

Cote 341

Chapter 341: Girls with Overlapping Traits

Forty exam questions couldn't be finished in a single day.

In the afternoon, Kaoru spent some time playing with Karuizawa Kei, listening to her share various teenage girl troubles.

By evening, he escorted her back, though he didn't go all the way up to the girls' floor—a man lingering there would be far too conspicuous.

While taking leave wasn't particularly serious, in the eyes of many students, it was shocking enough.

Kaoru received a steady stream of concerned messages.

If even he was getting this much attention, Kei must have been bombarded even more.

Still, no one had likely connected the two of them yet—no matter how you looked at it, the idea was just too outrageous.

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The next morning, Kaoru appeared in Class A's classroom.

Naturally, Kamuro Masumi who's sitting beside him, asked.

"Were you in the dorm yesterday?"

Instead of asking if he was feeling unwell, she asked if he had been in the dorm—such a typical question for her.

"Had a bit of a headache, spent half the day lying down in my room." Kaoru glanced at her desk.

"Do you have yesterday's notes?"

Classes weren't completely over yet—the teachers couldn't just rush through the semester's material and then leave the students to self-study for a whole month.

"How rare. So the day has finally come when you ask me for notes." Kamuro Masumi snorted twice before handing over the notes she had already prepared.

"Yamamura wants to meet you in the library this afternoon."

"Why are you the one delivering the message?" Kaoru was puzzled.

"Is that a problem?" Kamuro didn't feel the need to explain further.

"You'd better not stand her up. If you do, I'll never forgive you."

Kaoru glanced at Yamamura not too far away.

The girl sat upright, not showing the slightest hint of anything unusual.

Soon, the first class of the day—Mashima's English class—began.

He gave Kaoru a brief glance but made no further comment.

As time passed, the day's classes concluded without incident.

Kaoru picked up his bag and, right in front of Kamuro, decisively left the classroom.

Kamuro frowned.

...

Perhaps because it was the month before exams, the library was packed with students.

The upperclassmen had taken the best spots, leaving first-years to squeeze into places like the aisles.

"T-there are so many people...?" Miki Yamamura seemed a little startled.

"Is this your first time in the library?" Kaoru wasn't surprised.

During exam periods, the library was always the most crowded place.

"Ah, yes, it's my first time today." Miki Yamamura lowered her voice.

"Normally, I just study alone in my dorm..."

"It's not too late to take a break now." Kaoru led her to find a seat. "Studying alone makes it hard to relax, but when you come to the library and see so many others just as anxious as you, it eases your mind right away."

Miki Yamamura kept a straight face.

Was that supposed to be a joke?

It sounded more like the self-comfort of a slacker.

Before long, Kaoru found a relatively empty spot and gestured for her to sit.

"So... what should I do next?" Yamamura pulled out her textbooks and notes.

To carry out Sakayanagi Arisu's plan, she intended to play the part of someone a little slow.

"Hold on, we're waiting for one more person." Kaoru checked his phone, then glanced around.

Groups from Classes D, C, and B were already deep into their study sessions.

Miki Yamamura tensed slightly, unsure who he meant.

A short while later, a girl with braided hair and black-framed glasses came jogging over, slightly out of breath from the exertion, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

"U-um, s-sorry I'm late..." Airi Sakura's face flushed as she immediately apologized to Kaoru.

"Don't worry about it. I only got here a few minutes before you." Kaoru found it a little odd.

Miki Yamamura studied Airi Sakura with curiosity.

Though she herself had low presence and spoke little, she wasn't as severely socially anxious as Airi—at least she could muster the courage to observe others.

Under her gaze, Airi grew even more nervous, fidgeting awkwardly.

"This is Yamamura from my class, my exam partner—she's here for tutoring, just like you." Kaoru motioned for Airi to sit beside him.

"Yamamura, this is Sakura from Class D, a good friend of mine."

The two girls' eyes met briefly before Airi quickly looked away, while Miki Yamamura hesitated on how to respond.

Pairing two similarly introverted girls together clearly wasn't working well.

"Relax, we're just here to review for the exams." Kaoru kept his voice gentle. "I'm the one tutoring, but Yamamura, I'm sorry I didn't mention this earlier. The penalty for failing this special exam is expulsion, and I couldn't just stand by and let Sakura get kicked out."

Miki Yamamura nodded.

She didn't have any objections to begin with.

"I-I'm sorry for troubling you again." Airi Sakura bowed her head, acutely aware of her poor social standing and introverted nature.

Whether it was Hirata Yosuke's study group or Horikita Suzune's study sessions, she never dared to participate.

"I already told you it's fine. I'm the one who asked you to come," Kaoru said.

"Besides, this might change things a little."

Was he talking about making friends?

Airi stole a glance at Miki Yamamura, sensing something familiar in the other girl's demeanor.

"Speaking of which, I don't know your exact academic situations yet. Mind if I check?" Kaoru asked.

Initially assuming Airi's grades were subpar, Kaoru was surprised when she hesitantly handed over her meticulously organized notes and textbooks.

Her handwriting was far neater than Karuizawa.

After asking a few more questions about her grades, he discovered Airi's performance had already surpassed Kei's and was approaching Kamuro Masumi's level from the start of the term.

No wonder someone with her personality hadn't dropped out after all these months.

When Kaoru examined Miki's notes, he found them oddly impressive.

While academic performance couldn't be judged solely by note-taking, hers clearly indicated above-average ability.

The way she highlighted key points and added supplementary material showed a level of sophistication beyond ordinary students.

Just as Kaoru was pondering his next move, someone called out to him excitedly.

"Hey, Kaoru-chan! You're studying in the library too?"

Turning around, Kaoru saw Hasebe Haruka flashing him an unexpectedly delighted smile—clearly a chance encounter.

Chapter 342: Growing Increasingly Familiar

Kaoru-chan.

The nickname almost made Kaoru think he'd run into some onee-san.

Yet as he looked at Haruka before him, she did possess that mature physique—her huge chest far exceeding her peers', slender waist giving way to plump, fair thighs.

Her delicate face were gradually blossoming too, offering glimpses of the captivating woman she'd become.

"Good afternoon, Hasebe-san." Kaoru found it a bit odd but didn't dwell on it.

Judging from the direction Haruka Hasebe had come from, she must have just visited the restroom and happened to see him here.

"While it's a bit unexpected to see Kaoru studying in the library, that's not too hard to understand. But why is Sakura-san here?" Haruka seemed to have noticed Airi Sakura immediately, her eyes sparkling with some inexplicable light.

"I-I was... a-asking Mitoma-kun to help me with..." Airi Sakura's face turned bright red as she stammered incoherently.

Being discovered alone with a boy by a classmate was undoubtedly a shockwave to her brain—it was impressive she hadn't completely shut down on the spot.

"Hmm~" Haruka looked blatantly between Kaoru and Sakura, saying nothing, but her suggestive gaze was impossible to ignore.

"I saw Sakura-san studying alone and asked if she wanted to study together." Kaoru didn't let the conversation linger on himself.

"Are you here for Class D's study group, Hasebe-san?"

Of course, one could study alone in the library, but given Haruka Hasebe's direction toward Class D's study session, it wasn't hard to guess why she was here today.

"Horikita-san and the others are taking the final exams very seriously. They're making all the lower-scoring students attend study sessions, and I got dragged into it too." Haruka twirled a strand of her hair around her finger, looking somewhat disinterested.

"But honestly, given my grades, I might actually get expelled."

The expulsion rule stated that if either a student or their exam partner scored below 60 in any subject, both would be expelled.

Unfortunately, neither she nor her partner could guarantee passing every subject above that threshold.

After a moment of thought, Kaoru suddenly said, "Would you like to study with us instead?"

Haruka Hasebe froze for a second, giving him a strange look before glancing at the two girls beside him.

"Well... I don't doubt your academic abilities, Kaoru-chan. You're from Class A after all and even have time to tutor others. But I'm from Class D—would that really be okay?"

"If it were a problem, I wouldn't have invited Sakura-san, who's also from Class D."

"Fair point. But Kaoru-chan, you're not imagining yourself as some light novel protagonist, are you?"

"?"

"Look at you—one girl on your right, one on your left, and if I sit across from you, doesn't that seem a bit odd?"

"I see your point, but I can't exactly have you sit on my lap. That'd be even weirder."

"?"

Haruka Hasebe fixed him with a deadpan stare and he quickly surrendered.

"Alright, I thought you'd appreciate me playing along with your joke."

"That wasn't a joke—it was borderline harassment." Haruka Hasebe crossed her arms and tilted her chin up slightly, as if looking down on him with disdain.

Just as Kaoru thought the offer was off the table, she suddenly asked, "Are you sure teaching me too... won't be a burden?"

"Do I strike you as the type to give empty pleasantries?" Kaoru replied smoothly.

Haruka flashed him a smile.

"Kaoru is being so assertive. I really can't help it, so I'll reluctantly agree for now."

Despite her words, she obediently walked back to Class D's study group, clearly intending to retrieve her bag and return.

At that moment, Airi Sakura quietly tugged at Kaoru sleeve.

"Sorry, did I upset you?" Kaoru assumed her social anxiety was acting up again.

"N-no, that's not it..." Airi shook her head hurriedly, her gaze conflicted as she stared at Kaoru's face.

"Why... why does Hasebe-san call you by your first name? And so... so intimately too, calling you Kao... K-K-Ka..."

By the end, her face was beet red, completely unlike Hasebe Haruka who could casually say Kaoru's name without hesitation.

"Maybe that's just how she refers to friends. This is actually the first time I've heard her call me that," Kaoru replied, feeling a bit odd himself as he fell into thought.

"But if Hasebe calls me by name, should I do the same for her?"

Airi's breath hitched.

After a while, Hasebe Haruka finally returned, her expression noticeably more relaxed—likely from being extremely uncomfortable at the study group earlier.

"I thought Horikita-san would get angry, but she just froze when I mentioned your name." Haruka remarked as she sat across from Kaoru, though the distance made her frown slightly.

"This spacing isn't ideal. Maybe we should try a café next time?"

Cafés had round tables that allowed closer seating, unlike the library's long tables which felt awkward to her.

Kaoru glanced toward Class D's area where one figure stood out—Horikita Suzune expressionlessly tutoring her classmates, her face was unreadable.

"Is this classmate of yours from your class?" Haruka studied Miki Yamamura before introducing herself.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Hasebe from Class D, Kaoru's friend."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Yamamura," Miki replied with a slight nod, though her eyes darted away nervously.

"Yamamura-san?" Haruka smiled. "You're really cute. Are you Kaoru's exam partner?"

Miki realized she was dealing with the exact type of person she struggled with most, her expression turning awkward.

"She is my partner," Kaoru confirmed. "Mind if I ask about your situation, Hasebe-san?"

"Oh, I'm good at sciences but terrible at humanities—subjects like classical literature and world history," Haruka quickly pulled out her textbooks and notes.

"It's annoying that the school won't return our test papers. We can only check answers."

"No problem, I'll verify them with you later," Kaoru said, noting how neat her handwriting was—typical of a girl's notes.

Haruka blinked, slightly puzzled, but she would soon experience the joys of a certain nation's study methods.

When in doubt, do a practice test first.

No review method compares to the sea of questions strategy.

Chapter 343: Stalking

By the time the tutoring session ended, both Hasebe Haruka and Airi Sakura looked dazed, their eyes glazed over.

Facing the relentless sea of practice questions, even Miki Yamamura found it unbearable.

"Kaoru, are you sure this will work?" Haruka voice trembled slightly.

She didn't want to go through this a second time—her mind was already flooded with endless problems.

"I'm not sure about your situation, so I can only check everything thoroughly. It shouldn't be like this next time." Kaoru understood Japan's education system well.

If it weren't for college entrance exams, high school students here would mostly be enjoying a stress-free education—there was no way they'd normally face such an overwhelming barrage of exercises.

"That's a relief." Both Haruka Hasebe and Airi Sakura let out a sigh.

"Let's call it a day for now. If there's anything you don't understand later, feel free to message me."

"Got it! See you tomorrow!"

"See... see you tomorrow."

After parting ways at the library, Kaoru headed in a different direction.

Before long, Miki Yamamura, who should have been on her way back to the dorm, quietly turned around and began following him.

But after trailing him for a while, she sensed something was off—especially when Kaoru suddenly disappeared from sight.

Just as she was about to turn back, a large hand suddenly clamped down on her shoulder.

She nearly screamed, but then Kaoru's voice rang out.

"Yamamura-san, this isn't the best route back to the dorms, is it?"

Even without turning around, she could feel his presence right behind her.

The weight of his hand on her shoulder made the situation a hundred times scarier than any horror story.

Miki swallowed hard, trying to play it off.

"I... I think I dropped something on the way. I was just looking for it."

"Is that so? I thought you were following me. Need help finding it?" Kaoru released her

Truthfully, he hadn't actually noticed her tailing him—he'd just acted on instinct and set up an ambush here.

And sure enough, Miki had taken the bait.

Hearing his response, Miki felt incredibly awkward.

But then she remembered—she'd already been caught following him once before on the cruise ship.

At this point, she saw no reason to resist.

"Sakayanagi-san told me to keep an eye on you."

Kaoru sighed.

He wasn't surprised—he'd already suspected Sakayanagi Arisu might be up to something, which was why he'd paid attention to Miki in the first place.

"Why follow me?"

"I don't know. She just told me to report everything about you to her."

"And what if I found out?"

"..."

Miki slumped slightly, feeling useless for failing Sakayanagi's task.

"Can I ask why you're following Sakayanagi's orders?" Kaoru was puzzled.

Miki didn't seem like the type to actively involve herself in class affairs.

If Kamuro Masumi hadn't been blackmailed by Sakayanagi, she probably wouldn't have gotten involved either.

Of course, to Sakayanagi, whether it was Kamuro Masumi or Miki Yamamura, they were just particularly useful pawns—tools to compensate for her own shortcomings.

"Do I... have to say it?" Miki's voice grew very small, as if she was uneasy.

"No, it's fine if you don't want to." Kaoru wasn't desperate for an answer.

Still, from her reaction, he could guess a little.

"I-I'm sorry, even though Mitoma-kun is a good person," Miki Yamamura said softly.

"Actually, I've always hoped you could get along better with Sakayanagi-san and Katsuragi-san."

"Is the internal conflict in our class making you uneasy?"

"It just feels like if this continues, the class atmosphere will become even stranger, and things no one wants to see might happen."

"Yamamura-san really cares about the class, doesn't she?"

"P-please don't tease me."

Kaoru smiled.

It seemed the class atmosphere had given Miki Yamamura a strong sense of crisis.

After all, being close to Sakayanagi Arisu, her perception was sharper than other students'.

Not only that, but the reason she likely followed Sakayanagi Arisu was because Sakayanagi had displayed certain abilities that made her feel secure.

"Don't worry, it'll all be over next semester," Kaoru paused.

"When the time comes, I might ask you for a small favor. I hope you won't mind."

Miki Yamamura froze.

Could he be asking her to betray Sakayanagi Arisu?

Chapter 344: Just a side gig

Meanwhile, at the school café.

Mizowaki frowned slightly as he looked at Katsuragi sitting across from him.

Although he knew the other was loosely affiliated with their side, he was still an outsider with a suspicious background.

Due to Nagumo Miyabi's influence, he and Tonokawa had always been wary of Katsuragi and Kaoru.

After months of interaction, he believed he hadn't shown any cracks in his facade.

Had Katsuragi finally reached his limit today?

"Mizowaki-senpai, the reason I asked to meet today is that our first-year class has a special exam coming up," Katsuragi said hesitantly.

"I was wondering if you could help us?"

"A special exam? Sorry, but we second-years are preparing for our own exams right now. It'd be hard to find time," Mizowaki took a sip of his overly sweet coffee (he'd added plenty of sugar).

"Besides, shouldn't you be asking Nagumo-kun about this?"

He didn't outright refuse immediately, but his meaning was clear enough.

"Senpai, do you remember the first-year special exam?"

"I think it was... Paper Shuffle?"

"Yes. Our homeroom teacher said this special exam allows us to ask upperclassmen for help. Creating test questions just among us students is too complicated, so I thought of asking you."

Mizowaki found this somewhat amusing.

Weren't they supposed to be Class A? And yet they needed his help?

"Even if I agreed, my individual strength probably wouldn't be much help to you."

Hearing this, Katsuragi quickly added, "That's fine! I'm not asking you to help with all the questions—just a portion of them."

"A portion?" Mizowaki feigned just the right amount of confusion, already planning to report this to Nagumo later.

Katsuragi seemed troubled, hesitating before speaking.

"Our class situation is... complicated. You probably don't know this senpai, but most of our academically strong students are Sakayanagi's people. I'm barely holding on alone."

Mizowaki recalled the rivalry between Katsuragi and Sakayanagi.

Though separated by a year, he didn't know the specifics of Class 1-A's situation, but he'd occasionally heard rumors.

Moreover, Nagumo Miyabi's apparent favoritism toward Sakayanagi Arisu had always bothered him somewhat.

"You want to produce the exam papers faster than them?" Mizowaki quickly grasped the implication, inwardly surprised.

Had the infighting within Class 1-A already escalated to this point?

"Yes. This way, I can demonstrate greater capability than Sakayanagi-san within our class," Katsuragi said.

"Moreover, I can intentionally leak Sakayanagi's exam papers to make students from other classes believe they're ours."

Mizowaki narrowed his eyes.

Regardless of the first part, deliberately misleading opponents would indeed deal them a blow.

"I see. However, I'll need to consult Nagumo-kun's opinion first."

Katsuragi fell silent.

Just as Kaoru had said, this guy was difficult to handle.

Even after laying out so many openings, Mizowaki still refused to take the bait easily.

In that case, he had no choice but to play his final card.

"Mizowaki-senpai, I heard you're dating a third-year senpai."

In an instant, Mizowaki expression stiffened.

He fixed Katsuragi with a cold stare.

"What are you implying?"

"Even as a Class A student, dating a senpai requires funds, doesn't it?" Katsuragi met his gaze.

"Especially since she's about to graduate. With your own promotion to Class A still uncertain, the only support you can offer is material, right?"

Mizowaki replied flatly, "I appreciate your concern, but I can take care of my girlfriend just fine."

"I've heard the school converts students' remaining Personal Points into cash upon graduation."
Katsuragi paused.

"Haven't you considered helping your girlfriend with that?"

Now it was Mizowaki turn to fall silent.

He hadn't known about this before, but after Nagumo's incident, he realized he needed to save up some Personal Points.

Otherwise, his girlfriend might not even have enough money to rent an apartment in Tokyo.

Having stayed close to Nagumo Miyabi, Mizowaki understood better than most students the consequences of failure at this school.

Why did ANHS boast a 100% advancement and employment rate to the public?

Because those who failed weren't counted.

Moreover, due to the school's official stance, graduates from non-Class A would have "failed to meet standards" marked on their academic records.

This meant that most major corporations or higher education institutions would not prioritize them.

Mizowaki's girlfriend was a student in Class 3-B, and unless a miracle happened, it would be nearly impossible for her class to surpass Horikita Manabu's Class 3-A.

Under these circumstances, Mizowaki had been constantly worried about his girlfriend's future.

He had even hesitated between seeking employment or further education, considering whether to start earning money early to support her.

"Mizowaki-senpai, our offer here is 500,000 Personal Points." Katsuragi held up five fingers.

"On the condition that you don't tell anyone—including Nagumo-senpai."

Mizowaki took a deep breath and asked, "Why?"

"Because absolute secrecy is required. I don't want a third person knowing about this exam paper." Katsuragi's reasoning was sound, leaving Mizowaki with no room to argue.

"Also, senpai, you're worried about Nagumo-senpai, aren't you?" Katsuragi added.

"I'm also concerned about whether he might misunderstand something, which is why I specifically chose to meet at a café. If it were just the two of us meeting privately, even if there were no misunderstandings, rumors could still spread."

Katsuragi was well aware that Mizowaki and his group had never trusted him, so he decided to lay his cards on the table.

After hesitating for a moment, Mizowaki replied somewhat awkwardly, "500,000 is too low."

"For senpai's sake, how about 650,000?" Katsuragi countered.

"That's already a high price. All I need from you is help preparing 80 questions."

"If it's just helping to draft the exam, then I can agree." Mizowaki was tempted, but he also kept his guard up.

Even if he didn't leak the questions, he was still the one creating them!

That alone gave him an advantage—perhaps even enough to help Class 1-C against Class 1-A.

If Nagumo Miyabi ever found out, Mizowaki already had an excuse ready.

So he agreed without hesitation.

And if Nagumo never noticed? Then he'd just treat it as a side job.

Chapter 345: The Cunning First-Years

Kaoru sent Miki Yamamura away before heading to his real destination.

"Did he agree?"

Under a tree by the artificial lake, Katsuragi turned around upon sensing Kaoru's presence behind him, his expression complicated.

"Just as you predicted. But how did you know he'd agree to our side job for his girlfriend's sake?"

"Because he hasn't broken up with her, and they've been going out a lot lately." Kaoru walked up beside him.

"We owe that intel to Kiriama-senpai and Iijima-senpai. Speaking of which—Iijima-senpai, you can come out now."

From a nearby corner, a boy emerged cautiously, glancing around to confirm no one else was present before slowly approaching.

Katsuragi was surprised.

The boy looked familiar, but he couldn't immediately place him.

"Just to be safe—do you really trust this guy?"

The newcomer eyed Katsuragi skeptically.

"I've heard he's often with Nagumo. Aren't you afraid he's secretly sided with him already?"

Before Katsuragi could defend himself, Kaoru chuckled and said, "This is our class leader. I trust he wouldn't do that. Besides, he'll help you take down Nagumo."

"Alright, I hope you can understand how I feel. Nagumo is in a terrible mood right now, and I suspect someone might drop out during this special exam."

"Using expulsions and class transfers as leverage for coercion—it's not the most sophisticated tactic, but not entirely terrible either. So, are you thinking of teaching Nagumo a lesson or making him disappear from Class 2-A?"

"... Making him disappear is impossible. Besides, without him, our class's standing would be precarious."

"I see."

Katsuragi hesitated, but Kaoru had already stepped forward and asked.

"Who else knows about this?"

"I took photos before leaving and already sent them to Nagumo."

"Can I see your phone?"

"..."

"Sorry, it's not that I don't trust you, Ijima-senpai. There are just a lot of things I'll need your help with later."

Under Kaoru's gaze, Ijima reluctantly handed over his phone.

The chat logs with Nagumo indeed showed their conversation from today.

"Alright, thank you for your help today, Ijima-senpai. Please keep a closer eye on the class situation moving forward."

Kaoru returned the phone, and Ijima's figure gradually retreated into the shadows.

"Have you already teamed up with upperclassmen?" Katsuragi couldn't help but ask.

Ah, right—he hadn't explained this to Katsuragi.

No wonder he found Ijima's sudden appearance strange.

"Sorry for suddenly asking you to meet Mizowaki-senpai at the café today. The real goal was just to make sure others saw you two meeting privately." Kaoru revealed his true intentions.

"Ijima-senpai saw your meeting and naturally reported it to Nagumo."

Katsuragi froze for a moment.

He had genuinely thought Kaoru wanted him to seek Mizowaki's help.

Puzzled, he asked, "Isn't it bad if Nagumo-senpai finds out...?"

"It is bad, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. You've been by his side all this time without showing any real loyalty. He's well aware of our little schemes."

"But... what does this have to do with Mizowaki-senpai?"

"Simple—to make Nagumo feel like he has no one left to trust."

...

The next day, Class 2-A.

Mizuto Mizowaki arrived at the classroom as usual but immediately sensed something off—especially with the strange looks from those around him.

Tonokawa Sosuke stared at him, hesitating to speak.

"Mizowaki, where were you yesterday afternoon?" Nagumo Miyabi sat at his desk, not even looking up, his tone indifferent.

'Damn, Nagumo's informants had caught wind of it.'

Mizowaki heart sank, though he didn't overthink it—after all, they'd met at a café.

There was no reason to feel guilty.

"Katsuragi-kun asked to meet me at a café. Said he needed my help with something."

"Oh? And what was it?"

As Nagumo lifted his head with disinterest, the air in the room seemed to freeze.

Many students silently filed out of the classroom, voices hushed.

Asahina Nazuna watched the scene with concern.

Mizowaki instinctively grew nervous.

The atmosphere now was eerily similar to when Nagumo had decided to expel someone from the class before.

"Ijima said you two were discussing the first-years' special exam. Is that true?" Mizowaki was taken aback for a moment.

Seeing the boy not far away give him a faint smile, he couldn't help but sigh in relief.

He had thought it was something serious, but it turned out there was a witness to back up his statement.

"That's right. He wanted me to help with setting the exam questions, and in return, he would give me Personal Points as compensation," Mizowaki explained.

"I figured if we controlled part of their class's exam questions, it would make it easier for Ryuen and the others to deal with Class 1-A."

Nagumo Miyabi stared at him coldly, curling his lips into a disdainful smile.

"Acting on your own, did you really think he and Mitoma wouldn't anticipate us helping Ryuen?"

Mizowaki froze for a moment.

"I never told you to agree to his request. No matter how you look at it, this is Mitoma's scheme—though I have no idea what he's thinking," Nagumo sneered.

"If it were me, I'd have you take charge of the entire exam paper and then switch it out the day before the test. How do you think Ryuen and the others would react?"

Mizowaki's expression shifted.

He hadn't considered that at all.

These first-years were truly cunning.

"My apologies. That was indeed an oversight on my part."

Nagumo waved off his apology indifferently.

"Since you've already agreed, do your best for them. I want to see what Mitoma is up to."

"Understood." Mizowaki lowered his head slightly, thinking the matter was settled.

However, Nagumo's voice immediately dragged his thoughts back to a chilling reality.

"But, Mizowaki, there's one thing I'm curious about." Nagumo smiled, though there was no warmth in it.

"You're in the student council with me, and you've been by my side all this time. You should know exactly how I feel about Mitoma, shouldn't you?"

Mizowaki's pupils trembled.

He had made a mistake—one that Nagumo despised the most.

"I waited all night, yet you never reported this to me." Nagumo chuckled.

"Mizowaki, why did you agree to Katsuragi's request?"

In an instant, Mizowaki broke out in a cold sweat.

"Iijima says you accepted 700,000 Personal Points. Were you really willing to help Katsuragi just for that? How strange. I recall the school issued you a considerable amount this month, and I've never treated you poorly either."

Mizowaki instinctively glanced at Iijima, who scratched his head awkwardly, his hands clenching and unclenching unconsciously.

Nagumo didn't miss Mizowaki reaction.

His expression darkened, though he wasn't actually suspicious of his subordinate.

Still, the traitor in their class had to be rooted out.

Everyone had to be tested—especially students like Mizowaki.

Chapter 346: She Still Doesn't Believe It

What happened in Class 2-A was later relayed to Kaoru by Iijima.

In the end, Mizowaki revealed his true motive.

He had done it for his girlfriend, wanting to gather Personal Points.

Nagumo Miyabi was sharp enough not to press further.

Instead, in front of the entire class, he immediately transferred a million Personal Points to Mizowaki, promising to take care of his girlfriend from then on.

However, he also sternly declared that this was a reward for honesty.

If any traitor continued to hide, they would face the consequences.

Kaoru had Iijima delete the chat history between them.

Even though they used a secondary account to communicate, it was still necessary to clean up the messages and periodically switch accounts to avoid unexpected phone inspections by Nagumo Miyabi.

Back in his dorm, Karuizawa Kei sneaked over again in the evening, carrying her textbooks with a playful grin as she coaxed Kaoru into tutoring her for a few hours.

According to her, Chiaki Matsushita and the others hadn't questioned her absence, though Kushida Kikyo had skeptically probed a couple of times.

Still, Kei managed to brush it off.

However, Kei had heard about the incident in the library from other students and grew a little jealous, throwing a minor tantrum.

Left with no choice, Kaoru had to let her "drain" him again.

Perhaps because the first time had gone smoothly, her body recovered quickly.

After the session, the girl fled back to her room with a flushed face.

Thanks to this, Kaoru once again accumulated enough for a ten-draw—almost entirely from rewards provided by Kei.

But out of the ten, only one worthwhile reward appeared.

[Congratulations! You have obtained the reward—"Fixed Anchor Point"!]

[Fixed Anchor Point: Allows the user to select one target from randomly changing options, guaranteeing that the chosen target will come to the user's side.]

Judging by the effect, it seemed similar to a guaranteed draw—like pulling the exact card you wanted from a shuffled deck.

However, it could apparently be applied to any luck-based draw system.

Kaoru immediately thought of the Wish Machine, but the system promptly clarified: the so-called "target" required complete knowledge of its name and effect.

If the user didn't know the specifics of what they wanted, the effect wouldn't activate—vague descriptions or indirect references wouldn't pass the judgment.

Feeling slightly frustrated, Kaoru quickly shook it off.

.....

The next day, when he arrived in class, the atmosphere seemed oddly tense.

"I heard Ichinose used to be a criminal—she stole from convenience stores."

"Wait, I heard she robbed a bank?"

"No way! Ichinose is so cute—there's no way a cute girl would do something like that!"

"Maybe she's the one who stole your missing pendant before."

"I know, I know! Rumor has it her old dream was to steal all the gold in Japan."

"..."

Hearing these murmurs, Kaoru instantly understood and turned his gaze toward Sakayanagi Arisu.

The silver-haired girl sat quietly at her desk as usual, her cane resting beside her.

Her eyes, unmoving, locked onto Kaoru's the moment their gazes met.

Sakayanagi smiled faintly, while Kaoru took a deep breath.

He had considered this possibility, but he hadn't expected her to actually go through with it.

"Mitoma." Kamuro Masumi whispered to him from the side.

"About Ichinose... did you know?"

"Just found out now." Kaoru opened his phone—similar discussions were flooding student forums and group chats, the topic trending so heavily that even upperclassmen were chiming in.

No wonder she had told him to keep an eye on Class B earlier.

So this was her plan.

"Even though it's just a rumor, the only option now is to clear up the misunderstanding," Masumi mused.

"But for Ichinose, this must be really troubling."

Even if she hadn't interacted much with Ichinose Honami before, given the other girl's personality, it was truly difficult to believe such rumors.

If Ichinose Honami stepped forward to clarify, the situation would likely die down quickly.

Kaoru carefully read through everyone's comments.

Whenever someone derailed the discussion, someone else would promptly steer the conversation back on track.

However, since the school forum only allowed anonymous posting without alternate accounts, it was obvious that many anonymous users were deliberately fanning the flames.

Anyone with a discerning eye could tell something was off.

Yet, he knew all too well how most people were particularly obsessed with so-called "uncovering the truth."

Someone appearing as a pure, angelic figure on the surface while hiding a completely different face in private—nothing stoked emotions more than that kind of contrast.

In the idol industry, failing to handle such situations with proper PR would inevitably lead to backlash.

Kaoru pondered for a moment.

He admitted his own hypocrisy—when he did something questionable, he trusted himself to control the scale of it, so he acted without hesitation.

But if someone else did the same, he seriously doubted whether they could clean up the mess afterward.

More importantly—what exactly was Sakayanagi Arisu trying to do to Ichinose Honami?

By lunchtime, Kaoru decisively sought out Sakayanagi Arisu.

As she left the classroom and passed through the stairwell, he smoothly intercepted her.

"Just as you thought, it was indeed my doing. As for the reason, I doubt you particularly care," Sakayanagi Arisu spoke first, disrupting Kaoru's rhythm.

"You'd actually obey Nagumo-senpai orders?" Kaoru frowned.

"Fufufu, aren't you misunderstanding something?" Sakayanagi's tone carried a hint of irritation.

"Did you think Nagumo-senpai was holding leverage over her just to do nothing afterward?"

"I know. But she hasn't overcome her psychological trauma yet." Kaoru suppressed his emotions, having considered Ichinose Honami's perspective.

What she feared most wasn't the act of stealing itself, but the judgmental gazes of those around her.

If she had truly resisted theft, she wouldn't have acted so decisively for her sister's sake back then.

What truly left a deep impression on her, even causing profound pain, was when her mother took her to confess the theft to everyone, forcing her to endure their judgment.

The reason this became Ichinose Honami's dark history was because she was terrified of others' judgment, which subconsciously made her resist letting her Class B classmates learn about her past.

For her, confessing again would be equivalent to returning to the past and facing judgment a second time.

Sakayanagi Arisu raised an eyebrow, smirking as she said.

"Mitoma-kun, you seem to be overly gentle with Ichinose. What will she gain in the end if you protect her like this?"

"I want to know how you plan to resolve this," Kaoru ignored her question.

"I don't know. Perhaps Ichinose will collapse, or perhaps she's stronger than you think." Sakayanagi replied indifferently.

"Rather than letting Nagumo-senpai continue to hold this over her, it's better to settle it once and for all."

Kaoru fell silent for a moment.

"Heh, Mitoma-kun, would you like to grab a meal together now?"

"Sakayanagi."

"Is that a yes?"

"Next week, let's play chess in my room."

Sakayanagi froze for a second, a strange sensation flickering across her small feet again.

Her cheeks flushed slightly, but she would never admit to feeling intimidated.

"Heh, why not?"

Though the consequences of losing might be a little more than she imagined.

...

In the afternoon, Kaoru arrived at the café.

"Whoa, it's so crowded here! I thought everyone would be packed in the library."

Hasebe Haruka was stunned by the unusually bustling café.

"I guess everyone had the same idea as us," Miki Yamamura sighed deeply.

She really wasn't fond of crowded places.

Since it was packed, Kaoru simply took the flustered Airi Sakura by the hand, weaving through the line to snag an empty seat first.

Soon after, Hasebe Haruka and Miki Yamamura squeezed their way over as well.

"Kaoru-chan, ditching your friends for a girl? How lame."

Airi's face burned red.

She knew Kaoru was just looking out for her, but Haruka's teasing somehow felt... nice.

"N-no... It's not like that..."

"Actually, now that I look closely, Airi is really cute. If you pushed your bangs back and wore contacts, I think it'd suit you."

"Huh!?"

"Ah, was that too forward?"

Haruka chuckled awkwardly, assuming Airi was surprised by her sudden familiarity.

"Aren't we a fixed team now? So I thought maybe we should call each other by our first names. Otherwise, it'd be weird if I'm the only one calling him 'Kaoru,' right?"

"You're only realizing that now?" Kaoru glanced at his phone—still no reply from Ichinose Honami.

"It's not weird! Because we're friends, right?" Haruka pondered.

"Sakura-san is Airi, Yamamura-san is... Miki? 'Mii-chan' would clash with another classmate, so sorry, Miki."

Miki Yamamura was completely frozen.

She really wasn't good at handling this type of person.

"C-calling each other by first names so suddenly is weird!" Airi stole a glance at Kaoru.

"B-besides... I haven't even..."

"Do you dislike being called by your first name, Airi?" Haruka asked, puzzled.

"Isn't it normal for close friends to call each other by their given names?"

"So you're saying I should call you Haruka now?" Kaoru suddenly interjected.

"Eh?" Hasebe Haruka seemed momentarily stunned, her eyes flickering with emotion before quickly breaking into a smile.

"Getting even closer is fine too. That's what friends do, after all."

It seemed there was no escaping this.

Kaoru turned to Sakura Airi, who immediately averted her gaze.

"Airi."

"Guh..." Sakura Airi covered her flushed cheeks with both hands.

Why did he say it so straightforwardly?

Kaoru then looked at Yamamura Miki, whose body stiffened as if she'd realized what was coming.

"Miki."

"Eek!"

She seemed to have let out an embarrassing sound.

Yamamura Miki hurriedly covered her mouth, her face turning bright red.

Surprisingly effective.

Kaoru found this unexpectedly satisfying.

Since he'd already given them problems yesterday, today's tutoring session was more targeted.

His methods were similar to how he handled Karuizawa Kei—after all, learning required positive reinforcement.

Whenever they memorized a key point or solved a problem correctly, Kaoru would praise them.

For particularly challenging questions, he'd even buy snacks as rewards.

After an hour or two, the one having the most fun turned out to be Hasebe Haruka.

Chapter 347: I'm Counting on You

After finishing today's tutoring session, Kaoru checked his phone again.

The other party had replied, claiming they were completely fine.

Whether that was true or not, Kaoru wasn't planning to take her word for it.

He'd still visit her tonight.

However, it seemed he wasn't the only one with this idea.

No sooner had Kaoru returned to his dorm than he spotted someone crouched at his doorway—knees drawn to her chest, face completely buried, leaving only her high ponytail swaying in the breeze.

"Unless I'm mistaken, the girls' floors start from the 9th floor and above, right?"

At his voice, Amikura Mako looked up, her beautiful eyes refocusing on his face.

She bit her lip slightly. "Honami-chan is in trouble."

"You mean today's rumors?" Kaoru had actually been curious about Class B's reaction too, but no matter how he asked, Ichinose Honami refused to tell him.

"Want to continue this inside?"

Amikura Mako instinctively tried to stand, but her legs had gone numb from crouching for so long.

Dizzy, she nearly lost her balance, saved only by Kaoru's quick support.

"How long have you been crouching here waiting for me?" Kaoru asked somewhat exasperatedly.

Amikura Mako didn't answer, her face slightly red.

She couldn't very well admit she'd been waiting here for half an hour, could she?

"Next time just message me. It's not like I won't reply."

"But your replies are always so weird... Every time it's 'show me your legs' or something..."

"..."

Kaoru fell silent.

Amikura Mako pushed him away while blushing.

Now she finally understood why he always wanted to see legs—he was a genuine foot fetishist pervert.

Opening his dorm door, Kaoru entered first.

Amikura Mako hesitated at the threshold for a long moment before finally following him inside.

"Excuse me." The girl bent down at the entrance, her fingers lightly hooking her shoes as her feet, wrapped in white calf socks, slipped out of the small leather shoes.

Her slightly flushed ankles slowly stepped onto the polished floor, her five toes like a row of tiny pearls yet tinged with an enticing pinkish hue that drew attention.

Amikura Mako placed her shoes neatly to the side, then noticed Kaoru staring at her, causing her cheeks to flush.

Was she walking right into the lion's den?

Still, the only person she could trust right now was Kaoru.

Mako stepped further into the room, unconsciously taking in her surroundings.

This was her first time in a boy's room—it was cleaner and tidier than she had imagined, with no strange objects in sight.

It seemed utterly ordinary.

"The rumors started today, right? What's the situation in your class?"

"Yeah, everyone's really worried about Honami-chan. Kanzaki-kun and the others are even trying to find out who started the rumors."

"So, none of you believe Ichinose would steal anything?"

Mako gave Kaoru a puzzled look

. "Isn't that normal? There's no way Honami-chan would do something like that."

Kaoru thought back to Mako's own situation—of course Class B wouldn't believe such things.

They probably assumed someone was pulling the same old tricks again.

But he didn't pursue the topic. Instead, he turned and asked.

"Make yourself comfortable. Want something to drink?"

"No, thanks." Mako hesitated, glancing around before finally sitting at the table.

"Even though everyone's comforting Honami-chan, I can tell she's really down. On the way back, she was almost completely silent."

Kaoru was quiet for a moment.

"Hypothetically speaking... if Ichinose really did something like that, how would you feel?"

Mako blinked, then seriously considered the question before answering.

"Even if that were true, I wouldn't hate Honami-chan. The Honami-chan I know would never be the kind of disgusting, hateful criminal people are making her out to be."

"Why?" Kaoru asked.

"Because we're friends. Even if she did steal something, I know she'd feel guilty about it. As her friend, what else can I do besides help her correct her mistakes?" Mako said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Kaoru chuckled softly. "You should say that to Ichinose's face. I guarantee she'd feel better immediately."

Mako fell silent for a long time before finally gathering her courage and locking eyes with Kaoru.

"I want to ask you for a favor."

"Me?" Kaoru was puzzled.

"Can you help me find out who started the rumors?" Mako bit her lip.

"And... could you also help Honami-chan a little?"

Was her past experience making her overly protective of Ichinose Honami?

Just as Kaoru was about to respond, she continued, "If possible... I'd like you to break up with Honami-chan."

In an instant, the room fell silent.

Kaoru could hear his own heartbeat—and see the determination in the girl's eyes.

"Why would you say that?"

Considering their recent outing, it wasn't surprising that he and Ichinose Honami had been mistaken for a couple.

Not to mention, Amikura Mako knew he already had a girlfriend.

"Because you cheated on Honami-chan, you can't have a girlfriend and still harass other girls," Amikura Mako said seriously.

"Even if it's just lustful thoughts, you absolutely cannot act on them with other girls."

When she heard that Kaoru and Ichinose Honami had gone out on a date alone, her mind went completely blank for a long moment before she could recover.

The instant she regained her composure, Amikura Mako immediately sent a message to Ichinose Honami, probing for information while also trying to see if Ichinose knew about the bad things Kaoru had done to Kiryūin Fūka.

The result was that Ichinose Honami was extremely vague and showed no reaction to the latter at all.

Clearly, she had been deceived and knew nothing about the other side of Kaoru.

For a moment, Amikura Mako felt disheartened.

She was truly serious now and didn't want Kaoru to keep playing with Ichinose's feelings.

"Are you talking about my relationship with Kiryūin-senpai?" Kaoru wasn't angry; instead, he couldn't help but laugh.

"I don't know why Honami-chan chose to date you, but this kind of thing... this kind of thing is absolutely unacceptable." Amikura Mako was getting angry, not just because of his laughter but also because she regretted her own actions.

Kaoru thought for a moment and then said, "No, Honami is very important to me."

"Why?" Amikura Mako frowned. "Don't tell me you're just obsessed with Honami-chan's body?"

Had his image in her eyes really become this terrible?

But then again, she wasn't entirely wrong.

"That was part of it at first, but things are different now," Kaoru fell into thought.

"Maybe she woke me up, made me realize I can't keep going like this, or I'll just keep falling into one cycle after another."

Amikura Mako didn't understand what he was saying, but she grasped the first part.

She took a deep breath, as if making some kind of resolution.

"I see. Then let me satisfy your lustful thoughts instead."

Chapter 348: Bullying

Amikura Mako's reasoning was simple.

She hadn't just discovered the truth from their recent date but had also calmly reflected on when the two had secretly started dating.

This semester?

Impossible.

The semester had begun with the sports festival, and she had often seen Ichinose Honami leading everyone in practice.

There was no way she'd have had the energy for a relationship.

No matter what, there must have been some initial trigger for their romance, right?

Amikura Mako suspected it was during summer break.

Ichinose Honami had acted strangely then, especially in the way she looked at her—hesitant, as if holding something back.

Looking back now, perhaps they were already dating at that time, and she just didn't know how to bring it up.

But the trigger must have been even earlier, since summer break was too short.

Not only that, Amikura Mako was also pondering another question.

Why hadn't the two publicly announced their relationship?

There must be a reason they couldn't say it out loud.

What kind of normal relationship would be kept a secret?

It was obvious—their relationship was definitely problematic.

Combined with what Amikura Mako had accidentally witnessed and Kaoru's candid admission of his thoughts, she was now certain.

Kaoru had most likely deceived Ichinose Honami's feelings.

Or perhaps Ichinose Honami was just too naive.

Just now, it was merely a test, and Kaoru admitted without hesitation that his girlfriend was Ichinose Honami, showing no particularly strong reaction—as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Mako felt somewhat disillusioned with Kaoru and decided to probe further into his true nature.

"Are you running a fever?" Kaoru asked irritably.

He had initially entertained thoughts about Mako, but just as he was about to let her go, she had approached him on her own—which changed the situation entirely.

"Not at all. I'm serious," Mako said, her brows tightly furrowed.

"You know you have a girlfriend, yet you still go around provoking other girls. Isn't that just being a playboy?"

Her words made sense, leaving Kaoru momentarily speechless.

"Besides, you just admitted that you're only with Honami-chan because of your desires. If that's the case, I can satisfy your needs now. Can't you just break up with Honami-chan afterward?"

"Weren't we just talking about the rumors earlier?"

"It was just a rumor. What's more important now is the issue with Mitoma-kun. I can't let a pervert like you get close to Honami-chan." Mako pressed her lips together.

"If I hadn't seen you with Kiryūin-senpai, would you have planned to hide it from Honami-chan forever?"

"I'm a pervert, and perverts don't break up with their girlfriends," Kaoru admitted bluntly.

"If it were you, would you let go of a sweet, soft girlfriend like that?"

"So... have you done anything bad with Honami-chan?" Mako stared straight at him, her eyes tinged with sorrow.

Kaoru averted his gaze and murmured, "I'll help with the rumors, but right now, Honami needs you guys the most."

"What will it take for you to let Honami-chan go?" A flicker of pain flashed in Mako eyes.

"She's already under attack. If she finds out about your affairs on top of that... it would be too much for her."

It wasn't just concern for Ichinose Honami's feelings—her own emotions were tangled up in this too.

From learning that the two might be dating, to suspecting Kaoru, her mood had been fluctuating wildly.

Even she didn't know what she was thinking anymore.

Instinctively, she resisted the reality that the two were already together, even wanting to deny Kaoru's existence under the pretense of unreliability.

"Amikura-san," Kaoru suddenly closed the distance between them, sitting right beside her.

"You want me to break up with Honami for her sake, right?"

Mako Amikura nodded instinctively, then froze as Kaoru's hand landed on her thigh, gently stroking it.

"You think I'm a playboy and a pervert, toying with Honami's feelings. I'll reserve my opinion on that," Kaoru said, his fingers tracing over her thigh.

The white thigh-high stockings only reached just above her knees, leaving the soft, smooth skin of her thighs exposed, glowing faintly under the light—the texture was exquisite.

"What I'm more curious about is why you'd make such an offer—sacrificing yourself to get me to break up with Honami. Forget whether I'd even agree. What were you thinking when you proposed this?"

Mako's expression stiffened.

His touch felt like it carried an inexplicable magic, sending tingling currents through every place his fingers brushed, making her entire body tremble uncontrollably.

"I... I am... You just want to do weird things to girls, don't you?"

Her retort was weak, her eyes flickering with uncertainty.

"Exactly. I want to do weird things to Honami, and I want to do weird things to you too," Kaoru admitted outright.

"You already know I'm a pervert, so why let me take advantage of you?"

Mako snapped back to her senses and quickly slapped his hand away, putting some distance between them.

Yet Kaoru merely smiled, his presence overpowering as he closed the gap inch by inch, leaving her no room to retreat.

"It's too late to realize that now. A man and a woman alone—do you really think I won't do anything? Especially when you were the one who invited me to misbehave earlier."

Mako tried to stand, but he grabbed her arm in an instant, sending her tumbling onto the floor.

Before she could react, his eyes were right in front of hers, their lips barely a dozen centimeters apart.

His breath was so warm she could feel it.

"Just as you see me as a pervert, I can't help but wonder if you're deliberately tempting me," Kaoru murmured, his hand sliding up the girl's thigh.

The soft, smooth flesh felt different from the texture of her stockings, his fingers tracing from her knee toward the hem of her skirt.

The warmth of her inner thigh grew more intense, the slickness of her skin feeding his greed.

"I didn't!" Mako's face burned red, her eyes blazing with fury as she clamped her legs tightly around his wandering hand.

Kaoru studied her expression calmly.

"Open your legs."

The words struck her like a physical blow.

Her lips parted slightly, her gaze locked onto his face in anguish before she looked away, biting her lower lip as if to stifle any sound.

She squeezed her eyes shut, surrendering, though a single tear escaped.

In that instant, Kaoru felt her legs stiffly part, submitting to him in humiliating vulnerability.

Mako kept her eyes closed, waiting... but nothing further happened.

Instead, she heard a soft click.

After a moment of confusion, she snapped her eyes open—only to see Kaoru holding his phone with a faint smirk on his lips.

"Didn't expect your expression to be this cute too."

Mako froze.

He was just... taking a picture?

"Though I did want to do something bad to you, the price isn't one I'm willing to pay," Kaoru said, sitting back beside her as he fiddled with his phone.

"Also, I think you might've misunderstood. Beyond desire, I do have other feelings for Honami."

Mako regained some clarity, her voice icy.

"You expect me to believe a pervert's words?"

"If you don't, I'll have no choice but to assault you right here," Kaoru replied, his tone even colder than hers.

Mako fell silent, frustration gnawing at her. Maybe she'd misjudged him.

"You... don't seem like the Mitoma-kun I knew."

"No. I was planning to make a move on you—until Honami stopped me."

"Make a move on... me?"

"You didn't actually think I was a good person, did you?"

Mako was stunned.

Now that she thought about it, Kaoru had never really hidden the lewdness in his gaze from the start.

Strangely, he rarely approached her after that.

"No, no, no... This is just too weird, isn't it?" Mako found it hard to comprehend.

"Are you saying Honami-chan knows you're a playboy?"

"She even wanted to change me," Kaoru murmured.

Mako believed it.

Such words truly carried the naive optimism characteristic of Ichinose Honami.

But then, had he initially intended to target her from the start?

No wonder he suddenly got close to her and even knew how to subtly comfort her.

For a moment, Amikura Mako's emotions were complicated.

Chapter 349: Narrow Paths Cross

By the time Amikura Mako straightened her clothes, she noticed he was still fiddling with his phone.

Remembering what had just happened, her face grew hot.

"Delete those photos. I never allowed you to take pictures like that."

"No, I'm keeping them as evidence." Kaoru lowered his head.

"Making a move on a friend's boyfriend—your actions are just as despicable as mine."

"I told you it's not like that!" Amikura Mako instinctively denied his words, her breathing growing ragged, ears turning red with embarrassment.

Suddenly, she lunged at him, reaching for his phone.

"Give me that phone, now!"

Kaoru had been prepared.

Given their height difference, he simply raised his arm, causing Amikura Mako to miss and tumble onto his lap, flailing wildly.

"Relax, I won't share them. Only two people know about this, and I won't tell Honami either." Kaoru restrained her flailing wrists as the girl's soft body squirmed against him, her skirt slightly disheveled, revealing the pale flesh of her thighs just below her hips.

After struggling for a while and realizing she couldn't overpower him, Amikura Mako soon gave up, gradually calming down as she lay across his lap, unusually quiet.

"Why is Honami-chan with someone like you?"

"Sorry, but your attitude makes me not want to tell you."

"You're dating in secret, meaning you don't want others to know, right?"

"Are you implying I used underhanded methods?"

"..."

He seemed to know everything.

A faint tremor ran through Amikura Mako's heart as she lowered her gaze and whispered.

"Even now, I still think what I saw back then must have been a misunderstanding. Mitoma-kun shouldn't be that kind of person."

"To me, the Amikura-san I saw today isn't the one I know either. If it were another man, would you have thrown yourself at him like this?" Kaoru glanced down at her, seeing only her flushed ears.

"Of course not! I'm not that kind of woman!" Amikura Mako's face burned with anger as she forcefully broke free from his grip and sat up.

"I was just... testing you..."

"If that's the case, then why did you try to seduce me?" Kaoru seized her arm. "Sometimes, the outcome isn't in your control—it's in the other person's. You can't guarantee I'd follow the script you had in mind."

As Amikura Mako fell silent, Kaoru handed the phone to her.

"Rumors or not, Honami is afraid of you all. She wonders if you'll distance yourselves because of this. If she had stolen something in the past, would she have lost the chance to be friends with you forever?"

Amikura Mako looked at her phone screen in surprise.

Before she could speak, Kaoru continued, "Dealing with this kind of tactic is simple. Public relations isn't particularly difficult, and redirecting everyone's attention is also a good approach."

"You... you mean Honami-chan in the past..." Amikura Mako hesitated, momentarily forgetting the previous matter.

"She really..."

"No one is flawless. Even saints make mistakes. The question is whether you can accept an imperfect Honami."

Though Kaoru hadn't paid much attention to Class B's affairs, their reactions made it clear that their comrades were their driving force.

Amikura Mako gripped her phone and bowed her head deeply, suddenly overwhelmed by the realization of a grave mistake she had made.

...

As time passed, the rumors grew increasingly rampant, with supporters and opponents locked in fierce arguments.

Ding—

Seeing the notification on her phone, Ichinose Honami's lips curled slightly before her eyes lowered again.

She couldn't rely on Kaoru anymore.

Some things had to be faced alone.

No matter what Sakayanagi Arisu had done, or what her classmates and others might think of her, she had to take a brave step forward.

Ichinose Honami was ready.

She intended to put an end to this matter today—it couldn't affect everyone's exams, nor could it weigh on her own emotions.

In the past, she would never have had this courage.

Just the thought of everyone casting strange glances her way would make her heart ache, as if she were trapped in the endless flames of purgatory, forced to endure the scorching weight of her sins.

But now, the girl was fearless.

The past was the past, and the present was the present.

She couldn't remain stuck in what had been

. Ice and snow would melt under the blazing sun—the process was painful, but spring would follow.

Even if the first spring was bare and bleak.

Taking a deep breath, Ichinose Honami typed a reply to Mitoma Kaoru, telling him not to worry about her.

Then, the girl pushed open her room door, took the dormitory elevator down to the first-floor lobby.

At this moment, Shiranami Chihiro, Kobashi Yume, and Amikura Mako were waiting for her in the lobby.

The moment she saw them, Ichinose Honami couldn't help but smile.

However, a few passing students gave her odd looks, causing her smile to stiffen slightly.

"Honami-chan, good morning!"

Faced with Kobashi Yume's cheerful greeting, Ichinose Honami forced a smile and returned the greeting as if nothing was wrong.

Perhaps too preoccupied with her own unease, she failed to notice Amikura Mako's unusual silence and troubled demeanor along the way.

When they reached the entrance of the school building, Ichinose Honami changed into her indoor shoes, catching fragments of hushed whispers around her—comments like "It must be a rumor," "I can't believe it," or "If that's true, aren't we in trouble?"—which only worsened her mood.

"Ichinose, if these rumors aren't stopped soon, the consequences won't just affect you," Kanzaki Ryuji said suddenly, appearing beside her with a grave expression.

"Someone must be trying to sabotage our class again!" Kobashi Yume huffed angrily.

Ichinose Honami looked at them, and Shiranami Chihiro also mustered her courage, saying firmly.

"I believe Honami-chan isn't that kind of person."

"Don't worry, I'll resolve this matter." Ichinose patted Shiranami's head with a gentle smile.

She wasn't the same person she used to be—everything would be fine.

Just then, a voice sounded from nearby.

"Oh? I'd like to hear how you plan to solve this rumor problem."

Sakayanagi Arisu and Kamuro Masumi appeared before them, seemingly having just changed into their indoor shoes.

Kanzaki Ryuji's expression shifted slightly as he muttered, "I traced the rumor's origin. It seems a few Class A students started spreading it initially."

At this, Kobashi Yume and Shiranami Chihiro grew agitated.

"Damn Class A!"

Though touched by their indignation on her behalf, Ichinose knew she had to take the first step herself.

"Sakayanagi-san, I won't run away."

Hearing this, Sakayanagi merely chuckled dismissively.

"Everyone says such brave words. But can you actually do it? The moment you remember, fear will grip your heart and make your body tremble, won't it?"

"You're right. But someone has already given me confidence." Ichinose's gaze grew resolute.

"I told you before—relying on others means you can't accomplish anything." Sakayanagi's smile gradually faded, her expression blank.

"Is it because you have no one to rely on?" Ichinose smiled faintly.

"You don't care about anyone, and no one cares about you. No one understands your feelings. You only see the most superficial aspects of him—you can't feel his kindness. Why should I reject his kindness?"

Sakayanagi stared at her coldly, gripping her cane tightly.

Ichinose felt no fear before her—she was afraid, but not terrified.

She welcomed the sun melting her completely because someone was waiting for her to set things right.

The others looked bewildered by their confrontation.

Only Amikura Mako pressed her lips together tightly.

While others couldn't comprehend their exchange, she understood perfectly.

She didn't get it—not at all.

Why would Ichinose be drawn to him? What kindness? It was all lies.

What kindness could there be from a cheating pervert?

Yet remembering yesterday's events, Amikura could only remain silent.

Chapter 350: Oh No, She's Become a Backdoor Beneficiary

"Oh? So you're saying you've steeled your resolve now?"

Sakayanagi Arisu smiled, though the corners of her lips twitched almost imperceptibly.

What on earth was she talking about?

What did she mean by only seeing the surface of things?

What did she mean by failing to recognize the other's kindness?

What was with this condescending attitude?

Wasn't she the one holding leverage over you?

"Isn't this exactly what you wanted to see?" Ichinose Honami took a deep breath.

"I won't deceive anyone, nor will I wear a hypocritical mask. Even if some people end up disliking me for it, I'll bare my true self openly. The only thing I can do is strive to make up for my past mistakes."

"So, you admit you committed unforgivable sins in the past?" Sakayanagi Arisu felt somewhat flustered.

She had anticipated this moment, but she hadn't expected Ichinose Honami's resolve to be so unshakable.

Even if Kaoru Mitoma had used hypnosis on her, the effect was far too strong.

The so-called leverage depended entirely on the target's capabilities.

If the target had already surpassed the power of that leverage, all she could do now was watch helplessly.

Ichinose Honami was the core of Class B. If she were to falter, the atmosphere of Class B would shift dramatically.

None of the others had the ability to take up the mantle of leading the class.

Perhaps Kanzaki Ryuji from previous years might have had the potential, but Sakayanagi Arisu knew this childhood friend of hers well—he wasn't suited for the task.

Sakayanagi Arisu had no intention of destroying Class B now.

As she had mentioned earlier to Ichinose Honami, she needed forces beyond Class A.

The moment she learned of this leverage from Nagumo Miyabi, she had strongly sensed that Ichinose Honami had to break free from this dark past.

Unlike Kaoru therapeutic conversation, Sakayanagi Arisu's methods were extreme—she simply let the sword of Damocles fall decisively upon Ichinose Honami.

If she could endure it, everything would be negotiable.

If Ichinose Honami couldn't withstand it, it would prove she lacked the will and character to keep up with Sakayanagi Arisu in the coming actions.

That was Sakayanagi Arisu's reasoning.

However, it seemed she had underestimated the influence Kaoru Mitoma had on Ichinose Honami—and had vastly underestimated Ichinose Honami's own resolve.

"Unforgivable sins?" Ichinose Honami chuckled softly, a strange light flickering in her eyes as if recalling something.

"Actually, not long ago, I thought the same way. But someone told me that many things in this world can be seen from a different perspective."

"Honami-chan?" Shiranami Chihiro tugged at Ichinose Honami's sleeve, her face full of worry as she sensed the situation taking a strange turn.

Their conversation had drawn the attention of several students on their way to class.

Recognizing the subject of the rumors, their eyes lit up, and they began whispering among themselves.

"Is it true? She looks so cute, but behind the scenes, she's manipulating everyone? That's just too much."

"Well, she's so adorable—even if it's true, it doesn't really matter. Besides, given her looks, cutting her some slack shouldn't be a problem."

"That's not the point. We worked so hard to get into this school—why should we have to share a space with someone like her?"

"That's right, she's from the upper class. Things like college and employment are probably easily within her reach. It's really unfair."

"..."

Listening to the voices around her, Sakayanagi Arisu's lips curled slightly.

This was the power of public opinion—it could turn white into black.

Besides, Ichinose Honami had her own issues to begin with.

"Everyone, please listen to me."

However, unexpectedly, Ichinose Honami said something she absolutely should not have said in front of everyone.

"I... I'm sorry to everyone in Class B. I've betrayed your trust. And I also want to apologize to all of you."

The sudden action of the girl left everyone stunned—not just her friends like Kobashi Yume, but even Sakayanagi Arisu froze for a moment.

"W-Wait, Honami-chan, what are you saying!?"

"The rumors that have been spreading about me these past two days... I want to say—they're not rumors."

In an instant, silence fell over the crowd.

As Ichinose Honami confessed that she had once stolen a hairpin to celebrate her sister's birthday, everyone exchanged glances, unsure how to react.

When they heard that she had knelt and apologized in front of the store clerk, the atmosphere grew even heavier.

Sakayanagi Arisu gradually lost her smile.

The situation had spiraled completely beyond her control.

Did this girl not understand what she was doing?

At the very least, she should have said this to her own class first, shouldn't she?

And before explaining, shouldn't she have given her closest allies a heads-up?

Just by looking at the expressions of Shiranami Chihiro and the others, it was clear that Ichinose Honami hadn't breathed a word of this to them—not even Kanzaki Ryuji seemed to have any idea.

"At the time, my homeroom teacher recommended this school to me, so I thought... I could start over. Begin again from zero." Ichinose Honami forced a weak smile toward her friends.

"I'm sorry for making you all worry about me. But the truth is... I'm just a worthless, pathetic leader."

"Honami..."

Thud—

The sound of Sakayanagi's cane striking the ground echoed sharply, instantly drawing everyone's attention.

"Do you really think a half-hearted apology will make people forget your past? Who's to say you're not just fishing for sympathy? Or is this some kind of scripted performance by Class B?"

Her words cut in faster than anyone else's reaction, leaving no room for escape.

If it had been someone else in this situation, they might have broken down in tears.

"Sakayanagi-san, I'm not trying to gain sympathy. I know my past mistakes can't be undone, but the person I am today would never do something like that again. I just... want to get along with everyone properly."

Just as Sakayanagi was about to speak again, Kamuro Masumi beside her suddenly tugged at her sleeve, as if she had noticed something but hesitated to say it.

At that moment, Amikura Mako spoke up.

"Um... are you Sakayanagi from Class A?"

"I don't believe I need to introduce myself again, do I?" Sakayanagi frowned slightly, unsure what Masumi was trying to do—until she saw her mouth two words silently.

"Run away!"

Reading those words, Sakayanagi froze.

Run away? From what?

"Oh, I was just wondering if there were any other students in Class A with the surname Sakayanagi. Turns out it's only Sakayanagi-san. No wonder you're in Class A."

Amikura Mako flashed a dazzling smile, her words immediately drawing attention from those around them.

The whispers grew even more intense than before.

"Compared to Ichinose, Sakayanagi is way worse—typical privileged class."

"Ichinose-san just wanted to celebrate her sister's birthday and regretted it afterward. It was a small thing, but Sakayanagi-san is really hard to accept."

"Ugh, capitalism."

"She's probably just here to gild her reputation. After all, this is her family's school."

Sakayanagi Arisu could clearly feel her expression stiffen.

She realized all the discussion was now directed at her.

"Check your phone," Kamuro Masumi whispered to her.

Sakayanagi's face remained cold.

She didn't even need to look to know what had happened.

Without a doubt, only one person could be this adept at using her surname against her.

"She's cute and all, but getting in through connections? Even Class A has fallen."

"I heard Class 1-A has unusually high Class Points. Did she leak exam info?"

"That can't be possible, right?"

Listening to the surrounding voices and facing the strange glances, Sakayanagi suddenly smiled.

Tit for tat—was this meant to teach her a lesson?

"Honestly, Sakayanagi, you really didn't—"

Before Kamuro could finish, Sakayanagi turned and walked toward the Class A classroom.

"There's no point staying here. Even if I wanted to clear up these rumors, my presence alone won't help. Let's go back, Kamuro-san."

Kamuro glanced at Ichinose Honami across the way.

Overcoming her own darkness—how admirable.

She hoped the person they were talking about wasn't Kaoru.

With that thought, Kamuro followed Sakayanagi.

Meanwhile, Ichinose Honami stood frozen.

"Sakayanagi-san is the chairman's daughter?!" Shiranami Chihiro covered her mouth.

"No way!"

"Wait, so she's a nepo baby?!" Kobashi Yume's face was full of shock.

Amikura Mako turned her phone screen toward them and whispered.

"That's what the post says. It surfaced on the student forum this morning."

"It's true!"

The student forum was an auxiliary feature of the personal student system.

By opening their student ID, they could access the forum in the corner.

Normally, no one posted there—modern messaging apps were far more convenient.

But when scandals broke out, everyone suddenly took interest.

Like the night before last, when Ichinose was exposed as a thief.

Or this morning, when Sakayanagi was "confirmed" to be the chairman's biological daughter.

Amikura looked at Ichinose and noticed the latter was also staring at her, then quickly averted her gaze, her expression tense.

"Honami-chan, even if you've done something bad, I won't dislike you."

To Ichinose's shock, Amikura hugged her.

"Not only that, I want to be your friend—to graduate here together with you."

So this was what Kaoru meant by his words last night.

The moment he held her, he could immediately sense her trembling—she was afraid.

In response, Ichinose Honami bit her lip tightly, fighting back the urge to cry.

"I want to stay friends with Mako-chan too... I won't... I won't let anyone down again."

Amikura Mako could feel her emotions and hugged her even tighter, while Ichinose returned the embrace.

"Wah! Mako-chan, stealing the spotlight like that is so unfair! Don't forget about me!"

Seeing this, Kobashi Yume shouted and threw herself at the two, wrapping her arms around their waists.

However, in her excitement, she failed to notice how both of them stiffened at the same time, their expressions and bodies freezing unnaturally.