoulders swaying like a small boat tossed by turbulent waves.

Her voice crackled like fire in Kaoru's ears.

When she finally finished, Kaoru finally spoke.

"Are you telling me all this because you've given up on yourself?"

"Given up?" Horikita let out a bitter laugh. "No, I just want to see how far you're willing to go!"

"How far I go isn't up to me—it's up to you. The faster you improve, the less I can do to stop you," Kaoru said softly.

"Among the people I know, you're probably one of the quickest to change yourself. You've always known exactly what you want."

"Hah. What I want?" Horikita sneered. "You always look at me like that, as if you understand me. When in reality, you're nothing but a sleazebag."

"Has the student council president ever told you that you're just chasing after his shadow?" Kaoru asked.

Horikita fell silent for a moment.

"What's it to you?"

"The president thinks you only admire him. Because of that admiration, you aspire to become someone like him, and imitation is the easiest way to get close. So, ever since you were little, you've copied his every move—what he studied, you studied; what he did, you did—"

"Enough! What are you trying to say?"

"In your heart, you must have some awareness of what you're doing," Kaoru said with a faint smile.

"But is that really how you see yourself?"

A flicker of confusion passed through Horikita's eyes.

The earlier agitation had quietly faded, and she didn't notice how Kaoru was steering her train of thought.

"A little sister who only chases after her brother?" he asked.

"I... I don't know..." Horikita's voice was subdued.

"I just wanted to stand beside my brother, to have him acknowledge me..."

"And then what? After he acknowledges you, what do you want?" Kaoru pressed.

Horikita grew even more lost.

She didn't have an answer for that.

Chapter 303: You Two Are Holding Hands?

"Would you prefer it if your brother patted your head and said, 'You've worked hard, Suzune'?" Kaoru murmured softly.

"Or would you rather have the student council president—someone recognized by everyone—acknowledge you the same way others acknowledge him?"

The former was a brother's recognition of his sister.

As for the latter, only Horikita Suzune herself could say what it truly meant.

From childhood, she had always seen an exceptionally outstanding peer—someone who, no matter what he did, would inevitably earn praise.

In contrast, it seemed no one ever paid attention to her.

Over time, Horikita Manabu might as well have become synonymous with the entire world.

Gaining his recognition was tantamount to the world itself acknowledging Horikita Suzune.

His words left her feeling lost.

She didn't even know what she truly wanted.

"You're right. I am a terrible person—someone who enjoys watching a hardworking person humiliate themselves to please me. But let me correct one thing."

Suzune stared at him blankly as he reached out, his palm resting gently atop her head.

A warm sensation spread through her.

"What I'd rather see is someone who, despite enduring humiliation, still clings to their convictions and grits their teeth to move forward. I'll keep waiting for her to defeat me. Even if no one else recognizes her efforts, I will acknowledge her wholeheartedly."

Kaoru stroked the girl's silky hair—it felt nice, with no risk of hair loss, at least.

But Suzune quickly snapped out of her daze and abruptly swatted his hand away.

"Disgusting!" She glared at him, though her cheeks were faintly flushed, like plum blossoms dusted with snow, carrying a subtle, pleasant fragrance.

Nearby, Sakayanagi Arisu observed the entire scene, her thin lips curling into a faint smile.

No wonder some people are drawn to him.

That combo was downright unfair.

The two found Sudou Ken in the first-floor lobby of the dormitory, lounging on a sofa with his legs crossed, sipping coffee with an air of leisure.

"So this is your ambition? Giving up halfway to sit here and drink coffee?"

Suzune's voice was icy, laced with exasperation.

At first, Sudou was pleasantly surprised to see her—until he noticed Kaoru trailing behind her, at which point his expression soured.

"Seriously? You came all this way just to scold me?" Sudou grumbled. "I led the team in practice and matches, but how did you all repay me? Skipping events, half-assing it, slacking off—every single one of you was useless. Why should I have stayed on the field?"

The absentee was likely Kouenji.

Aside from Ayanokoji passive approach, some Class D students had been downright ridiculous—knocking over hurdles or simply walking around them during the race.

It had left many spectators stunned, and Sudou had nearly lost his temper.

"I always thought you were just a brute with nothing but useless strength, but you surprised me. You took the sports festival seriously."

"That condescending tone is really annoying."

"Because right now, I have to praise you. You met my expectations—though there's still plenty for you to improve on."

"What did I even do wrong?"

"You know exactly what would've happened if you'd attacked Class C earlier."

"They were the ones who fouled first!"

Sudou looked visibly irritated.

He didn't want to hear Suzune's lecturing.

Sure, she was good-looking, but her personality was downright unbearable.

"So what if they cheated?" Horikita Suzune said calmly. "I feel the same way you do, but their cheating are their problem. It only makes them despicable—not us. All we have to do is focus on playing properly."

Kaoru glanced at her face.

The girl's cool demeanor seemed to hide countless unspoken thoughts.

"Easy for you to say," Sudou scoffed, averting his gaze.

"At this rate, we're going to lose, aren't we? If we're already doomed, whether I'm on the court or not doesn't matter."

"It's not over until the very end," Horikita Suzune asserted firmly.

Sudou agitation only grew.

His eyes darted around before finally locking onto Kaoru, as if venting his frustration.

"Actually, I've been meaning to ask—why is he even here? Does Class A have a problem with me too?"

"Mitoma-kun was on the way—"

Before Horikita could finish, Kaoru cut in.

"I just wanted to confirm—has your bet been called off?"

"Bet?"

Both parties froze.

After a moment, Sudou finally remembered what he was referring to, his expression stiffening.

If he defeated Kaoru in the sports festival, Horikita Suzune would allow him to call her by her first name.

"Given the current situation, I'd say I've won," Kaoru added. "As per our agreement, from today onward, I can call you by your name, right? Suzune."

Horikita Suzune felt nothing—after all, he had already been calling her that without permission for half a year.

Sudou, however, flushed bright red and snapped, "I never admitted defeat!"

"There's no point in acting tough now. Suzune, let's go back. Let this guy do whatever he wants—don't bother with him."

With that, Kaoru took Horikita Suzune's small hand in his.

Completely oblivious to matters of the heart, Horikita Suzune only recognized that he was provoking Sudou—not the deeper implications of his actions.

"No, Class D can't afford to lose Sudou-kun right now," she rejected Kaoru's suggestion but allowed him to keep holding her hand.

Perhaps, subconsciously, she had already grown accustomed to it.

Sudou felt his blood boiling.

He knew Horikita Suzune's personality was terrible—there was no way anything could happen between them.

Yet, the more he thought about it, the more fixated he became on her.

Such was adolescence.

Horikita Suzune gave him a different kind of feeling, making him unconsciously chase after her.

But today, that illusion seemed to shatter.

"Hey, just what the hell is your relationship?!" Sudou's eyes widened in disbelief.

First, Kushida had clung to Kaoru, and now even Suzune was like this?!

"We haven't started calling each other by our first names yet," Kaoru answered.

Suzune glanced at him, then at Sudou, belatedly realizing something.

She pulled her hand away and said, "The afternoon match is about to start. How much longer are you planning to stay here?"

Sudou clenched his coffee cup before slamming it into the trash bin with a muffled thud.

"I'm not going back. You two can go ahead and flirt all you want."

Provocation won't work either, Kaoru thought silently.

"I'll wait here until you come back."

Suzune continued to stare firmly at Sudou, gradually realizing that if she wanted to climb to Class A's position, she couldn't afford to abandon any potential ally.

Especially after hearing Kaoru's words earlier.

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Chapter 304: Almost Forgot

Kaoru returned to the track field alone.

Sakayanagi was already seated on a folding chair, seemingly with no intention of going back to the spectator stands.

"She didn't come back with you?"

"Probably waiting until the last event. Aren't you going back to the stands?"

"Fufufu, I should be the one asking—do you still need me to keep score?"

"No."

Soon, the afternoon's assigned competitions were about to begin.

The first event was the scavenger hunt.

Kaoru used his last "Lucky Dice," quadrupling his luck.

[The person you like.]

Kaoru thought for a moment, then put the slip back.

Following the rules, he requested a redraw.

[Your favorite food.]

Who wrote this prompt?

It seemed the second-year executives had planned the scavenger hunt.

He had underestimated things—he hadn't expected Nagumo to set a trap here.

[A classmate's socks.]

Were these prompts for real?

If he hadn't used the "Lucky Dice," would his fate have been even worse?

Kaoru's expression remained dark throughout, and due to the excessive time wasted, he only managed to secure third place.

However, when he picked up Sakayanagi's socks, the entire crowd fell into silence.

As time passed, the events concluded one after another.

"Disgusting foot fetishist."

On the three-legged race track, Kamuro Masumi tied the rope while shooting Kaoru a look of undisguised disdain.

"If you hadn't been participating, I definitely would have taken your socks," Kaoru explained himself.

"Even creepier," Kamuro rolled her eyes—this guy wasn't even denying being a foot fetishist anymore.

"Once we start running later, let's coordinate better," Kaoru paused. "Our final practice went really well, which means we already have good chemistry."

"To think a perverted foot freak like you can be so serious about this."

"..."

Though Kamuro acted disgusted, she still took things seriously when she needed to.

The two stood together at the starting line, just like during their recent practice, waiting for the referee's whistle.

At first, they had stumbled plenty of times, but after continuous practice, they definitely wouldn't fall now.

Whoosh—

Seeing the two return panting heavily, Sakayanagi smiled sweetly.

"Taking first place in the three-legged race—Mitoma-kun and Kamuro-san really do make a great team."

"No one has better chemistry than you two," Kamuro retorted irritably.

"The moment he crouched in front of you, you willingly stuck out your foot for him."

Kaoru's face darkened.

Did she really have to badmouth him in front of everyone like this?

"In that situation, it was either the shoes or the socks, right?" Sakayanagi blinked. "If I refused, Mitoma-kun might blame me—saying my rejection caused Class A to lose, then forcing me to apologize."

"Who in their right mind would let a guy take off their socks?!" Kamuro stared at her in disbelief, while others nearby gave them strange looks.

"Exactly. Why did Mitoma-kun choose me, of all people?" Sakayanagi asked seriously, her gaze fixed on Kaoru.

"Because you weren't competing, so taking off your socks wouldn't be a problem, right?"

"That may be true, but could you return my sock now?"

"Oh, right. Almost forgot."

Kaoru pulled the girl's sock from his pocket.

Indeed, she was currently barefoot on one side, her pale toes curled against her shoe.

Just as he was about to put the sock back on for her, Kamuro suddenly snatched it from his hand.

"Honestly, you two are unbelievable—one's a perverted foot freak, the other's shameless."

Grumbling, Kamuro crouched in front of Sakayanagi and helped her put the sock back on.

"I can't believe you actually tried to keep it, you creep!"

Kaoru wanted to argue—collecting socks was just one of his wishes, not something he'd actually do.

It was just that the opportunity had presented itself, so he figured he might as well fulfill one of his fantasies.

"Pervert," Sakayanagi giggled, joining in on the teasing.

And so, Kaoru gave up on defending himself.

Fine, he was a pervert.

Once Kamuro finished helping Sakayanagi put her shoe back on, the latter thanked her before turning to Kaoru.

"The final relay won't change the outcome either way. There was something I wanted to say to you, but... never mind. It can wait until after the race."

With that, Sakayanagi smiled softly at both Kaoru and Kamuro.

"Hehehe... Let this deadweight cheer you on for now, at least."

Kaoru remained silent, his gaze shifting toward the second-year students.

Nagumo Miyabi's face was dark with anger, while Class 2-A students appeared timid and hesitant.

Meanwhile, Class 2-B was eager and ready, their participants practically vibrating with anticipation.

On the other side, the third-years were equally prepared.

Class 3-B was hot on the heels of Class 3-A, with Tachibana Akane muttering something under her breath, her expression flickering with unease.

Just before the race officially began, Horikita Suzune and Sudou finally returned.

Whatever they had discussed in private, they immediately huddled with Hirata Yosuke and others to finalize their strategy.

Chapter 305: The Unexpected

Though scrambling the order of participants might have seemed like a viable tactic, in a relay race like this, its impact was minimal.

The students chosen for the final event were already the best in Class A—Kito Hayato, Hashimoto Masayoshi, Kamuro Masumi, Shinji Matoba, and Kaoru Mitoma among them.

The Katsuragi faction and the Sakayanagi faction stood on the same track with unspoken understanding.

Katsuragi Kouhei wasn't participating, but seeing Sakayanagi Arisu also staying on the sidelines, he quietly sighed in relief.

The remaining members of the Sakayanagi faction were, after all, the elite of their class.

Take Kito Hayato for instance—this peculiar boy was likely the most physically capable student in Class A.

And then there was Kamuro Masumi.

Before today, no one could have predicted the little surprise she would bring.

Kaoru was the second-to-last runner, positioned slightly behind, but with a clear view of Nagumo Miyabi, Horikita Manabu and Horikita Suzune ahead.

Since the track wasn't wide enough to accommodate all three grades at once, the school had designated the inner lanes as the racing course while the outer lanes served as the waiting area for baton exchanges.

After passing the baton, runners would then move back into the inner lanes.

Though each leg of the race covered considerable distance, with all grades sharing the same field, the gaps between them weren't vast.

The race itself consisted of just three laps around the track.

This setup placed Kaoru in an oddly close position to the final runners.

"Mitoma, standing so far back—are you afraid to face me?" Nagumo's cold voice drifted over from ahead.

"The most crucial leg should be entrusted to the most suitable person." Kaoru had no patience for his taunts.

Soon enough, Nagumo might not even be able to keep up with Kamuro.

"I'm not surprised you're working with Kiriya. What does surprise me is how you knew about Class 2-A's situation." Nagumo scoffed. "Don't worry. Once this is over, I'll find out exactly who the traitor is."

"And once you do?" Kaoru asked.

"Hah. What do you think will happen to them?" Nagumo's lips curled in mockery.

"Did they think I wouldn't act against my own classmates? The moment they betrayed me, they ceased to be my allies."

"I thought you wouldn't care about something as trivial as betrayal. Not long ago, you were preaching about individual strength above all else. Isn't betrayal just another natural consequence?" Kaoru's tone was matter-of-fact.

"What better way to prove one's strength than by toppling you?"

Though meant as mockery, Nagumo actually considered the words seriously before nodding.

"You're right. I am their king. Nothing demonstrates power more effectively than slaying the king. But betrayal is still betrayal."

The more he agreed with Kaoru's reasoning, the more his fury towards the traitor burned.

"Since they didn't defeat me immediately, then Kiriya, you, him, and everyone else daring to defy me—you'd better be prepared for the consequences."

"Are all of us going to be expelled by you?"

"Mitoma!" Nagumo Miyabi was visibly irritated.

This guy always disregarded seniority, even openly mocking him to his face.

"It's a competition now. Stop arguing," Horikita Manabu said calmly.

The race had officially begun.

The first runner for Class 1-D was Sudou Ken, who took an overwhelming lead before passing the baton to the second runner, Hirata Yosuke.

By the time it was the fourth runner's turn, Class 2-A and Class 3-A had already caught up.

Some students had pushed themselves too hard and ended up falling on the track.

"Hehe, President Horikita is so strict. I just wanted to have a little chat with this junior, that's all," Nagumo said with a smile, though his eyes held no warmth.

"But it seems like our class is in the lead now. Mitoma, your calculations—"

"Being in the lead doesn't mean anything. Class 2-B's overall points have already caught up to yours," Kaoru cut him off.

"Including this relay, my participation list was entirely designed to counter Class 2-A."

His sudden confession stunned Nagumo, followed by a surge of fury.

Not only had he been attacked by a junior, but recalling the humiliation from earlier that morning made his face burn with anger.

Kamuro turned her head slightly.

She had been ignoring their exchange until now, but she couldn't help feeling a flicker of surprise.

Why was this guy picking a fight with the second-years?

Then again, thinking about it, it wasn't entirely unexpected.

After all, he and Nagumo had never gotten along from the start.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Horikita Suzune standing nearby.

Though the girl looked somewhat startled, her expression was mostly tense—and was that a hint of envy in her eyes?

Horikita Suzune remained silent.

Even though she had achieved her wish—standing proudly beside her brother—she didn't feel the confidence or pride she had imagined.

Instead, she was overwhelmed with unease and Kamuro's presence beside her only deepened her insecurity.

Horikita Suzune knew she could never match Kamuro's speed, just as she could never match her brother's.

Standing here now, she couldn't help but feel a little pathetic.

Especially when she remembered all the things she had said to Kaoru.

The memory made her want to bury her head in the sand.

She regretted her earlier confidence.

Soon, the fifth runner took off, with Kaoru in fourth place, chasing closely behind.

As he passed the sixth runner, he glanced briefly at Horikita Suzune, who also looked back at him.

Their eyes met for just an instant.

"How does Class D compare to Class A now?" Horikita Manabu suddenly asked.

Horikita Suzune froze for a moment before realizing her brother was speaking to her.

A flicker of panic ran through her, followed by a tinge of shame as she answered.

"I... I'll catch up to Mitoma-kun and his Class A. I definitely will."

"Is that so?" Horikita Manabu's voice was indifferent. "You haven't improved at all. Mitoma-kun's judgment about you must have been wrong."

Horikita Suzune had expected harsher words of disdain, but instead, he simply said that—and even mentioned Kaoru's name in the process.

"Mitoma-kun... Did he say something to you?"

"Just some pointless nonsense. He asked me to take the final leg of the relay, saying it was your request. I was surprised. You two seem to have gotten close."

Horikita Suzune's face flushed crimson as she recalled that she had indeed made such a request while indulging Kaoru.

Had he actually told her brother about it?

"Is this girl president Horikita's sister?" Nagumo's voice suddenly rang out, his scorching gaze sizing up Suzune.

Suzune instinctively lowered her head.

Whenever someone identified her as Horikita Manabu's sister, this near-reflexive response always surfaced.

"That's none of your concern."

"Who would have thought the student council president's sister would be placed in Class D upon enrollment. Quite surprising."

"Even so, she remains my sister."

"Heh, what an admirable sibling pair. I'll look forward to the days ahead."

The impact of Kaoru's earlier blow seemed to have vanished as Nagumo's smile reappeared.

The next moment, the final baton was passed into his hands.

"Then I'll await you at the finish line, President Horiki—" Nagumo's words were cut short as a black shadow suddenly flew past him, freezing his smile mid-sentence.

When he recognized the figure, his pupils shook with disbelief, utterly unable to comprehend how someone had overtaken the leading Class 2-A.

Chapter 306: Official Conclusion

"Kamuro! Kamuro! Kamuro!"

"First place! We worship you!"

"Kamuro-san, p-please give me your autograph! Right here!"

Faced with her class's cheers, Kamuro Masumi clearly felt overwhelmed, her hands fidgeting helplessly.

She desperately wanted to explain that even she didn't understand what had happened.

After reconsidering it, since she herself didn't know the circumstances, she might as well ignore them all.

Despite this resolution, Kamuro found herself completely surrounded by female students, with even upperclasswomen joining the growing crowd.

Thus, Kamuro became entirely engulfed by the crowds, drawing envious glances from many male students.

"I didn't expect you to run so fast at the end."

No sooner had Kaoru sat down than a drink was handed to him.

Sakayanagi Arisu smiled playfully at him.

Had he not caught up to Class 2-A at the last moment, Kamuro might not have secured first place, and Nagumo wouldn't have worn that stunned expression.

"I wouldn't have taken the fifth leg if I lacked confidence." Kaoru glanced toward the second-year contingent, now in disarray.

"Well then, what performance do you have planned now?"

"Shouldn't you praise me first?" Sakayanagi pouted, eyes shimmering with pretend tears.

"Today, I never once disrupted Mitoma-kun's plans, did I?"

Individuals like Kito, Hashimoto and Kamuro were all her people.

Had she truly intended to interfere, Kaoru would have been powerless against her.

After brief consideration, Kaoru reached out and lightly scratched under Sakayanagi's chin, his voice completely flat.

"Meow meow meow."

In that moment, Sakayanagi genuinely felt like she'd transformed into a cat, with him gently stroking her chin as if expecting her to respond with contented purring.

"What are you doing?"

"Exactly what you see—I'm petting Sakayanagi-san."

"Sometimes I want to crack open your skull to see what's inside." Sakayanagi sighed dramatically, immediately capturing Kaoru's mischievous hand.

"I'm not a kitten, and you're certainly not my owner."

"Sooner or later it'll." Kaoru remained unfazed.

Sakayanagi smiled as a ray of twilight fell upon her, setting her silver hair ablaze with golden flames.

Her slightly upturned lips carried a hint of cunning, while her exposed calves gleamed pristine white, smooth as cream.

"Attention, please. The results of this year's sports festival will now be announced—"

At that moment, the school broadcast signaling the official conclusion of the sports festival rang out.

The students who had been gathered around Kamuro instinctively looked up toward the electronic display on the high platform, where the overall scores for each grade and the points for the Red and White teams flickered into view.

Seizing the opportunity, Kamuro quickly slipped out of the crowd.

She couldn't understand why she had suddenly become so popular—all she had done was chase down a few boys.

Kaoru turned his gaze to the screen, where the first result to appear was the outcome between the Red and White teams.

"White Team wins!"

Instantly, murmurs of unrest rippled through the surroundings—this was likely the first time Class A had suffered defeat.

But there was no time to dwell on it, as the rankings for each grade were announced next.

First-year Class C, First-year Class A, First-year Class B, First-year Class D;

Second-year Class B, Second-year Class A, Second-year Class C, Second-year Class D;

Class 3-A, Class 3-B, Class 3-D, Class 3-C.

...

In the rankings above, both Class 1-A and Class 2-A lost their first-place positions.

Although the exact point values couldn't be seen, this ranking alone was enough to explain the situation.

As teammates in the Red Group, Class D's poor performance dragged down the overall score.

As punishment for this failure, all members of the Red Group would have 100 points deducted.

On top of this, with the exception of Class 1-C which gained some points, all other classes received point deductions.

Class 1-A: 1656

Class 1-B: 966

Class 1-C: 522

Class 1-D: 0

After this sports festival, Class 1-D had returned to the era of zero points.

Fortunately, negative points weren't possible.

Upon hearing this news, Ike Kanji and the others next door had already started wailing in despair, with some even beginning to blame and argue with each other.

Hirata Yosuke didn't know how to calm them down.

While Class 1-D was certainly in a pitiful state, there wasn't a single smile to be found in Class 1-A either.

"Damn it, why did we lose?" Totsuka Yahiko grumbled angrily.

"If we knew that, we wouldn't have lost in the first place," Hashimoto Masayoshi replied with some exasperation.

"In my opinion, it's probably because our competition roster got leaked. The plan to ally with Class D from the start was flawed to begin with. Maybe they didn't keep things confidential properly, which is why we ended up at the bottom."

Totsuka Yahiko couldn't refute this because he suspected Class 1-D as well.

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it now. Ultimately, it was a mistake in judgment at the time."

As he said this, Hashimoto Masayoshi glanced at Katsuragi Kouhei—this decision had been his idea after all.

Katsuragi remained silent.

Since it was his mistake in judgment, he should take responsibility and apologize to everyone.

"We really shouldn't have allied with Class D."

"Look, Kamuro-san got first place in the grade and won the Most Outstanding Student Award!"

"What's the use? We still lost in the end."

"Even though we tried so hard... It's so frustrating..."

"Hey, Katsuragi, why did we lose today?"

After suffering this setback, many students turned their confused gazes toward Katsuragi.

Compared to the VIP Exam, the failure in the sports festival was much more glaring.

The more they fell behind others on the field, the more demoralized they became—especially when no matter how hard they tried, they just couldn't catch up.

Before the results came out, some had held onto hope that they could at least preserve their points.

But in the end, they still failed, though the loss wasn't as devastating as it could have been.

"Calm down," Sakayanagi spoke up at this moment.

"Winning and losing are both normal in competitions. The important thing is to learn from our mistakes and improve for the next test."

"The princess is right," Hashimoto Masayoshi quickly chimed in.

"The issue now is to reflect on what we've done so far and see if we made any mistakes."

It was unclear how he managed to say "Princess" with a straight face.

The students exchanged glances, and someone suddenly said, "I think everyone tried their best. We practiced hard for the competitions, so I don't understand why we still lost in the end."

"Why can't Class A lose?" Sakayanagi smiled. "Why must we always be the winners?"

The student froze, clearly not knowing how to respond.

"Since childhood, your parents and teachers should have taught you this, right? Even geniuses can fail at times. Why do you think you can keep winning indefinitely?"

"In academic ability, are any of you superior to me? In physical prowess, can I match up to you all? The answer to both is likely no. In this world, there will always be someone stronger than you. No one can be certain of continuous victory—in fact, the idea of always winning is a lie."

"Now, just because we lost one sports festival, you can't handle it? If that's the case, I think it's better to willingly give up the Class A position and let Class C or B take it instead."

"I don't understand—if we made the wrong decision back then, why not just correct it next time?"

Faced with Sakayanagi verbal assault, the class fell silent, except for Katsuragi who sensed danger.

He realized Sakayanagi was seizing his authority by preemptively calming the class's emotions, subtly defining today's failure with a single phrase—"the wrong decision back then"—shifting the blame onto him.

The problem was, many in the class actually agreed with Sakayanagi's reasoning.

They began to show expressions of reflection, then echoed her words.

"Rushing into decisions really isn't the way."

"We should be more cautious from now on. If unnecessary, it's better to fight alone—other classes can't be trusted in the end."

"Does Class A even need allies in the first place?"

"Sigh, if only we had abandoned Class D earlier..."

These words drilled into Katsuragi ears.

Though no one directly blamed him, it was close enough.

"I propose that from now on, we vote on important matters," Hashimoto Masayoshi suggested.

"If we don't deliberate carefully and consider differing opinions, we might repeat today's mistakes."

Considering differing opinions—meaning he'd have to win over the entire class?

"Wouldn't that be too troublesome?"

"Not really. Since we're all on the same side, isn't it good for the whole class to be united?"

"So decisions must be unanimous?"

"Isn't that ideal?"

Katsuragi realized Hashimoto was helping Sakayanagi strip him of his authority.

Now, the class was truly divided into only two factions, with the remaining neutrals just coasting along.

This meant that without the Sakayanagi faction's approval, he could no longer easily make decisions on behalf of the class.

"I don't oppose unanimity, but what if we can't reach a consensus? Who gets the final say?" Katsuragi asked.

"Hahaha, then we'll take a vote," Hashimoto replied with a smile. "Whoever gets the most votes, we follow."

If they voted now, Katsuragi would likely have the most support—seemingly advantageous for him, but that might not last.

Especially since Sakayanagi had planted a landmine in her earlier words, framing the failure as Katsuragi's fault.

Class 1-A would likely keep recalling today's events in the future.

"Unanimity sounds great! I agree!"

"Exactly! No more wrong decisions!"

"It's all because we were too rash back then!"

Katsuragi hesitated, then glanced at Kaoru, whose gaze was fixed on the second-year students, seemingly indifferent to the discussion here.

"Heh, having a lively discussion, Class A?"

The victor of this sports festival, Ryuen Kakeru arrived at the territory of Class A with his followers in tow.

Upon seeing Katsuragi, he flashed a radiant smile.

"Ah, Katsuragi, is my timing inconvenient? Should I come back after your class finishes complaining?"

Chapter 307: Class A Is Nothing Special

Given the timing of his appearance, Ryuen clearly had no intention of leaving quietly.

Instead, he seemed to be here as the champion, eager to relish the sight of Class A's defeat.

"What kind of joke is this? How dare you show your face here?" Totsuka Yahiko protested indignantly.

"Tell us, did you steal our entry forms?"

Katsuragi face darkened.

He had been the one holding the entry forms—if Class C had managed to steal them from him, wouldn't that make him the prime suspect as a traitor?

"Oh? Entry forms?" Ryuen raised an eyebrow, smirking.

"So you suspect there's a traitor in your own class? How pathetic. Not only are you fighting among yourselves, but you're even turning on your own people."

Totsuka Yahiko flushed red with anger, but Katsuragi responded calmly, "There are no traitors in Class A. We're all comrades. Please refrain from such remarks, Ryuen."

"Oh, really?" Ryuen looked between Katsuragi and Sakayanagi with amusement.

"If that's the case, what were you all discussing just now?"

"Nothing of concern to you. Just Class A's internal affairs," Hashimoto Masayoshi replied.

"No, Hashimoto, I can't let this slide. After all, wasn't it this student who accused us of stealing your entry forms?" Ryuen crossed his arms.

"I swear on my honor that no one in Class C would do such a thing. If you don't apologize immediately, I won't let this go."

Totsuka Yahiko was stunned, and even Katsuragi frowned.

"Hah? You guys broke the rules during the competition too! I haven't even settled that with you yet, and now you're turning this around—"

"Yahiko!"

Katsuragi stopped the furious Totsuka Yahiko and addressed Ryuen coolly.

"It was wrong to suspect you without evidence. For that, I can apologize. However, you shouldn't push things too far either."

Ryuen chuckled and turned to Ishizaki beside him.

"Hmm, I seem to have forgotten—did we break any rules?"

"Definitely not!" Ishizaki immediately shook his head.

The followers behind him also shook their heads frantically, afraid of being beaten if they hesitated.

"Seems like a misunderstanding. How strange—the moment I arrive, you accuse me of stealing your entry forms, and now you're accusing me of cheating." Ryuen clicked his tongue.

"So even Class A can't handle losing, huh?"

"You—!"

Not just Yahiko, but several other students were now visibly seething.

"Ryuen-kun, you might be getting a little too carried away, don't you think?" Sakayanagi's tone was less a warning and more a reminder.

This wasn't Ryuen's moment—it was hers.

Starting today, she would gradually seize control of Class A.

"Tch. It's rare to see Class A reduced to such a sorry state. What's wrong with indulging in a little gloating?" Ryuen remained unfazed, even seeming pleased.

"Class C isn't welcome here!" Yahiko voiced his strong disapproval.

"Hehehe, only sore losers would care about something like a participation list. The truth is, you were simply crushed by me, nothing more." Ryuen laughed, his expression brimming with arrogance.

"You bastard!"

"Yahiko!"

Katsuragi once again stopped Totsuka Yahiko, his mind racing at this moment.

"Hey, Mitoma, aren't you going to say anything?" Ryuen seemed bored as he turned to Kaoru Mitoma, who had remained silent.

"What should I say?" Kaoru looked at him strangely.

"Congratulations to Class C for earning a measly 50 points?"

'Hmm, even if they gave their all in this sports festival, they'd only end up with around 50 points.'

Ryuen's expression stiffened momentarily before returning to normal.

He snorted, "Such a tough talker. I hope you can keep that attitude in the future because, starting today, Class A is nothing special."

For a moment, he had been worried Kaoru might have some countermeasure, but in the end, there was nothing.

"It's you guys who are sneaky! You must have gotten hold of the participation list—that's why you targeted us today!"

Faced with Yahiko's fury, Ryuen remained unbothered, wearing a smile as if he were enjoying the spectacle.

"Looking for a fight?" Ishizaki stepped in front of Ryuen.

"Who's afraid of you Class C thieves?!" Yahiko glared furiously.

"Who are you calling thieves?" Shiho Manabe, standing behind them, seemed unable to hold back.

"It's you Class A guys who are the arrogant ones, always complaining about practice in the café—I'm sick of you!"

In an instant, both Class A and Class C froze.

"Hah? Why would we ever leak information in a café?!"

"Then what? After practice, you guys whined about how hard it was, how Class D was dragging you down, and how miserable it was to be paired with them."

"W-wait, who said anything like that?"

Totsuka Yahiko finally realized something was off.

He turned around abruptly to see many students looking awkward.

"That's not it! We might have complained a little, but we never mentioned anything about the participation list!"

"Damn it, you traitors!"

No matter how they tried to explain, Totsuka Yahiko refused to believe them.

If they hadn't said anything, how would the other classes know?

At first, Ryuen was annoyed by Shiho Manabe's interruption, but seeing Class A starting to turn on each other, he reconsidered—this excuse wasn't bad.

"Heh, what a shame. The truth is, we saw right through Class A—your expressions, your breathing, your movements, even the tone of your voices. Just as I expected, Class A is nothing special after all!"

With that, Ryuen didn't give Class A a chance to respond, casually walking away with his entourage, leaving only his retreating back for Class A to stare at.

"I really want to punch him!" Totsuka Yahiko was seething—exactly the reaction Ryuen had wanted.

However, Sakayanagi Arisu's expression was grave.

This was strange.

What did Shiho Manabe's words just now mean?

While she could understand Class C not wanting to reveal their source, why would they give such a reason?

"What the hell? So it's all your fault!"

"We really didn't say anything!"

"If you didn't say anything, then how did Class C find out what you were doing in the café?"

"W-we don't know!"

"..."

As Totsuka Yahiko berated a group of students, Sakayanagi Arisu's eyes flickered with irritation.

It was obvious—her plan to attack Katsuragi was about to fall apart once again.

Originally, the narrative had been that Katsuragi had made a wrong decision, leading everyone down the path of failure.

But now, Shiho Manabe had refuted that claim, splitting the responsibility into two parts.

Faced with accusations from their opponents—and worse, accusations that were factually true—some students, no matter how much they wanted to argue, couldn't guarantee they hadn't leaked information.

And so, Sakayanagi let out a sigh.

It was clear she wouldn't be able to continue her assault on Katsuragi today.

Her gaze shifted silently to Kaoru with a faint glimmer in her eyes.

Had he anticipated this outcome as well?

Chapter 308: Striking While the Iron is Hot

Thanks to Shiho Manabe's words, Class 1-A fell into a brief period of self-doubt.

However, the Sakayanagi faction's stance remained intact.

To prevent similar mistakes in the future, any major decisions would now require unanimous approval from the entire class.

On the surface, this seemed like a restriction imposed on Katsuragi, but in reality, it would also create significant complications for Sakayanagi.

Even so, both Katsuragi Kouhei and Sakayanagi Arisu knew that the opinions of the majority hardly mattered.

If they didn't eliminate each other soon, the infighting within the class would only grow worse.

For now, the Katsuragi faction held the advantage, leaving Sakayanagi no choice but to bide her time.

At this thought, Kaoru exhaled softly.

Even if he forcibly suppressed Sakayanagi's plans today, she wouldn't give up so easily.

Because Sakayanagi Arisu would never submit willingly.

Even if her faction were dismantled, she would find other ways to replenish her strength, waiting for the perfect moment to launch another ambush.

The internal strife in Class A could only end in one of two ways: either Katsuragi and Kaoru relinquished control of the class and submitted to Sakayanagi's leadership, or they expelled her—forcing her to either drop out or transfer to another class.

No matter how you looked at it, Sakayanagi was a troublesome woman.

Kaoru walked along the tree-lined path under the dusk sky.

The sports festival had officially ended, and students from all grades could be seen trudging wearily toward the dormitories, some with smiles still lingering on their faces.

Under Class A's rule, the lower-ranked classes had rarely won a single round, so this victory was undoubtedly a cause for celebration.

But in some classes, the students' resentment was almost palpable—like vengeful spirits.

Anyone who saw the results, marked with a big fat zero, would surely feel miserable.

Spotting Sudou and his group up ahead, Kaoru took a detour down a quieter path.

Though it would take more time, it would help him avoid unnecessary trouble.

Normally, this route was only frequented by couples, and Kaoru rarely took it.

But right now, it didn't feel so bad.

"...Can you tell me the reason?"

Kaoru came to a halt as he spotted two figures seated on a bench ahead.

Shielded by the trees, they didn't seem to notice anyone passing by.

"Leaving summer vacation aside, why did you lose in today's sports festival?" One of the figures, likely a teacher, had her long hair tied into a high ponytail, her shapely figure concealed beneath office attire.

"With your abilities, even if you couldn't take first place, there's no way you'd end up dead last, right? Ayanokoji, don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

Though sitting on the same bench, the distance between them was noticeable—less like strangers and more like two people keeping their guard up.

Still, Kaoru was surprised to run into Ayanokoji Kiyotaka here.

"Class information was leaked. There wasn't much I could do about that, Chabashira-sensei."

So it was indeed Chabashira Sae, the homeroom teacher of Class D.

At the same time, Kaoru felt puzzled.

Why would a homeroom teacher meet a student in private?

Moreover, Chabashira's tone just now sounded more like an interrogation than a normal teacher-student conversation.

"Even if there was a traitor, I refuse to believe you were completely unaware. Even if it was Class A's doing, don't tell me you had no countermeasures at all?" Chabashira seemed agitated.

"Your class finally earned some points, only to lose 150 in the VIP exam and now another 200. Do you even care what happens to your class?"

"Chabashira-sensei, wasn't it you who forced me into action in the first place?" Ayanokoji's voice was calm, his expression unchanging.

"Are you provoking me? Don't forget—it's only because of my protection that you're still able to stay here. Otherwise, you'd be expelled immediately." Chabashira's tone dripped with threat, as if she sensed Ayanokoji's skepticism toward her.

Kaoru found himself reevaluating the teacher.

He had assumed she was just another deadbeat, but it turned out she was just as shameless as he was.

"Do you have any proof to back up your claims?"

"The proof is that I know everything about you. While other students and teachers are clueless, I know exactly what you've done."

"Do you know Mitoma?"

"Of course. His performance has been far more impressive than yours, Ayanokoji."

"Actually, I suspect he might be someone sent by my father."

"..."

"Surprised?" Ayanokoji paused. "The way he carries himself is different from you. He seemed fully aware of my abilities—he tested me on the deserted island, but when I didn't react, he backed off."

"What are you trying to say?" Chabashira felt an inexplicable irritation, even sneering.

"Are you admitting defeat because you think you can't measure up to him?"

"I don't admit defeat. But the fact remains—you understand me far less than he does." Ayanokoji's tone remained indifferent.

"Take Horikita, for example. Your first instinct was to use me. But I did warn you, didn't I? That one day, you'd regret exploiting me."

"Hmph. Ayanokoji, don't forget—if you're caught smoking, bullying, stealing, or cheating, expulsion is only natural. And as your homeroom teacher, I decide whether you've done those things or not."

"As a teacher, you resort to threatening a student. Are you really that fixated on Class A?"

"It's not my threat, but your father's wish."

"No, I know full well that a mere teacher wouldn't dare oppose my father."

A flicker of unease flashed in Chabashira Sae's eyes, but she quickly masked her emotions and replied coolly.

"I'm your homeroom teacher. No one knows better than me how to get you expelled."

"I see." Ayanokoji Kiyotaka silently produced an object.

"Now that I have recorded evidence. I told you—you'd regret this."

Chabashira Sae's expression stiffened.

Her gaze locked onto the device in his hand—undoubtedly, a highly professional recording tool.

"You... How do you have something like this?" Her voice finally lost its composure, replaced by disbelief.

She had assumed Ayanokoji wasn't carrying his phone today, eliminating any risk of recording.

"Found it in my room," Ayanokoji said. "If this recording gets out, whether I get expelled remains uncertain. But you, Chabashira-sensei, will definitely lose your position at ANHS—and your precious Class A."

Chabashira Sae averted her gaze subtly, though her tone retained a trace of defiance.

"Even if you force me out, someone else will take my place. Your father won't let you off the hook."

"Maybe. But right now, you're the one with no choice. If you want to climb to Class A, your only hope lies with me. And this year's Class D is probably the best you've ever had, which is why you're tempted." Ayanokoji's voice was eerily calm.

"In other words, you need me, but I don't need you. If I drop out now, Class D will only drift further from your dream."

Chabashira Sae fell silent.

Ayanokoji didn't expect a response.

He simply stated, "Given my father's methods, you wouldn't last long. Someone else must have helped me. Let's end this here today, Chabashira-sensei."

With that, Ayanokoji stood and left without another glance at her.

Watching his retreating figure, Kaoru felt the object in his hand looked oddly familiar—almost like the listening device he'd asked Kushida to plant in Ayanokoji's room.

In an instant, Kaoru's mood turned complicated.

If he recalled correctly, the device had likely run out of battery.

Ayanokoji had just bluffed Chabashira Sae.

Even so, he wouldn't ask for the bug back.

Honestly, Kaoru had initially hoped to gather some intel, but Ayanokoji did nothing noteworthy in his room—just occasional parties with Ike Kanji and the others.

Nothing more.

Perhaps Ayanokoji had discovered the device early, explaining the lack of useful information.

In the end, the bug had only worked for about half a month, and Kaoru hadn't bothered retrieving it.

Who knew Ayanokoji would use it today to fend off Chabashira's blackmail?

Then again, Chabashira herself was at fault—hence her panic at the prospect of exposure.

Kaoru fell into thought.

From their conversation, Ayanokoji's father seemed to be a formidable figure, one intent on forcing his son to leave school.

Recalling Sakayanagi Arisu's words, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was the ultimate masterpiece produced by a certain institution, which was originally meant to rival Advanced Nurturing High School—in other words, the product of factional struggles.

No doubt Ayanokoji's father was also a politician.

Kaoru decided to look into the matter later.

He turned his attention back to Chabashira Sae.

Likely due to the results of the sports festival, she seemed visibly shaken, her eyes dull and lips pressed tightly as she stared blankly at nothing in particular.

Her gaze was empty, simply fixed ahead.

Just as he was about to move, a figure suddenly brushed past him.

A strand of long hair swept across his vision, followed by a faint, pleasant fragrance.

"Asahina-senpai?"

At his voice, the girl ahead abruptly stopped and turned—indeed, it was Asahina Nazuna.

Kaoru's eyes brightened, but Asahina only glanced at him before silently turning away and quickening her pace.

"Wait, Asahina-senpai, the cafeteria isn't crowded right now. There's no need to rush."

Sure enough, Asahina soon halted.

"Mitoma-kun, do you know about our class's competition roster?" she asked without turning around.

Kaoru immediately understood.

After a brief hesitation, he replied, "Are you suspecting that I peeked at your class's information and relayed it to Kiriama-senpai?"

"No. I know simply looking wouldn't have this effect. It's impossible for every event to coincidentally match us against opponents just slightly stronger than us."

After a long pause, she continued.

"Tell me... is there a traitor in our class?"

Chapter 309: The Loosened Bond

Hearing the conversation, Chabashira Sae sharply turned her gaze toward them.

Upon realizing it was just a boy and girl talking, her expression shifted slightly before she silently stood and walked away from the bench.

The atmosphere grew awkward.

Kaoru watched as a few white butterflies fluttered out from the flowerbed beside the path, gliding gracefully past the girl before him.

Perhaps for ease of movement, her hair was tied up high, revealing the delicate nape of her neck, where a faint shadow of sunlight lingered against her flawless, pure-white skin.

"Does Nagumo-senpai believe someone leaked information from the class?"

"Though I don't want to think any of our comrades would do such a thing, there's no other reasonable explanation."

"Asahina-senpai trusts her classmates, but... I won't reveal who it was."

"..."

Asahina remained silent for a long while.

Kaoru glanced toward Chabashira, who had noticed his gaze.

Her cold, beautiful face turned away as she nonchalantly left the bench.

"I'm not forcing you to tell me. I just find it hard to believe. After fighting alongside each other for over a year... why would someone betray everyone?"

More than losing to Class 2-B, Asahina was far more troubled by the idea that someone in her class had abandoned them.

She couldn't comprehend the reason.

When Nagumo Miyabi coldly announced to the entire class that he would uncover the traitor and deliver the harshest punishment—even expulsion—she had tried to persuade him to show mercy.

But Nagumo had dismissed her with cold indifference.

Especially when, in front of the whole class, he had asked her:

"Are you trying to help Mitoma fight against me?"

Asahina Nazuna was instantly overwhelmed by a surge of intense humiliation.

Had all these years of companionship not been enough for them to understand her?

How could she possibly help Kaoru go against her childhood friend?

Even when she had recently spotted Kaoru scouting her class, Asahina had immediately confronted him.

The only reason she let him go was because forcibly detaining him would have been pointless.

Thus, Asahina decisively left the classroom, deliberately avoiding the main path and walking alone into this secluded alley.

"Betrayal is indeed shameful, but have you ever considered, Asahina-senpai, why someone would still betray others despite having their trust?"

Asahina froze slightly, her previously muddled mind gradually clearing.

"Was there a reason that made betraying everyone necessary?"

"Or perhaps a reason that made betraying Nagumo-senpai necessary."

"Betraying Miyabi..." Asahina quickly recalled something. "Are you trying to stop Miyabi's reckless behavior?"

"That reason is too righteous. Aside from the student council president, I doubt anyone else has such noble intentions." Kaoru chuckled.

"For example, my reason for opposing Nagumo-senpai is simple—I also want to act freely here, so I can't allow anyone to be more unrestrained than me."

Asahina couldn't see his expression, but she could easily imagine it.

She couldn't help but press her lips together.

"What an outrageously arrogant kouhai."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Even so, I still find it infuriating."

As she spoke, Asahina turned around, her gaze landing squarely on Kaoru.

He was exceptionally tall, with a perfectly proportioned body—no less striking than a magazine model.

Coupled with his youthful, delicate features, he could easily rival some of the most popular idols.

The words she had intended to say suddenly died in her throat.

After a brief silence, Asahina murmured.

"I shouldn't be meeting you privately. People might misunderstand and think I'm getting involved in your conflict."

"I understand." Kaoru nodded.

Asahina was momentarily taken aback.

She had expected him to hastily deny her words or show disappointment, but his response was nothing more than this indifferent acknowledgment.

A flicker of hesitation crossed her mind—had Kaoru actually never been interested in her?

At this realization, Asahina quietly let out a sigh of relief.

She and Nagumo Miyabi had clearly overthought things.

Then, a weight seemed to press against her chest.

There was nothing between them to begin with, yet Nagumo Miyabi kept suspecting her—didn't she even have the space for normal social interactions?

It was almost laughable how Nagumo, who flirted around freely himself, wanted to control her social circle.

"Actually, Asahina-senpai, you don't need to mind my thoughts. If you want to involve yourself in our fight, that's fine. You can side with Nagumo-senpai as much as you like, even spy on me for information. I won't do anything to you."

Asahina Nazuna froze, staring at Kaoru before her, wondering if she had misheard him.

"If there's anything Asahina-senpai wants to know, I can tell you everything except the most crucial parts." Kaoru paused, then added.

"Actually, I might even share the crucial parts—depends on my mood."

"W-Wait, are you joking?" Asahina forced a smile.

This was absurd.

"Not at all. Didn't Asahina-senpai say you wanted to be friends with me?" Kaoru replied matter-of-factly.

"Since we're friends, telling you doesn't matter."

"What if Miyabi and I make you regret this for life?"

The words left her mouth before she could think—her mind was blank.

"I considered this possibility when I decided to befriend you... No, more accurately, I just wanted to be friends with you. That's enough for me."

Asahina could feel how stiff her expression was.

If he had phrased it slightly differently, this scene, these lines—it could've easily been mistaken for a confession.

What should she do? Should she fend him off with the composure of an upperclassman?

No, no, no, no—she needed to stay calm.

He hadn't confessed, and she hadn't brought up the topic either.

She had to steer the conversation back immediately!

"Heh... hehehe, Mitoma-kun, do you really think we aren't friends yet?" Asahina let out a dry laugh.

"Besides, I have no intention of cutting ties with a cute kouhai like you. If anything, I'm more worried about whether you mind my relationship with Miyabi."

"I don't mind. Childhood friends, right?" Kaoru said. "Didn't you mention you two have known each other since elementary school?"

At this, Asahina relaxed slightly, unconsciously touching the omamori tied around her wrist.

Softly, she murmured, "Fate is a strange thing. Sometimes you think you've missed your chance, but destiny makes you look back—things you thought were gone suddenly return."

"It really is strange." Kaoru fished a die from his pocket.

"Senpai, want to test your luck?"

Asahina stared at the die in his hand, puzzled.

Test her luck?

"This is a luck-boosting die. Whatever number you roll, your luck will multiply by that much."

What Kaoru held was the 「Lucky Die」 —though its uses had long been exhausted.

Now, it was nothing more than an ordinary trinket.

Chapter 310: Fate Is Meaningless

After a moment's hesitation, Asahina took the dice from him.

It was small, seemingly unremarkable die.

"Go on, give it a toss."

Clack—

The dice tumbled across the ground, wobbling a few times before settling on four dots.

"It seems senpai luck has quadrupled," Kaoru picked up the dice and rolled them again himself.

"Alright, my luck is sixfold now."

Asahina Nazuna looked puzzled as he handed the dice back to her, saying.

"Senpai, try again. Let's see whose luck is better."

"What's the point of this?"

"The essence of fate is luck, isn't it? Like pies falling from the sky, meeting someone you like, or having lost items returned to you. If you're really unlucky, such things wouldn't happen."

"The shrine says it's inevitable coincidence—something bound to happen within a certain timeframe."

"What is coincidence?"

"..."

Asahina Nazuna hesitated, glancing between him and the dice in her hand before finally making up her mind.

"This time it's three, lower than before."

"Another six for me. Your luck is pretty good."

"Senior's luck is great too—it's five now."

"No, no, yours is better. Still six."

"One."

"..."

At first, she had merely been humoring Kaoru, but as it went on, Asahina Nazuna's expression grew increasingly serious—especially when she saw him roll sixes every single time.

Her composure began to waver.

After about twenty rounds, Kaoru finally stopped, and the girl before him stared at him with disbelief.

"Senpai suspects I'm cheating, don't you?"

"I've never seen someone roll sixes continuously like this."

"It's destiny. Fate decreed that today, here, at this exact moment, I would roll sixes while competing with you in dice."

Asahina Nazuna instinctively disbelieved his explanation, but seeing was believing.

As someone who had always held faith in the mystical, she couldn't help but waver.

Yet, she didn't know this world had effects akin to cheating.

"Lying to your senior comes with consequences, you know?"

"In your eyes, your meeting with Nagumo-senpai must have been the same, right?" Kaoru smiled.

"Since elementary school, your numbers always matched. That's why you became classmates, friends, attended the same middle school, came to ANHS together, and just happened to end up in the same class."

"Because our grades were similar, and our deviation scores fit ANHS requirements." Asahina Nazuna touched her omamori.

Kaoru's gaze darkened.

Had he not overheard some crucial information today, he might have actually believed that.

No—even without knowing the secret behind their enrollment, it was obvious ANHS didn't admit students based on academic performance alone.

"I see. The version I heard was that Nagumo-senpai was the most popular guy in elementary and middle school. Life got too boring for him, so he applied to ANHS. And you, Senpai, were afraid of losing him, so you chased after him all the way here."

Here, Kaoru showed a reflective expression.

"Seems I trusted the wrong rumors. My apologies."

Though he apologized promptly, Asahina Nazuna's expression turned uneasy, as if he had touched a sensitive nerve.

"You didn't mishear. From the first time I met Nagumo, he was always the center of attention—whether at school or anywhere else, he was the most popular boy." Asahina Nazuna unconsciously tightened her grip on the omamori.

"Even now, I still think Nagumo is a wonderful guy."

"Sorry, I—"

"Therefore, I want to add that the reason I've never worried about him is precisely because Nagumo is such an incredible guy." Asahina Nazuna took a deep breath.

"The reason I came to ANHS is because I was intensely curious about this place. I wanted to go somewhere completely unfamiliar."

"Was it senpai's decision alone?" Kaoru observed her reaction closely.

"I talked to my parents about it. At first, they didn't really understand, but they eventually agreed since Kouyou guarantees 100% employment and university admission." Asahina Nazuna cracked a small joke to avoid appearing too awkward in front of her junior.

"But then, Nagumo-senpai also ended up at ANHS. It almost feels like fate."

At Kaoru's remark, Asahina fell silent for a moment.

"Miyabi motivations are different from mine... He just wants someone who can defeat him..."

Kaoru's expression turned odd.

So the guy was a masochist—no wonder he kept pestering Horikita Manabu.

"Senpai, want to try again?"

Asahina gave him a puzzled look.

Were they going to play dice again?

"This time, you'll roll the dice, and I'll guess the number. Let's see if I can get it right." Kaoru handed her the dice with a faint smile.

"Aren't you curious how I did it earlier?"

Now that he mentioned it, Asahina was genuinely intrigued.

"What if you guess wrong?"

"Then I'll just have bad luck."

"That's too sneaky."

"Because you don't believe I can guess correctly."

"..."

Asahina felt a bit indignant—after all, the dice were in her hands now.

But then a thought occurred to her, and she eyed the dice suspiciously.

Could there be something controlling it?

Like those remote-controlled dice in movies—seemingly ordinary, but actually manipulated to land on whatever number the user wanted.

"I don't have a controller." Kaoru raised both hands. "See? Nothing here. It's not like I can will it to obey me, right?"

"I wasn't suspecting you!" Asahina's cheeks flushed slightly, embarrassed at having her skepticism exposed.

"Shall we begin?" Kaoru asked.

Convinced there was no trickery, Asahina cupped the dice between her palms and shook them vigorously until even she had no idea what number they'd land on.

"Five."

Asahina gave him a doubtful look before slowly lifting her hand—revealing five dots on the dice.

"That's amazing."

Though impressed, she refused to accept it.

Maybe it was just a fluke.

Soon, the second round.

"Three."

"Your luck is too good, isn't it?"

"One."

"No, no—one more time!"

"Six."

"..."

Before long, Asahina fell completely silent.

In just over a dozen rounds, Kaoru had guessed wrong only twice—hitting the mark every other time.

Had he gotten every single one right, she might've suspected some hidden cheating method.

But the fact that he'd actually missed twice made it all the more convincing.

Now, Asahina was thoroughly bewildered.

She'd never met someone with luck this uncanny.

"Senpai, do you think I'm just really lucky now?"

"No matter how you look at it... this is a bit exaggerated..."

"Perhaps it's because I'm quite good at this sort of thing," Kaoru smiled.

"What we call fate is probably like this—you can't help but think things like 'what a coincidence' or 'how lucky.'"

Asahina Nazuna lowered her voice, "Beyond that, good luck can also help avoid misfortune."

"If there's a puddle ahead, would you step in it or go around it?" Kaoru asked.

"I'd go around it?" Asahina tilted her head, not quite understanding his point.

"But what if after going around, a car appears? Trying to avoid it, you accidentally step back and end up stepping into the puddle anyway." Kaoru paused.

"What would you think then?"

"That sounds terribly unlucky," Asahina murmured.

"Indeed it is. Now let's rewind—suppose the puddle is so big you have no way around it. Would you just step right in?" Kaoru pressed further.

"Maybe I'd turn back?" Asahina said cautiously.

"Sure, but then someone bumps into you, and you still end up in the puddle. What would you think then?"

Hearing this, Asahina began to grasp his meaning.

"Is this puddle my inevitable fate?"

"Exactly. This is your destiny."

"In that case, I'd be incredibly unlucky."

"Beyond just bad luck, though," Kaoru smiled faintly, "wouldn't you also think—'Great, now I can finally leave this destined puddle behind, because ahead lies a smooth, open road'?"

Asahina froze.

She had never considered that perspective.

If stepping into it was inevitable, why not just do it and keep moving forward?

"Fate, luck, coincidence, destiny, karma... the world is full of inexplicable phenomena. But what truly matters is how we choose to respond."

A quiet realization stirred in Asahina Nazuma heart.

She sensed Kaoru was hinting at her connection with Nagumo Miyabi.

Her lips pressed together tightly—childhood friends like them were seen as the perfect couple in others' eyes.

Whether classmates or even her own parents, everyone thought the same.

Yet she herself felt lost.

Her feelings for Miyabi were only what any childhood friend would have—to call it romance seemed unrealistic.

But no one else shared this view.

And no one knew the real reason Asahina Nazuna had come to ANHS.

"Senpai, I've studied palmistry. Would you like me to read your fate?" Kaoru's lips held a faint, translucent smile.

Asahina Nazuna snapped back to reality.

Perhaps the earlier miracle had left a deep impression on her.

After only a brief hesitation, she extended her hand to Kaoru.

Kaoru didn't hold back, gently grasping the small hand—warm, delicate, smooth, and soft, as if boneless.

It was tiny and pliant, a sensation that could be described with countless adjectives, making it impossible not to linger.

And so, Kaoru kept holding on without letting it go.

"W-Wait... Didn't you say you were going to read my palm?" Asahina Nazuna blushed, belatedly pulling her hand back.

In response, Kaoru flashed a thoroughly mischievous grin.

"Actually, I don't know how to read palms at all. After all this, senpai should already understand what I'm thinking." He deliberately paused for a moment.

"If senpai stays as defenseless as before, I definitely won't let the chance slip by. Without meeting the right person, fate is completely meaningless."

Asahina Nazuna stared at him blankly before her heart began pounding uncontrollably.

Her mind finally cleared—this guy had been targeting her all along.