

Cote 421

Chapter 421: Trash Talk Time

Beyond just rewards, Kaoru had discovered that the Wish Machine itself sometimes took interest in his wishes.

For instance, it would occasionally agree to certain requests in exchange for deducting wishes—meaning his next fulfilled wishes wouldn't yield rewards, essentially trading portions of his "salary" for the company's "assets."

That said, the Wish Machine rarely accommodated Kaoru's requests.

Proposals like hypnosis apps, NPC modes, or invisibility cloaks were firmly rejected, often accompanied by scolding.

Perhaps because such shortcuts would drastically reduce the difficulty of earning rewards.

This inconsistency left Kaoru puzzled about the machine's logic—wouldn't efficiency dictate the opposite approach?

[Are you certain?]

For the Wish Machine, a simple chess match hardly qualified as a proper request.

"Let's begin. Best of five games. If it's a draw, we'll play additional rounds until there's a winner." Kaoru turned his phone screen toward Sakayanagi.

"I didn't bring a board—we can use this app."

"No, I have a chess set. It's in the cabinet beside you—please take it out." Sakayanagi pointed with her cane toward the small cupboard.

As a chess enthusiast, she naturally kept her own board and pieces.

"I wouldn't resort to using AI," Kaoru grumbled, though he obediently retrieved the chess set.

Sakayanagi Arisu watched as he arranged the pieces on the board, her eyes reflecting his every move with a faint trace of confusion.

From their previous two matches, Kaoru's skill level had clearly been inferior to hers—like that of an amateur newcomer.

Even if he had practiced for a month or two, could that really have allowed Kaoru to improve so drastically?

If that were the case, what did her lifelong experience and technique amount to?

Losing to Kaoru in this regard would mean her natural talent was lacking?

Sakayanagi refused to believe it.

Even if Kaoru had improved, he still couldn't surpass her.

And yet, she had instinctively been wary of the possibility that he might use the latest AI.

"Though I don't know where your confidence comes from, your courage is commendable. This time, I hope you won't resort to cheap tricks—it'd be best if you defeat me fair and square."

Though she spoke these words, Sakayanagi didn't for a second believe she would lose.

Her tone was utterly composed, carrying the lofty ease of someone who knew victory was assured.

This was her domain.

Kaoru was merely a challenger—and the stronger the challenger, the more exhilarating it would be for her to triumph.

Except, Kaoru had something better than AI.

He had the Wish Machine.

[Fine, I'll humor you and play this foolish human game.]

The Wish Machine agreed to Kaoru's terms.

As the pieces settled into place, the match officially began.

Kaoru took white, Sakayanagi took black, with the former making the first move.

Under the Wish Machine's guidance, Kaoru moved his white pieces without a single thought of his own.

At first, Sakayanagi remained composed, calmly responding to Kaoru's plays.

She didn't even bother getting out of bed, using her cane to direct Kaoru in moving her pieces for her while internally assessing just how much he had improved in this short time.

She noticed that Kaoru now had a solid grasp of openings, calculating several moves ahead—something that mildly surprised her.

But only mildly.

[I must say, she truly is a genius. From the very start, she's perfectly predicted every move ahead—all of which will lead her straight to irreversible defeat.]

Kaoru played expressionlessly.

The reason he disliked invoking the Wish Machine wasn't just the price he had to pay—it was also because the thing had a habit of spewing trash talk.

Meanwhile, as the game progressed into the midgame, Sakayanagi's expression grew increasingly serious, her brow furrowing slightly.

[Oh-ho, she's actually thinking before moving now.]

[Unbelievable. She's so bad at this, I'll crush her like a bug.]

[Honestly, I'm surprised you've lasted this long. Don't worry, it'll be over soon.]

[You're a disgrace to chess. I'd rather play against my refrigerator.]

[Ah, she's getting frustrated now. Go on, bring your king out for a stroll.]

[Is it ending already? This is my first time playing this stupid game, and I thought you were decent. Turns out, this is all you've got.]

Under the Wish Machine's command, Kaoru decisively captured her king.

The first match was over.

"I... lost?" Sakayanagi panted, her face was full of disbelief.

Throughout the game, she had remained completely silent, her mind wholly occupied with figuring out how to counter Kaoru's moves.

Looking back now, she realized she couldn't keep up with Kaoru's train of thought at all.

His unpredictable moves sometimes made her wonder if he had made a mistake, only to find out he had already calculated five or six steps ahead.

What was even more absurd was that Sakayanagi noticed Kaoru never hesitated or paused to think.

The moment she made a move, he would react instantly.

"Another round?" Kaoru reset the pieces, his gaze settling on Sakayanagi.

Facing his eyes, Sakayanagi suddenly felt indignant.

Could he surpass her in just a month or two?

Impossible!

"Heh, let me see Mitoma-kun's true skill." Sakayanagi found her defeat hard to accept, and deep down, she struggled to acknowledge that Kaoru's talent might be even greater than hers.

The second round began, with Sakayanagi taking the first move.

[You should make her show her real skill. I don't want to play casual games with her anymore.]

[Pathetic move. Did you think that would save your knight? Hah, wasted effort—it's gone.]

[Hope you're having fun, because your rook is next.]

[Can you relay my words to her? Tell her she's made too many mistakes—she went wrong from the very first move. I don't see any chance of her winning.]

[Oh, so you were thinking about your next move. I thought you were just daydreaming about what to eat later.]

No matter how hard Sakayanagi tried to turn the tide, her advantage crumbled.

She was pushed into retreat before even reaching the midgame, her king cornered with no escape, forced to watch as Kaoru delivered the final checkmate.

Sakayanagi's mind was in a daze.

The match had been filled with too many things she couldn't comprehend—one moment she thought it was a trap, the next she saw an opportunity.

By the end, she suddenly realized she had already been led into a dead end.

"A-Again."

Without realizing it, Sakayanagi had risen to her feet, determined to give it her all this time.

Kaoru, however, didn't mind.

He couldn't read the board anyway—he left everything to the Wish Machine.

At least the Wish Machine was having fun, even if its trash talk was a bit noisy.

[Again? What else can you do besides daydream? Surely not play chess?]

[Stop lying to yourself. That move was wrong—just wait, I'll take your queen next.]

[Idiot. You're the easiest fish to hook. I'll trade this pawn for your queen. Mad yet?]

[Hahaha, someone's not happy here.]

[Time's almost up. It's over. You played like a baby otter learning to walk... Wait, was I just playing against an aquatic animal?]

Following the Wish Machine's commentary, Kaoru's rook charged straight for Sakayanagi's king, leaving her frozen as she stared at her own fingers.

The third match ended with Kaoru's complete victory.

Chapter 422: Not Doing Anything Wrong?

[She lost. Praise me now.]

Ignoring the Wish Machine's self-praise, Kaoru watched as Sakayanagi's delicate face flushed red, her lips muttering strange words under her breath.

'Impossible... How could I have misjudged that move just now... I shouldn't have fallen for that trap...' Sakayanagi's mind was in complete disarray, her consciousness still trapped within the intense mental exertion of their chess match.

By the time she regained awareness, her body had already reached its limit.

As Sakayanagi suddenly collapsed, Kaoru reacted swiftly, catching her petite frame in his arms.

Kaoru immediately noticed the girl in his embrace was burning up—her face flushed crimson, breathing labored and ragged.

Her weak eyes locked onto his as small hands clutched desperately at his collar.

"Where's your medicine?" Kaoru knew cardiac patients always carried emergency medication.

"Cough... cough... How... how did you win..." Sakayanagi's voice was interrupted by painful coughing, yet she maintained her iron grip on Kaoru, her gaze piercing his eyes as if this answer was all that mattered.

"Are you seriously worrying about that now?" Kaoru nearly laughed in frustration. "Someone who can't even accept losing a chess match needs to behave!"

Sakayanagi tried to speak again, but her breathing grew increasingly erratic, chest heaving violently as agonized gasps escaped her throat.

Abandoning all caution, Kaoru cradled her with one arm while rummaging through drawers with the other, finally discovering a box of medication.

"This one?"

Unable to recognize the drug, Kaoru showed it to Sakayanagi.

At her slight nod, he placed a pill in her mouth.

"Don't talk now. Shake your head if you feel worse—I'll call an ambulance."

Even in this crisis, Kaoru remained composed.

He materialized the "Nano Regenerative Fluid" he'd previously obtained through draws, triple-checking with the Wish Machine about its suitability for Sakayanagi's condition.

[My products aren't counterfeit. Show some respect! If she dies from my medicine, I'll just resurrect her for you.]

The Wish Machine sounded offended.

Having accepted Kaoru's wish, it considered severing their connection—this user never even offered a word of praise.

Feeling the syringe in his hand, Kaoru observed Sakayanagi's glassy, unfocused eyes—she seemed moments from shock.

Without hesitation, he administered the injection.

As the slightly translucent liquid vanished from the needle, Kaoru snapped off the tip and concealed the syringe in his pocket, continuing to hold Sakayanagi close.

Perhaps the medications were taking effect—color gradually returned to Sakayanagi's face, her breathing stabilizing.

"Hmm, it seems more intense than before." Sakayanagi reached out and touched Kaoru's face, her gaze slightly dazed yet carrying a hint of amusement.

"Did I scare you?"

"It's the first time I've seen someone nearly die from playing chess." Kaoru noticed her fingers trembling—was she actually scared inside?

"I won't die. I know this body's condition well. It's just a bit uncomfortable." Sakayanagi hummed softly before abruptly changing the subject.

"Did you do something to me just now?"

Even in her dazed state, she had noticed Kaoru's unusual behavior.

"Taking advantage of you." Kaoru casually ran his hands over her petite frame.

Though the injection had been administered on her arm, it didn't stop him from brushing against certain areas.

A familiar sensation surged through her again, accompanied by an odd tingling current that made her unbearably flustered.

The blush that had just faded returned to her delicate cheeks.

Kaoru had only meant to distract her, but she remained silent, as if allowing him to do whatever he pleased.

When he glanced down, he found her face flushed once more.

Then, Sakayanagi felt herself being lifted slightly before being gently placed on the bed, with Kaoru crouching in front of her.

"Anywhere else uncomfortable?"

Sakayanagi blinked in surprise before hearing him continue, "If you're not feeling well, I'll call for help right now."

Even if the "Nano Regeneration Serum" had some effect, it only alleviated Sakayanagi's symptoms—it couldn't cure her heart condition.

Kaoru planned to search for healing-type rewards in his next ten-draw, hoping for a pleasant surprise or two.

If only the effects of the rewards could be used on the Wish Machine itself—Kaoru would have loved to exploit it ruthlessly, like with the previous "Lucky Dice" or the current "Cup of Greed."

"No, I'm fine. Thanks to your help, I'm doing well." Sakayanagi seemed genuinely happy, her mood shifting rapidly.

"But I am a little curious—did Mitoma-kun go easy on me before?"

'Hmm.'

Either Kaoru was a natural prodigy, or he had deliberately held back.

Kaoru neither confirmed nor denied it.

Seeing his reaction, Sakayanagi's gaze turned faintly melancholic before she smiled again.

"This time, I'll admit defeat. What do you want me to do?"

As she spoke, she deliberately leaned closer.

At this distance, Kaoru could not only feel her warm, sweet breath but also catch a glimpse of the snow-white skin peeking from her collar—her delicate collarbone as smooth as milk, the slight rise of her petite chest like rolling hills, as if lifting his gaze just a little more would reveal the scenery beneath.

"If it's something naughty... given how much you've cared for me, I might not refuse." Sakayanagi gazed softly into his eyes, her voice a whisper.

"Or perhaps... you want me to keep your past a secret?"

Though phrased as a question, she suspected Kaoru had played chess with her because of his idol-related matters.

Sakayanagi's emotions were complicated.

She had been so sure of her victory, only to discover that his skills surpassed hers—she had truly lost to him.

Just thinking about this made the girl feel extremely frustrated.

Especially this year, ever since encountering him, nothing had gone smoothly.

She had even lost to an opponent she had once defeated in the field she took pride in, nearly shattering her mentality.

As a result, her usually dormant heart condition flared up just now, and Sakayanagi Arisu instinctively clutched her chest.

Seeing her reaction was normal, Kaoru couldn't help but sigh in relief before saying.

"Your speculation is useless to me. I don't care about this. Even if it were you, would you believe I'm the producer?"

Sakayanagi was about to say something when Kaoru interrupted, "I'm seventeen this year, and he was twenty-seven. Do you think I could be him?"

Age couldn't be faked—this could be discerned from teeth and bone structure.

Moreover, the producer had been cremated right before their eyes.

Would they really believe a high school student was the producer?

At this point, Sakayanagi calmed down.

She thought she had grasped Kaoru's weakness but overlooked one crucial point.

A weakness is only useful when threatening the other party.

If the other party doesn't care about it, her deterrence was practically zero.

In contrast, Kaoru actually had photos of her, giving him stronger leverage over her.

"Are you really not him?" Sakayanagi still felt somewhat unwilling.

She had considered many possibilities, such as Kaoru faking his death.

But that wouldn't explain why Kaoru would come to ANHS.

Would a renowned producer fake his death just to participate in some high schoolers' childish games?

"Don't overthink it. I'm just me."

Seeing that he had managed to placate Sakayanagi, Kaoru let out a slight sigh of relief.

Her problem was that she didn't understand Studio 283—they really might come after her.

Sakayanagi was still frustrated.

She had finally caught an opportunity, yet it was utterly useless against this guy.

"Still, as a Christmas gift, this surprise of yours was truly surprising," Kaoru said sincerely.

"Your chess skills also gave me quite the surprise," Sakayanagi Arisu murmured. "After three consecutive games, I realized your thought process is completely unpredictable—wild, erratic, and ever-changing. It's nothing like a normal person's logic."

[She's just too weak. Did you relay my words to her?]

"I can play with you again next time, but don't get as worked up as you did earlier."

Until he could draw a reward that could cure her, Kaoru didn't dare provoke her recklessly.

"Heh, I can't see any trace of nervousness on your face. It's like you're thinking, 'This woman is such a hassle,'" Sakayanagi said, displeased.

"You don't look the least bit scared either," Kaoru retorted irritably.

"Because I won't die so easily." Sakayanagi Arisu lifted her chin, her tone carrying a hint of nonchalance.

"This is just the gods' disrespect toward genius."

'You dare say something like that when there's a Wish Machine here that can revive people at any time?' Kaoru subtly averted his gaze.

"Well then, shall we do something bad now?"

For some reason, Sakayanagi seemed very interested in this.

As if deliberately trying to catch Kaoru's attention, she hooked her fingers on the hem of her skirt and lifted it slightly, revealing extremely fair skin on her calves.

Gradually, her slightly flushed knees became visible, but she abruptly stopped at her thighs without lifting further.

She sat on the bed, her bare ankles slightly raised with the tips of her toes pressing against the smooth floor, outlining delicate and tender arches.

Her pinkish toes had a glossy sheen, and her fair skin tinged with red seemed to invite one to kiss it.

"Mitoma-kun, what exactly is your request? Could you tell me?" Sakayanagi's lips curled slightly, her voice carrying a hint of allure.

"Besides the two of us, no one will disturb us here."

Kaoru glanced at her chest but said nothing.

Sakayanagi belatedly realized and couldn't help clenching her fists—she just hadn't developed yet!

Even if she conceded that it was just a lump of fat, she couldn't understand why anyone would care about such a place!

"If you're going to look down on it, then go back to your Ichinose-san."

"Obviously, no one would do anything inappropriate to someone who nearly went into shock just now."

"..."

For a moment, Sakayanagi wore a strange expression—somewhere between surprise and unwillingness.

"My request is simple," Kaoru said. "In the upcoming exam, you are not allowed to drop out. You must unconditionally abide by our agreement. If you lose, you'll obediently become my maid."

If Sakayanagi were to drop out during the exam, even if she ultimately lost, their agreement wouldn't take effect.

Of course, Kaoru didn't doubt her abilities—he just wanted to prevent her from resorting to extreme measures, like self-destructing to win.

Sakayanagi Arisu remained silent for a while before smiling.

"At least have some faith in my skills. I'm not so desperate as to end up in such a situation. On the contrary, Nagumo-senpai has his eyes on you. Right now, you're the one most likely to drop out."

Kaoru didn't comment.

He stood up, intending to give the Christmas gift to the girl before him, but in Sakayanagi's eyes, it looked like he was preparing to leave.

"Aren't you going to do anything bad to me?"

Chapter 423: What Needs to Be Done, Must Be Done

"Fine, let's play another game of chess. Whoever loses has to take off a piece of clothing."

Kaoru glanced sideways at the girl on the bed, slightly annoyed.

Knowing full well they were alone in this situation, she still dared to provoke him.

"Hehe, that's hardly fair. You're wearing much more than I am." Sakayanagi smiled as she eyed his overcoat, scarf around his neck, and gloves (though removed), still fully bundled up.

Kaoru couldn't grasp her intention—was she teasing him or seducing him?

"Did I interrupt your date with Ichinose-san tonight?" Sakayanagi motioned for him to sit back down.

"Though I meant to use this as leverage, part of it was also because I didn't want you getting too close to Ichinose-san."

"She's my girlfriend," Kaoru reminded her with slight displeasure.

They were already dating—why wouldn't she let him get close?

"Only one girlfriend?" Sakayanagi murmured softly. "It's hard to believe you can date multiple people without any psychological pressure—something even many nobles struggle with."

As the young lady of a prestigious family, she was exposed to things beyond ordinary people's comprehension.

While having multiple wives might seem unimaginable to commoners, it was standard practice among noble families.

Otherwise, certain chaebols wouldn't be embroiled in scandals about illegitimate children.

"Did you ask me to stay just to criticize my morals?" Kaoru appeared reluctant to continue the conversation.

"No, I think it's more about understanding your future plans," Sakayanagi replied with a smile. "For instance, when you asked me to be your maid, should I interpret that as you being interested in me?"

"Everyone has desires—I'm no exception. Being attracted to pretty, cute girls is human nature," Kaoru said.

"But what separates humans from animals is our ability to control instincts, transforming desire into enduring love."

Sakayanagi blinked teasingly. "Is this your Christmas confession to me?"

"Still better than someone threatening mischief," Kaoru retorted, sensing she was deliberately provoking him despite knowing his physical limitations.

"I never said this was a joke." Sakayanagi propped herself up on the bed, slightly raising her bare feet.

As her skirt slid past slender calves, it revealed a glimpse of pale, soft skin.

"Of course, the 'mischief' I mentioned isn't what you imagine. Try it—if you please me, I might grant more of your requests."

The implication was clear: she'd permit minor transgressions, but their nature and extent remained entirely at her discretion for Kaoru to decipher.

Overstep the bounds, and she might take offense.

Kaoru glanced at her toes—was she expecting him to submit to her feet like last time?

Meaning she tacitly permitted him to... lick.

But Kaoru wasn't interested.

Having done it once, repetition seemed tedious.

"Did you just shower?" he suddenly asked.

"Yes, there shouldn't be any odor," Sakayanagi replied with mischievous amusement. "Want to check?"

"In that case, are your clothes in the bathroom now?" Kaoru pressed.

Sakayanagi's expression froze. Surely he didn't mean...

"You're truly depraved—constantly redefining my standards."

She'd thought foot worship was degenerate enough, but now he targeted her clothes? Sakayanagi almost regretted inviting this wolf into her home.

Then again, having endured last time, surrendering clothes—non-contact items—seemed inconsequential.

Provided Kaoru didn't... use them in her presence.

That she couldn't tolerate.

"Don't overthink it. I'm not a fetishist," Kaoru said. "Besides, if this much disgusts you, your future will be far more uncomfortable."

"Who becomes whose maid remains undecided," Sakayanagi smiled, already envisioning Kaoru in maid attire—a fitting retaliation.**

"We can talk about the maid later. What do you want now? Should I go again?" Kaoru grasped her ankle.

The heel bore a delicate flush, and her toes glowed with a tender pink sheen, resembling a row of tiny pearls under the room's light.

An unusual warmth spread from her ankle as his hand nearly enveloped it entirely.

Sakayanagi Arisu pressed her lips together, pausing before turning her face away.

"You've already taken so much from me. It's not like I'm giving this away for free. This is the first time I've lost in chess to someone my age—and to someone who's been putting on an act, no less."

For a moment, Kaoru was taken aback before realizing she genuinely believed he had been feigning incompetence before.

Otherwise, his extraordinary performance tonight would be hard to explain.

Chess was much like mathematics—the gap between an amateur and a professional was vast.

It was only natural that Sakayanagi felt frustrated.

"I don't have any ulterior motives. I just didn't like your attitude earlier," Kaoru said. "Since I couldn't spank you, I had to humble you through chess instead."

Mentioning that again made Sakayanagi's cheeks flush slightly, though her mood improved—perhaps because she could tell he was being sincere.

"You're such a strange person. Sometimes you're lecherous, other times completely indifferent. When you're being perverted, it's disgusting and annoying." Sakayanagi leaned closer, her hands cupping his face.

"But when you're cold, it makes me want to teach you a lesson. You accuse others of being arrogant, yet you're no different."

Their gazes locked.

As she stared into his eyes, fleeting images flashed through Sakayanagi's mind—their earlier chess match, a faint sense of unwillingness rising in her chest, followed by the memory of him saving her.

Her heartbeat gradually quickened.

Just as Kaoru was about to speak, his eyes flickered to her collar.

Earlier, he hadn't noticed, but now he could see the soft swell of her modest chest, even more pliant than usual.

"See something you like?" Sakayanagi hastily covered herself, the tips of her ears tinged pink. "That's your reward. Now that you've seen it, you can leave."

The girl's mood swung unpredictably, making her hard to read.

Yet, even without relying on Emotion Perception, Kaoru could tell she was embarrassed.

"Didn't you say earlier that I could do something bad?"

"Time's up." Sakayanagi belatedly realized. "My goal was just to ruin your Christmas date. Mission accomplished."

It was around 11 PM—Christmas was nearly over, and most people were likely turning in for the night.

"I never said today was my Christmas date with Honami." Kaoru smirked. "Someone like me has time to spare for multiple people."

"Not even sparing me?" Sakayanagi feigned composure. "If you beg, I might still consider fulfilling your request."

For some reason, Kaoru burst into laughter, leaving her baffled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Just thought of something amusing."

"..."

It was interesting—she didn't blush when actively teasing him, but the moment she accidentally exposed herself, she grew flustered.

Sakayanagi shot him a glare, realizing she'd been seen through, and felt a pang of embarrassment.

She had indeed forgotten her own state.

Accustomed to being alone in her room, she suddenly felt an unusual sensation all over her body.

"But if the sheep willingly invites the wolf into the pen, should the wolf just graze on the grass nearby?"

With Kaoru's words, Sakayanagi felt a sudden force beneath her, and she was abruptly pushed onto the bed.

Her calves were still held in Kaoru's hands, raised high over her shoulders.

"Pervert."

The position was too strange, flushing Sakayanagi's delicate face.

"When I was willing, you refused. Now that I'm unwilling, you're interested. Are you deliberately teasing me?"

"Because I was worried it might be a trap. Who knows what you were thinking, being so forward?"
Kaoru replied.

"Your shy retreat proves there's no trap."

"So that's how you see me?" Sakayanagi seemed a little angry. "I am still a girl, after all. Do you think I would casually seduce a man?"

It was Kaoru's turn to blink.

Resting Sakayanagi Arisu's legs on his shoulders, he mused, "Could it be that Sakayanagi-san likes me?"

"Is there no option besides liking me?" Sakayanagi let out a coquettish sniff, as if enduring his actions.

"I don't know how you convinced Ichinose, but there's no way I'm joining you."

Kaoru then reached into his pocket and pulled out a wedding ring, holding it before her eyes.

The moment she saw the ring, Sakayanagi's mind blanked for a moment.

Her gaze stiffly shifted to his face as she spoke.

"Are you proposing to me?"

"Though a promise is a promise, I won't treat you as a maid or an enemy. Whatever your initial intentions were, I like you now." Kaoru paused. "As for this, you can consider it a Christmas gift."

"Who gives a ring for Christmas?" Sakayanagi found it somewhat amusing. "And why do you like me?"

"Should I list the reasons?" Kaoru asked.

Sakayanagi thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"If you propose to me, what about Ichinose? Are you planning to give rings to everyone?"

"Is that not allowed?" Kaoru countered.

Sakayanagi was momentarily speechless—so he really had done that.

"I told you, I won't join your harem." The girl's attitude remained firm.

"I won't dwell on what happened before. Even if you do something to me now, I won't acknowledge it."

"Put it on first." Kaoru slid the wedding ring onto her finger. "You're still not well. How could I force things?"

Sakayanagi froze briefly, only to feel her vision darken as warmth pressed against her lips.

"But some things are non-negotiable," someone declared.

Chapter 424: Targeting Your Father

His body pressed down, and Sakayanagi Arisu flusteredly blocked his chest with her hands.

Her silver hair cascaded onto the bed like melting snow, her eyes flashing with shock and indignation.

The hot, sticky sensation on her lips carried a presence entirely foreign to the girl.

Never imagining she'd lose her first kiss under such circumstances, her frustration channeled into her hands as she instinctively pushed against Kaoru's chest.

Her brows furrowed, her stiffened legs devoid of strength, while an inexplicable discomfort welled in her chest—a suffocating weight that forced delicate, breathy gasps from her nose.

Her arms straightened, finally parting their lips.

Kaoru looked down at her with amusement, licking his lips as if savoring her taste.

"You've taken my first kiss. Satisfied now?" Sakayanagi panted lightly, lips pressed tight as she glared at him with flushed annoyance.

"Let me go, or I'll really get angry."

Kaoru still held her legs, his back slightly straightening as his hand slowly traced the curve of her calf, gliding upward along her slender thigh.

By now, her nightgown was in disarray, the hem slipping down her waist under gravity, revealing a glimpse of smooth, pale skin along her hips

"Hmm..." Sakayanagi Arisu tightly pursed her lips, enduring the strange sensations he brought.

The position tested the flexibility of a young girl, but only because her legs were weaker and more delicate than an average person's could she withstand his playful antics.

Even so, the touch from the opposite sex sent shivers down her spine, raising goosebumps all over her body—unlike anything she had imagined.

The consequences of mischief might be far more severe and uncontrollable than she had anticipated.

"You're actually the easiest high-society young lady to handle," Kaoru said. "With your background, someday you'll marry a man of equally noble birth or comparable status. That's just how these so-called elite circles work."

Sakayanagi Arisu stiffened slightly.

"In other words, as long as the price is right, a young lady like you is practically a commodity with a clear price tag," Kaoru continued with a faint smile. "The only tricky part is your grandfather—he's a politician, after all."

Sakayanagi's grandfather represented a certain faction that established this special high school, giving it an official nature and even turning it into one of a politician's achievements.

In a place like Japan, financial conglomerates were the establishment—the larger the conglomerate, the greater its influence on the government.

Thus, some politicians were more than happy to arrange marriages with these financial dynasties.

Perhaps in the future, Sakayanagi Arisu would appear at one such wedding.

"You want to buy me?" Sakayanagi's expression turned odd.

This was the first time she had heard such a proposal.

"My father would never agree to someone like you. You could offer him all of Tokyo, and he wouldn't even blink."

Kaoru blinked. "If I step in to take responsibility afterward, would your father still refuse?"

"Hmph. At best, you'd only qualify as a live-in son-in-law," Sakayanagi retorted stubbornly, though her gaze shifted away as if searching for an escape.

"Not necessarily. Aren't you curious why I'm here?" Kaoru whispered temptingly in her ear. "What if I came specifically for you?"

Sakayanagi's ears flushed red—likely the first time a member of the opposite sex had ever breathed so close to her.

Her sensitive skin tinged with a faint blush.

"What do you want?" she asked, feigning composure.

"I hold shares in the Shinomiya Financial Group. Status-wise, I might not be a bad marriage prospect," Kaoru murmured. "Don't you think that's enough, Arisu?"

Though one percent might not sound like much, in a conglomerate of this scale with such a complex ownership structure—where even the head of the Shinomiya Group held less than twenty percent—Kaoru was effectively the seventh-largest shareholder.

"Shinomiya Financial Group shares?" Sakayanagi's expression turned stunned, momentarily forgetting his familiar address.

Trapped in the closed-off environment of Advanced Nurturing High School, her awareness of the outside world was limited.

Otherwise, she would have known what Kaoru had done just the day before.

"I suspect your father has already caught wind of it. Arranging a marriage proposal shouldn't be too difficult," Kaoru mused. "But even I admit that alone might not be enough to seal the deal."

Sakayanagi watched as he touched his own calf and even licked it, her face flushing slightly with embarrassment—this guy really was a perverted foot fetishist.

"If a father knew his daughter's illness could be cured, I doubt he would refuse," Kaoru murmured.

"After all, not just anyone can invest trillions into her treatment."

At the mention of her illness, Sakayanagi Arisu froze for a moment.

Then she recalled how he had always subtly paid attention to her legs.

Could it be that he wasn't just a foot fetishist, but actually concerned about her condition?

Kaoru, however, wasn't thinking that deeply.

The reason he brought up the Shinomiya Financial Group's shares was simply that he needed an excuse—it couldn't just be that Sakayanagi miraculously recovered for no reason.

Though the shares were just shares, and he certainly didn't have trillions of yen lying around, he suspected Sakayanagi Narumori would likely be tempted.

After all, anyone capable of acquiring Shinomiya Financial Group's shares must have some powerful backing.

So, Kaoru's point was simple: even if Sakayanagi Arisu refused, he could just win over her father and grandfather instead.

Meanwhile, Sakayanagi Arisu roughly grasped his intentions and found it both amusing and exasperating.

A strange emotion welled up inside her—this was the first time she had lost in chess to someone her age, the first time she had been proposed to, and now she had even lost her first kiss.

All these circumstances mixed together, creating a peculiar sense of disarray within her.

"You want to cure my illness... could it be just to satisfy your perverted desires?" Sakayanagi Arisu chuckled, though unease flickered in her heart.

It felt like she truly couldn't escape.

Would she not only have to serve as a maid next year but also become his wife in the future?

Speaking of marriage, Sakayanagi Arisu had never given it much thought before.

The only reason she had made that bet with Kaoru was because he was interesting enough—she had never imagined she might actually end up marrying him.

"If it were just about perverted things, I could always turn to Honami," Kaoru paused.

"Rather than just that, I'd say I want you to experience more of life's pleasures too."

"Oh?" Sakayanagi Arisu smiled. "How smooth. Right now, Mitoma-kun sounds just like a playboy who knows how to charm girls."

Kaoru lowered his head and kissed her lips again—soft, just as he remembered.

"Shameless." Sakayanagi Arisu pushed him away, her face now completely flushed, her heart pounding as if it had suddenly sprung back to life.

"If this is what it takes to kiss you, I'd gladly stay shameless forever." Kaoru lifted her legs, about to set them down, but her arms looped around his neck instead.

"Even if you can cure my legs, in my eyes, you'll only ever be a live-in son-in-law," Sakayanagi said, her arms tightening around him, her gaze unwavering.

"I won't be a mistress, I won't be a second wife, and I certainly won't submit to you."

Kaoru blinked, then smirked, tilting her chin up with a finger.

"That's not for you to decide, loser."

Remembering her earlier defeat in chess, Sakayanagi Arisu's face burned red with frustration.

"Heh... next time, you'll be the one losing."

"Such bold words from a mere loser."

"I won't fall for your tricks again—mmph—!"

Kaoru sealed her lips once more, her protests dissolving into muffled whimpers.

"Mitoma-kun."

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"No, I simply wanted to ask you—how exactly does one write the characters for 'pervert'?"

"It's not because your body can't take it anymore, is it?"

"Well, yes, but what does that matter?" Sakayanagi pondered for a moment. "I think we should petition the education board to change the pronunciation of 'pervert' to 'Kaoru Mitoma.'"

"In that case, the pronunciation of 'lewd' should be 'Sakayanagi Arisu,'" Kaoru replied with mock seriousness, looking straight at her.

Sakayanagi playfully punched his shoulder, as if finding the joke too amusing to resist, and let out a soft laugh.

"What should I do? It feels all sticky."

"Just change it when you wake up tomorrow."

"Your twisted tastes are disgusting. Has Ichinose and the others been subjected to this too?"

"Kikyō had a similar experience, though it was with stockings."

"Are you a fetishist?"

"I have a particular interest in defiling beautiful girls."

Sakayanagi shot him a sidelong glance before sitting on the bed, subtly smoothing her skirt over her lap, her slender legs pressed together, showing no outward signs of disturbance.

In truth, the girl could still feel a lingering dampness, as if the sensation from earlier remained on her fingertips, leaving an odd tingling along her inner thighs.

Kaoru stole a glance—everything from before was now hidden beneath her skirt.

"Just out of curiosity, how many others have received rings from you besides me?" Sakayanagi touched the ring on her finger, which she hadn't paid much attention to earlier but now found herself growing increasingly fond of.

She wondered where he had managed to find such a design.

"Honami, Kei, Kikyō, and Suzune," Kaoru answered.

"It's strange they haven't started fighting over it." Sakayanagi studied him suspiciously, feeling like things had gone a little too smoothly for him.

Kaoru stayed silent.

His stock of rings was running low, and he wasn't even sure who to give the next one to.

"Alright, alright, get out already. I just took a bath, and now you've made a mess of everything. I need to wash again."

In truth, Sakayanagi just felt too sticky, as if his presence was still clinging to her skin, leaving behind an unsettling sensation.

"You might have trouble moving. Should I help you?" Kaoru offered earnestly.

Sakayanagi stared at him blankly.

"If you feel unwell, don't hesitate to call me." With that, Kaoru gathered his things and left the girl's room.

Once he was gone, Sakayanagi finally let out a sigh of relief.

Then, recalling what had just happened, she lowered her gaze, her ears burning red.

A delayed wave of shame nearly made her want to bash her own head in—how could she have done something like that?

Perhaps too much had happened tonight, muddling her thoughts so much that she hadn't pushed Kaoru away immediately, leading to... whatever that was.

And she hadn't taken off the ring. Did that mean she had accepted his proposal?

Sakayanagi's emotions were tangled, and for the first time, she felt truly lost.

What exactly did love feel like?

He mentioned shares—that had to be real, right?

If it was, would her father even agree to his proposal?

Chapter 425: The Shameless One

Stepping out of the girl's warm room, Kaoru was met with the biting night wind, instinctively pulling his coat tighter around himself.

Somehow, it seemed like he always got kicked out afterward.

Kaoru took out his phone.

It was already close to 1 a.m., and it was probably too late to deliver gifts now.

However, he had received messages from quite a few people—Christmas greetings from Ichinose Honami, Sakura Airi, Kamuro Masumi, Yamamura Miki, and Karuizawa Kei.

Kaoru replied to each of them one by one.

The messages remained unread—they were likely asleep at this hour.

It was about time to head back.

Kaoru put away his phone, stepped into the elevator, and pressed the button for the second floor.

At the same time, he decided to start a new ten-draw.

After all, he had accomplished quite a lot over the past two days—whether it was the "dual journey" with Kushida Kikyo and Horikita Suzune or today's encounters with Ichinose Honami, Amikura Mako, Tachibana Akane, and Sakayanagi Arisu—Kaoru had collected plenty of wishes.

After deducting three of them, he had accumulated twelve draws.

This time, he didn't plan to hold back—he wanted to use them all.

[Drawing corresponding rewards now...]

[Congratulations! You have obtained the reward—"Pain Transfer"!]

["Pain Transfer": Allows the user to transfer any pain they experience to a designated target. Does not include actual injuries. Duration: one minute.]

...

[Congratulations! You have obtained the reward—"Light of Life"!]

["Light of Life": Restores a small amount of HP to the target. Does not take effect if the target is already dead.]

...

"Bandages," "Stamina Potion," "Grilled Meat," "Painkillers," "Small First Aid Kit," "Bloodsucking Sword"...

[All rewards have been distributed. Please check your inventory!]

Looking at these rewards, Kaoru sighed.

Most of them were only useful for minor injuries—clearly not enough to cure Sakayanagi's heart condition, which was a persistent debuff.

The most valuable reward this time was probably "Light of Life," which could restore HP and might be able to save Sakayanagi in a critical moment.

Of course, Kaoru could also use it on certain elderly individuals—there were plenty of people in this world on the verge of death who desperately longed for a miracle like "Light of Life."

Kaoru returned to his room, took a quick shower, and then fell into a deep sleep.

...

Heavy, suffocating, as if something was pressing down on him.

Beyond that, Kaoru faintly caught a whiff of a delicate fragrance.

A warm, soft sensation nestled in his embrace, and his nose tingled slightly.

Perhaps it was the sensitivity of youth, or maybe just the vigor of his prime—despite all he'd been through, Kaoru could still feel the vitality coursing through him.

Yet, that vitality seemed to have settled into a certain soft little hand, and he could even hear her murmuring.

Kaoru opened his eyes to find Kushida Kikyo lying beside him, sharing the same pillow, while she had stolen most of his blanket.

"Good morning, Master," Kushida said with a playful grin. "I thought you'd be with Ichinose. Didn't expect you to spend the night alone. Did she reject you?"

"If she were here today, would you still have barged in?" Kaoru replied expressionlessly, pulling the girl closer.

"Showing up in a man's room first thing in the morning—aren't you embarrassed at all?"

Kushida let him hold her, her eyes narrowing slightly.

She actually quite enjoyed being held by him, but she still teased him.

"Well, what can I do? She took the best spot. Of course, I'd be curious whether you two did anything. If you had, I'd shamelessly join in."

Kaoru's lips twitched, his expression turning odd.

Why was she more eager for a threesome than he was?

"Had enough groping?"

She seemed to be enjoying herself a little too much, and Kaoru was starting to lose his restraint.

The girl in his arms was soft and fragrant, and her hand was currently gripping his most vulnerable spot.

"It's fun, and not what I expected... Well, not entirely unexpected. I thought only guys got addicted to this, but then I realized it hurts at first, but then it feels good." Kushida sounded a little shy, but in front of Kaoru, she didn't want to keep pretending.

After all, he was the one who corrupted her.

"Did you steal my key just for this?" Kaoru asked flatly, his fingers teasing her.

The plump softness in his grasp was like a ripe peach, her snow-white skin peeking from her collar, so tempting he wanted to take a bite.

"Who would do something like that? I'm not some shameless woman. If I wanted to do this kind of thing, I could get a boyfriend anytime."

As she spoke, Kushida let out a soft moan, her brows furrowing slightly as if enduring his touch.

Then, her body stiffened when Kaoru began his counterattack, making her legs instinctively press together.

"Mhm, the not shameless Kikyo—tell me, have you gone to the bathroom today?" Kaoru whispered in her ear, his voice gentle but his movements rough.

"Ah—! Y-you... you pervert...!" Kushida's face flushed red, his voice triggering an involuntary reaction in her body.

"Mmm... I-I was wrong... stop... Master, ah—! I really can't hold back..."

Listening to her ragged breaths, Kaoru smirked and finally stopped, letting her recover.

"I've had enough. Every time I'm with you, I end up humiliating myself," Kushida huffed, glaring at him.

"No biting my ears next time!"

"Really? You were clearly enjoying yourself too, so how can you blame me?" Kaoru said nonchalantly, as the girl's excitement had already transmitted completely to him through her fingertips.

"You forced me!" Kushida Kikyo naturally refused to admit it, then, as if venting, made Kaoru hold his breath. She smirked triumphantly, "Now I've got you. Should I help you out?"

Their eyes met, and Kaoru leaned in for a kiss.

No girl could resist the feeling of a kiss—the kind that made her heart leap out of her chest, soft and tender, pressing close together.

The person she liked was right before her, as if wrapped in his fervent warmth, leaving her whole body weak and tingling.

Before she knew it, Kaoru had wrapped his arms around her slender waist.

As she frowned, that strange yet familiar sensation returned.

"I've done something bad again. I feel like I'm beyond saving. What should I do?" Kushida looped her arms around his neck, her dazed gaze seeming to murmur to herself.

"It's fine. I'm here." Kaoru paused, then added.

"Besides, this side of Kikyo is something only I get to see. I'm perfectly satisfied."

"Sounds like I'm the one at a disadvantage!" Kushida Kikyo pouted slightly before smiling again.

"Hmph, I want to be on top. This isn't comfortable enough."

Perhaps out of caution, Kushida Kikyo was wearing casual clothes today, though her coat and sweater had already been tossed aside.

All that remained was a long-sleeved undershirt and a pleated skirt, giving off the vibe of a cozy, domestic girlfriend.

Kaoru stared for a moment before realizing—it was actually his long-sleeved shirt.

She must have taken it the other day and was now wearing it back.

Kushida Kikyo quite liked this.

She interlaced her fingers with his, their hands clasped together, giving her enough support to avoid fumbling around.

"How do I look?"

"Lewd."

"You're lewd too. Much lewder than me."

"Girls who aren't lewd would be shy. Only our little Kikyo is addicted."

"Cut it out! Karuizawa does it way more than I do!"

"Kei just likes clinging to me."

"I don't care. I want it too—the same number of times!"

"..."

"Hey, should we record a video?"

Kushida was curious about how she looked right now.

Without a mirror, she thought of having Kaoru film her so she could admire it later.

"It's better not to record stuff like this," Kaoru frowned. "If it accidentally gets leaked, the consequences would be unthinkable."

Kushida thought about it and realized he was right.

Their phones were school-issued—who knew if the school could access their private files?

"What about the photos of me from before?"

"I deleted them."

"Huh? Didn't you say you uploaded them to the cloud?"

"I lied."

"Grr—"

Kushida nearly burned red with embarrassment and squeezed him hard a few times in retaliation.

Just as the two were enjoying their morning "exercise," the door to the room quietly cracked open.

"Strange, why is there a pair of shoes here?"

Hearing the murmur, Kushida and Kaoru froze, then turned to see Karuizawa Kei stepping into the room.

Their gazes locked, and the items in Karuizawa Kei's hands fell to the floor.

Chapter 426: Will You Join Too?

Although he had just bragged about joining in on the fun, seeing Karuizawa appear before them clearly caused Kushida's expression to short-circuit.

She was sitting atop Kaoru, completely frozen, even tensing up from nervousness.

The intense pressure left Kaoru momentarily dazed as well.

The current situation was beyond awkward, and Kaoru found himself at a loss for words.

After a brief silence, Karuizawa spoke up, "Um... where's Ichinose?"

"She wasn't with me tonight." As he answered, Kaoru felt an inexplicable sense of strangeness.

"Hmm, so... you two have been at it until now?"

At Karuizawa's words, Kushida shuddered, as if finally snapping back to reality.

Her face flushed bright red, and with a muffled "Ahh—!" she grabbed the nearby blanket and pulled it over her head before burying herself into Kaoru's chest.

Kaoru nearly got the wind knocked out of him.

Holding her waist with one hand, all he could see was her curled up on top of him, her face hidden under the blanket, leaving her expression completely obscured.

"Hurry up and get off." Kaoru hadn't forgotten their current state—if this continued, things would only get more awkward.

"No... this is too embarrassing," Kushida mumbled from under the blanket, her voice barely audible.

"Why did she just barge in like that? There wasn't even any warning!"

Kaoru was momentarily speechless.

When you were getting cozy with Horikita Suzune, you were way more enthusiastic than this.

Now you're hiding under a blanket acting all shy? I really don't get what's going on in your head.

"Having fun?" Karuizawa picked up something from the floor nonchalantly. "Guess I worried for nothing. Well, it was my own fault for overthinking. After all, Kaoru has plenty of girls who like him—it's not like he needs me."

Since Kushida was clearly playing dead, Kaoru had no choice but to speak up.

"Actually, I was planning to spend today with you, Kei. And didn't I message you last night?"

Considering Karuizawa's feelings, Kaoru had thought about how to handle things.

Around 1 AM, he had specifically sent her a message proposing a secret date today.

So, Karuizawa should have seen his reply—that was why she had come over today.

He just hadn't expected Kushida to suddenly show up, making him completely forget about his earlier plans.

"So then... what's this supposed to be?" Karuizawa's face was icy. "Did you call me over just to watch you two get intimate? Are you messing with me?"

Since Kaoru had already told her about Kushida, she wasn't exactly shocked—just furious.

Anyone who walked into their boyfriend's room and saw another girl in his bed would naturally be angry.

"Can I say I didn't expect things to turn out like this? Would you believe me?"

"You expect me to believe the excuse of a shameless pervert?"

"Sorry... I'll make sure to keep my promises to you next time."

"That's not convincing at all. Can you two separate first?"

Her words only made Kaoru feel more awkward.

Just as he was about to lift Kushida up, she pressed down on his shoulders, refusing to budge.

"Wait, I've calmed down a bit now." Kushida slowly straightened her back, the blanket slipping from her head as her slightly flushed face turned toward Karuizawa, though her gaze carried a scrutinizing edge.

"Next time, could you also stop like this, Kei?"

"W-what?" Karuizawa was bewildered.

Perhaps Kushida's current demeanor—so different from her usual pure and gentle persona—made her feel strangely unfamiliar.

"Look here, he gave me a ring too. The design is different, but you have one as well, right?" Kushida waved her small hand, which indeed bore a glittering ring.

"That means, in his heart, I'm about the same as you."

Karuizawa was startled.

She had considered the possibility that the rings might have been given to multiple people, but seeing someone else wearing one for the first time inexplicably stirred tension in her chest.

"D-does this mean... you agreed to his idea too?"

"A harem? I suppose so."

"If that's the case, isn't this incredibly rude? Doing... doing such things right in front of me..."

"Ha, there'll be even more in the future, you know?"

"Huh?!"

"Haven't you thought about it? We're all his now. Eventually, we'll all end up in the same bed, letting him have his way with us!"

"..."

Karuizawa short-circuited for a moment, clearly because unspeakable images had flashed through her mind.

"People like Ichinose, Sakayanagi, Horikita, Sakura—even the senior girls—he probably won't let a single one go. Everyone together—that's his plan." Kushida let out a cold laugh.

"You were the first to rise in status. Did you really never consider this?"

"T-that's... shameless!" Karuizawa grew angry. "Even if everyone likes him, they wouldn't do something like this! Bad things... how could you do them right in front of—"

"Why not?" Kushida cut her off. "Or do you want to monopolize him for an entire night?"

Karuizawa's thoughts tangled into chaos

Logically, she held the advantage, so why did Kushida's words somehow make sense?

"If you don't believe me, ask him yourself." Kushida grinned at Kaoru.

"Do you want to keep going with me, or would you rather have both of us at once?"

Blushing but unable to look away, Karuizawa fixed her gaze on Kaoru.

Feeling the pressure, Kaoru gritted his teeth, gripped Kushida's slender waist, and pulled her into his lap, holding her close.

"Just consider this me forcing you two. No need for all this talk, Kikyo."

"Ah... I-I wasn't spouting nonsense... This is the truth... I was already prepared to play along with you to the end..."

"You've completely confused Kei. Bold one moment, shy the next—sometimes I really can't figure you out."

"I-it's just too sudden!"

Watching them, Karuizawa bit her lip.

This feeling was unbearable.

She was his girlfriend too—why did she have to stand by and watch?

They were the ones in the wrong here.

"Kei." Kaoru suddenly called her name.

"What? Hurry up and finish, or I'm leaving!" She averted her eyes so he wouldn't see her tears.

"I want to kiss my girlfriend."

"..." Karuizawa slightly turned her gaze to meet his eyes, her cheeks flushing warm again as she quickly averted her face.

Yet she felt unbearably embarrassed, as if his words alone had set her entire body aflame.

The more she burned, the angrier and more humiliated she became—standing here now made her feel like a complete joke.

"I want to kiss Kei," Kaoru repeated.

"Ugh, so annoying! Just die!" Karuizawa huffed, puffing up her cheeks.

Normally, she would have already leaned in by now, but given the situation, doing so would only prove Kushida right, wouldn't it?

"If Kei won't come to me, then I'll go to you."

He seemed fully capable of following through, so with flushed cheeks—reluctant yet expectant, torn between frustration and helplessness—Karuizawa obediently shuffled closer to Kaoru.

Without another word, Kaoru really did kiss her.

"Mmm... Hah..."

"I love you, Kei."

"D-Don't say such embarrassing things at a time like this!"

Kushida watched the two with an amused grin before shamelessly sidling up, demanding her own kiss.

Later, Kaoru seemed to remember something, but Kushida waved it off, telling him they could talk about it next time.

"So, how many times have you done it with him?" Kushida sat contentedly on the bed, her slightly parted legs exuding a slow, milky scent.

Kaoru was at a loss for words.

It was as if she had no sense of shame whatsoever, perhaps because she had taken off her usual mask and was a little too relaxed.

Karuizawa was blushing furiously while holding up her finger.

Only the first time had Kaoru done this to her.

"It seems I've had one more time," Kushida muttered. "Do you want to have a go? That way, we'll be even."

"Kikyo," Kaoru said, looking at her with a deadpan expression.

Kushida was all smiles.

She knew her words were a bit out of line; she was just saying it casually.

"I understand. But I can't have a baby yet." Karuizawa seemed to have made some sort of decision.

Kneeling on the floor, she helped Kaoru clean up the mess.

"Even though I can't do that kind of thing yet, I'll try to accept it."

"Kei, this is too much for you. I really just wanted to go on a date with you today." Kaoru had a bit of a headache.

He did covet their bodies, but not to the point of doing this every day.

"Isn't this a date too?" Kushida looked at him strangely. "Isn't there a term called a stay-at-home date?"

"Are you telling me you want to stay here all day?" Kaoru's expression was odd.

Shouldn't this kind of date be proposed by the guy?

"I-I'm fine with it here," Karuizawa said, lifting her eyes. "As long as I can be with you, Kaoru."

"Then it's decided!" Kushida hopped off the bed with great enthusiasm.

"To be honest, I've always been curious about what you do in your room."

Seeing this, Kaoru stroked Karuizawa's head and said softly, "Honestly, Kei, are you really okay with this?"

"There is one thing that bothers me a little," Karuizawa said, subtly averting her gaze and mumbling.

"But, what Kushida said is more or less right. I actually knew today would come."

"But forcing you two to get along just feels so contrived," Kaoru said, a little dejected.

"I guess it is a little. I'm not particularly good at dealing with people myself, even though I might seem assertive," Karuizawa said in a small voice.

"I was startled today, but I usually get along fine with Kushida."

Kaoru didn't say anything more, just stroking her head.

After a moment, Karuizawa hesitated, then asked very cautiously.

"Um, will you really put everyone in the same bed, Toru?"

"Don't listen to her nonsense. If you two don't agree, am I really going to forcibly tie you to the bed?"
Kaoru said.

"What if you get upset and bite me?"

Imagining the scene, Karuizawa couldn't help but let out a laugh, then quickly went back to holding it in her mouth.

"I-I won't bite. Even if Toru is being too much, I won't bite."

"You idiot."

"..."

Thanks to Karuizawa's help, Kaoru lost some more of his stamina.

However, since they had agreed to have a stay-at-home date, Kaoru later forcefully suppressed Kushida's mischief.

Not only that, but Kaoru also gave yesterday's Christmas gift to Karuizawa and Karuizawa gave her Christmas gift to Kaoru as well.

Yes, it was the very thing that had just fallen on the floor.

A pair of silver-gray bracelets, clearly a couple design.

Karuizawa didn't dare to wear the "wedding ring" in front of others, but she did dare to secretly wear a couple design bracelet with Kaoru.

In a way, this was also her staking her claim.

Kushida was a little dissatisfied with this.

It seemed she didn't have any matching items with Kaoru.

Chapter 427: The Midas Touch

When he woke up the next morning, Kaoru was the only one left in the room.

Although Kushida had intended to entice Karuizawa, even she herself was a bit shy.

A threesome was clearly not something that could succeed right after they met.

Kaoru looked at the calendar.

After Christmas ended, the New Year was just around the corner.

Since the Christmas gift hadn't been given, changing it to a New Year gift would be about the same.

However, the arrival of the New Year also meant that the new semester was about to begin.

Just then, Kaoru received a call from Kiriya Ikuyo.

"It seems Nagumo met with Ryuen from your year. Someone saw Ryuen enter the Special Education Building today."

The student council office and the teachers' offices were both in the Special Education Building, but it was currently winter vacation.

The teachers wouldn't be at work, so it could only be that Nagumo Miyabi had intentionally summoned Ryuen Kakeru.

"Is there any news from Tonokawa-senpai and the others?" Kaoru asked.

"I've asked. Nagumo had previously commissioned Ryuen for something, and now they might be collaborating more deeply. He once gave Ryuen several million private points, being exceptionally generous," Kiriya replied. "However, Tonokawa and the others are all being excluded by Nagumo now, so they don't know the content of their conversation."

Kaoru pondered for a moment.

Nagumo had actually scouted several candidates among the first-years: Sakayanagi Arisu, Ichinose Honami, and Ryuen Kakeru.

And now, Nagumo must have realized that both Sakayanagi and Ichinose were unreliable, so he chose Ryuen Kakeru.

No, it was more like he had no other choice.

Even if Ryuen Kakeru were to blackmail him or just take the money and slack off, there was nothing Nagumo Miyabi could do, unless he supported another agent to deal with Kaoru Mitoma.

Due to the difference in school years, Nagumo Miyabi indeed couldn't find an opportunity to enter the fray himself.

"Has anything happened in Class 2-B?"

"Yes. Nagumo demanded they hand over their private points, keeping only enough for living expenses. Many people are dissatisfied now, but they don't dare to say anything."

Was Nagumo short on money now?

Just as this thought emerged, Kiriya added, "It's not just Class 2-B. Nagumo is also extorting Class 2-C and Class 2-D, forcing them to submit a blood oath, while continuing to tempt them with twenty million private points to work for him. To that end, he specifically rewarded a certain student with one million private points."

"His methods have become more drastic," Kaoru somewhat understood Nagumo's current anxiety.

To attack him, Nagumo had to at least suppress his own backyard, or else it would be easy for his base to be taken.

"Yes, the entire year is dissatisfied with him now." Kiriya paused.

"Moreover, the school's exams are getting more and more dangerous. Just last semester, quite a few people were expelled. Some in the lower-ranked classes have already given up struggling."

Although Nagumo had united the entire second year to deal with special exams, given his personality, he would obviously not save students who were about to be eliminated.

In his eyes, anyone who could be eliminated was trash, not worth saving.

The spark of hope, so painstakingly ignited during the sports festival, was now being snuffed out by a massive wave of expulsions, causing the lower-ranked classes to fall back into a perpetual slump.

Seeing no possibility of advancing and facing expulsion at any moment, what else could they do but give up?

Wait, Kaoru understood why Nagumo was collecting Private points.

What does a group of students who have given up need the most?

To live in the moment, of course.

As long as Nagumo could let them enjoy their lives, they would naturally work hard for him.

In other words, all these people wanted right now were Private points.

Kaoru didn't ask Kiriya how many Private points he had.

Their entire class combined probably had less than Nagumo Miyabi alone.

"Kiriya-senpai, can you do me a favor in a bit?"

After getting his agreement, Kaoru logged into the school forums and skillfully began editing his new post.

[Help, does anyone get it, fam? I was changing in the mall dressing room today when I ran into this super creepy guy. He didn't even ask, just barged right in, and even said he was the Student council president and wanted to get to know me...]

[Posting anonymously, there's this blond senpai who talks a good game, but he's actually Losing potency. Sisters, you'd best avoid him, it's just disgusting.]

[Hehehe, this is the first time I've been so disappointed in the school and the Japanese education system. They really are a bunch of tax evaders. For example, the current Student council president is lavishly renovating his office and has cut funding for club activities, transferring it all to his Balance.]

[Why hasn't Nagumo deleted his history of being in Class B?]

[The strongest student in the second year, usually so high and mighty, has now lost even his childhood friend. I heard he secretly transferred tens of millions of points to the other guy, asking him to treat his childhood friend a little better.]

[Why is Nagumo collecting everyone's Private points? It's simple, he's broke now. He lost his previous tens of millions of Private points to a first-year. He's just a fox borrowing the tiger's might. He has no money at all, otherwise, why hasn't he enabled a single person to transfer classes?]

[You've all been deceived by Nagumo. Nagumo isn't the leader of the second-year Class B anymore. The school is also planning to remove him from his position. Even Tonokawa and the others have abandoned him. Nagumo is planning to take the money and run!]

[It's true, I just saw Nagumo's Balance. It's less than a hundred thousand!]

...

After publishing these anonymous posts, Kaoru had Kiriya help bump them to the top, hoping to get as many people as possible to see them.

All sorts of strange rumors suddenly appeared on the forums, all targeting Nagumo alone, which easily attracted the attention of gossip-mongers.

Of course, to prevent Nagumo from tracking him down, Kaoru specifically applied to the school for ID protection, spending a million Private points to prevent Nagumo from Doxing him.

Compared to Private points, Kaoru was more interested in the effect of "The Midas Touch."

As long as the words he personally wrote could be widely disseminated, they could eventually blur the line between fiction and reality.

....

In less than an hour, Nagumo quickly learned of the news on the forums.

He opened the forum page, absolutely furious.

The moment he saw the titles and content, he seethed with rage.

Since when was he Losing potency?

Harassing female students? Cutting club activity funds? Maliciously getting a classmate expelled out of jealousy? He liked men?

These posts were simply shocking.

The more Nagumo read, the more alarmed and uncertain he became.

Had he really done these things?

Although it was true he hadn't been very interested in women lately, that didn't mean he was losing his potency, did it?

Nagumo's face flushed an ugly shade of red.

The few underlings beside him were extremely cautious, not daring to breathe too loudly.

"Na-Nagumo-kun, should we issue a clarification to debunk the rumors and have the school delete these posts?" someone suggested.

"What rumors!" Nagumo glared fiercely at the person who had just spoken. "Most of this is true! How do you expect me to explain it!"

"Ah, most of it is true?" The other person was stunned. "No wonder it looked so familiar."

Nagumo's expression was grim.

He knew who was behind the leaks on the forum, mixing partial truths in with the rumors and even exaggerating the original facts, making it difficult for him to issue a clarification.

For example, the part about losing potency.

Was he really going to clarify that?

The more he tried to clarify, the more the gossip-mongers' imaginations would run wild, wouldn't they?

Or another example: he had indeed lost a considerable amount of private points to Kaoru.

Was he supposed to clarify that he had only lost a few million, not tens of millions?

Nagumo Miyabi felt that would only be more humiliating.

So, in his capacity as the student council president, he contacted the school and demanded they delete the posts.

However, the posts' effects had already secretly taken root.

Nagumo was completely unaware.

He even planned to use even more explosive news to cover up his own scandal.

....

Meanwhile, in the coffee shop, Kaoru listened to the students' discussions, most of which were about the rumors surrounding Nagumo Miyabi.

With a circulation of only four or five hundred people, the effect of "The Midas Touch" hadn't been maximized.

It had merely made most students very interested in the content, constantly imagining the truth behind it and trying to piece together the facts.

Even Nagumo subconsciously believed that although the rumors were exaggerated, parts of them were true.

Kaoru suddenly felt a strong urge to issue his own declaration of independence to the entire world.

However, the effect of "The Midas Touch" was to make people believe something was true, not to make wishes come true.

Without sufficient facts to support it, it would quickly become a castle in the air.

In other words, to achieve the best effect, this reward had to be used in conjunction with facts.

As Kaoru was browsing the forum, he suddenly discovered that all his posts had been deleted by an administrator.

Then, a non-anonymous post was pinned to the top of the forum.

[A Twenty Million Point Bounty on Kaoru Mitoma!]

Chapter 428: Mutual Bounties

A bounty, huh? It had been a long time since he'd heard that word.

Kaoru looked at Nagumo Miyabi's post.

The other party hadn't been anonymous; anyone could see his personal information.

He had even posted his balance: over twenty million private points.

Kaoru was surprised that after his extortion, Nagumo had managed to earn it all back within two semesters, all while spending a considerable amount of private points to win people over.

To be fair, Nagumo Miyabi was indeed the wealthiest student in the entire school right now.

Although Morishita Ai's balance was no less than his, she was the treasurer for first-year Class A.

Her account was basically a public fund and couldn't be considered her own money.

Not long after the post was published, Kaoru heard several gasps of varying volumes around him.

The sound of discussion grew more intense and excited than before.

Nagumo's post was just one sentence: whoever could get the first-year Class A student, Kaoru, to leave this school would receive twenty million private points.

In an instant, dozens of replies appeared below.

Some were begging to be sponsored, some were asking who Kaoru was, and some were questioning if Nagumo Miyabi had misappropriated public funds.

"This is bad. Nagumo is getting serious. You shouldn't have revealed so much just now." Kiriya called him quickly, her voice tinged with a headache.

"Twenty million is too much. It's enough to make the students in your class betray you!"

One had to understand that the highest goal the school set for students was to graduate from Class A.

Possessing twenty million private points, however, meant that a student had directly secured a guaranteed spot, making it irrelevant even if their class dropped to Class D.

At this moment, Nagumo's intentions were obvious.

He planned to replicate his own experience with the first-years, throwing money around to buy people's loyalty.

Even if he couldn't get Kaoru expelled, he could still disgust him this way.

"Mm, his cooperation with Ryuen is probably similar. He might be giving Ryuen even more favorable terms." Kaoru recalled the conditions Nagumo Miyabi had offered to try and win over Sakayanagi Arisu.

He had to admit, the guy was quite good at throwing money around.

After all, he was the wealthiest student right now; that was his advantage.

Kiriyama Ikuyo was somewhat speechless.

What kind of situation was this, and he was still concerned about Nagumo Miyabi's cooperation with Ryuen Kakeru? Obviously, stabilizing his own class was more important right now.

"I heard there are two leaders in your class, one is Katsuragi, and the other is Sakayanagi. Are you safe?"

"I'm safe. Even if they were both my enemies, I'd still be very safe."

"Aren't you a little too confident?"

"If someone succeeds in getting me expelled, and they are already a Class A student, which class would they transfer to?"

"No, perhaps someone would consider the future risk of the class dropping and want a safety net to be more secure."

"Wrong. For a Class A student, the biggest risk isn't the class dropping, but being eliminated in an exam and then expelled."

The current first-year Class A is leading by such a large margin.

If they really fall, it would only prove they don't deserve their position in Class A.

With this point gap, even if they lose, it would take one or two semesters for them to drop down.

"What about the other classes?" Kiriyama took a slow breath. "If the lower-ranked classes cooperate to expel you and then split the reward, that possibility can't be completely ruled out."

"If they could actually cooperate, I might as well drop out myself," Kaoru said faintly.

"Seems like you have a way to get through this crisis. All I can do is keep my class in check and try to protect you during the next joint exam."

"Thanks."

"You're the one with the best chance of overthrowing Nagumo."

"I'll get you a New Year's gift next time."

"..."

No sooner had Kiriyama's call ended than Horikita Manabu's came through, also inquiring about the bounty.

"No need to be so tense. It'll be over soon."

"There's a joint exam next semester. Nagumo probably knows this, which is why he issued the bounty against you in advance."

"What kind of joint exam?"

"Probably a training camp. I'm not sure about the specifics."

"In that case, Horikita-senpai, why don't we end Nagumo together next semester?"

"...Are you suggesting I team up with Kiriyama-kun?"

"No, I won't interfere with your exams." Kaoru's voice was calm, devoid of any fluctuation. "Since he's so fond of throwing money around, I'll return the favor in kind."

There was no denying that Nagumo was currently one of the top students.

The amount of Personal Points he possessed was something no one could catch up to in a short time.

However, the rules of this school only applied within it.

The so-called Class A privileges were nothing more than a dull trick in the eyes of people like Kouenji Rosuke, Kiryūin Fūka, and Sakayanagi Arisu.

What most students dreamed of as privileges were merely their starting point—not even that, in some cases.

In other words, the core of this school was Class A's privileges.

The significance of Class Points existed solely to uphold those privileges, while Personal Points served no purpose other than acting as currency—except for class transfers.

The higher-ups wanted to use this system to cultivate the talents they desired, but they were also aware that their rules didn't work on certain individuals.

Nagumo's so-called "meritocracy" was just him playing within the school's rules.

The only tools he could leverage were Personal Points and Class Points.

Kaoru had no interest in the school's rules—nor in Nagumo's ideology.

And he certainly wasn't planning to play fair.

[100 Million Yen Bounty on Nagumo Miyabi—Will Add More If Needed!]

Kaoru stopped pretending.

With the backing of the Shinomiya Financial Group, he had no fear of such bounties.

The school forum drew a lot of attention today.

The moment the post went up, people quickly realized Kaoru was one of the parties involved, and the post's popularity skyrocketed.

Moreover, the title was so explosive and confrontational that it shot straight to the top of the trending list like a rocket.

[No way, 100 million yen?]

[If we can get Nagumo expelled, we get 100 million?]

[Feels too fake. Even the rich kids in my class wouldn't claim to have 100 million in pocket money.]

[Clown!]

[He must be desperate. Nagumo's twenty million can transfer classes, but what money does a first-year have? This is a case of a cornered rat biting the cat!]

In response to the onlookers' skepticism, Kaoru Mitoma simply replied with one line.

[I can hire a lawyer to draft a legally compliant contract for everyone. If you don't believe me, you can also look up news about the Shinomiya Financial Group.]

Soon, someone quickly found news about the Shinomiya Financial Group's recent equity changes.

A transfer of shares in such a massive financial group couldn't escape the notice of journalists.

When they saw that the shareholder was someone with the exact same name—Kaoru Mitoma—the forum fell silent for a long time.

Immediately after, Kaoru's private messages nearly exploded, mostly from third-year students.

With graduation looming, they were practically scrambling to cling to his coattails.

Kaoru finally understood why Kouenji Rosuke had senior girls feeding him every day—even students from Class A couldn't resist the temptation!

Is this what life as a Tokyo elite is like?

....

Meanwhile, Nagumo also saw the post about the 100-million-yen bounty, his face turning ashen.

"Impossible. How could he have shares in the Shinomiya Financial Group? One's named Shinomiya, the other Mitoma—shouldn't he be from the Mitoma Financial Group?" Nagumo couldn't make sense of it.

"And the share transfer happened just a few days ago. Could he have flown out or something?"

Nagumo reacted swiftly, refusing to be thrown into chaos by Kaoru's post.

He immediately spotted the oversight Kaoru had neglected.

However, Nagumo didn't outright dismiss it as fake news.

Instead, he cautiously asked his homeroom teacher whether any students had left the school in the past few days.

Normally, a teacher wouldn't answer such a question, but considering Nagumo's status, the teacher didn't see it as a big deal and simply replied.

No one had.

Feeling reassured, Nagumo sneered and took to the forum with sarcasm.

[As far as I know, no student left the school on Christmas Eve.]

[Oh? The man himself has appeared!]

[Perverted student council president!]

[This guy likes little kids, so gross.]

Seeing the replies, Nagumo flew into a rage but had to remind them to focus on the more serious issue—exposing Kaoru's trick.

[Could anyone have left the school?]

[So, is someone lying here?]

[Good thing I didn't send him a selfie. Almost got scammed!]

[Damn it, I already sent him my black stockings! He even said 'show me more'—so disgusting!]

Watching the forum's mood shift, Nagumo felt victory was within his grasp.

A cold smirk spread across his face.

If Kaoru were really a rich heir, he wouldn't have needed to drag Kouenji Rosuke in as a guarantor back then.

So this had to be fake news—just a case of someone with the same name that Kaoru was exploiting.

Was he so rattled by the bounty that he was grasping at straws?

Just as Nagumo was about to fan the flames, he saw Kaoru post a photo in the thread.

[A contract?]

[Real or fake?]

[Big bro, check your DMs! I just sent you a selfie ♥️📷]

Nagumo scrutinized the contract carefully—whether it was the content or the stamped seals, there didn't seem to be any flaws.

It looked almost real.

In an instant, his face darkened.

It couldn't possibly be genuine!

If this were true, it would be an attack from outside the school, something he had no means to defend against.

Kaoru's assault would be unstoppable.

Compared to twenty million Personal Points, a hundred million yen was obviously far more tempting.

But Nagumo Miyabi hadn't lost yet.

His advantage was the school's advantage—Class A's privileges guaranteed 100% employment and university admission.

Could a hundred million yen buy a University of Tokyo student ID?

Getting into the elite programs at the University of Tokyo would allow him to earn back that hundred million yen in no time, with even greater advantages beyond just the money.

Nagumo Miyabi's mind raced.

He didn't recklessly question the contract's authenticity.

Instead, he had his subordinates promote Class A's benefits on the forums to calm the student body.

[Oh?]

Kaoru continued posting.

[On top of the hundred million, I can specially add employment security—an extra company as a bonus.]

At this point, even Nagumo Miyabi's subordinates wavered.

After all, the goal of entering the University of Tokyo was to rise above others.

Now that there was a chance to achieve that status immediately, why not just latch onto the winning side?

Nagumo Miyabi felt his limbs turn cold.

If Kaoru kept this up, not just the second-years—the entire school might defect to his side.

There was no way he could defeat an opponent like this.

This was someone who had already beaten the game of life—a pay-to-win player who could single-handedly destroy the game's balance.

Wait... balance?

Suddenly, Nagumo Miyabi's eyes lit up.

No matter how wealthy Kaoru was, the school wouldn't allow such a situation to persist.

Otherwise, wouldn't the school's rules become meaningless?

So, Nagumo Miyabi called his homeroom teacher again.

Chapter 429: Look Behind You

Perhaps due to the added effect of The Midas Touch, the hype exceeded expectations.

In the café, someone recognized Kaoru, and soon a crowd gathered around him, eager to confirm whether his claims were true.

At one point, an upperclassman noticed he was alone and deliberately brushed against him, nearly clinging to his arm.

Forced to answer a few questions, Kaoru quickly excused himself and left the scene.

His energy was limited—he couldn't waste it on random bystanders with no real aspirations.

Avoiding the crowd, he searched for a quiet place when he unexpectedly ran into Kamuro Masumi, who was carrying shopping bags, likely returning from the mall.

"Good morning, Masumi," Kaoru greeted her.

"Today was fine... until someone decided to use my first name," Masumi retorted with clear displeasure, her gaze flickering briefly toward his wrist.

"My apologies, I forgot your Christmas gift last time." He had genuinely intended to give her one, but he'd spent too long in Sakayanagi's room, leaving too late.

"Don't worry about me. You're Mitoma-sama, after all—your time is far more valuable." She moved to step past him.

"Oh? You actually know how to use honorifics?" Kaoru was genuinely surprised—it was rare to hear polite speech from her.

"I'll speak if I want to, and keep quiet if I don't. What's it to you?" Kamuro Masumi snapped irritably, then frowned in confusion as she saw him standing nonchalantly in her way.

"Shouldn't you be busy putting bounties on Nagumo? Why are you blocking me?"

It seemed news traveled fast—even Masumi already knew about it.

"Nothing much. I just suddenly remembered some of your past... exploits." Kaoru eyed her shopping bag thoughtfully.

"I don't steal every single day!" Masumi huffed, aggressively opening her bag. "Want to see my receipt?"

"As long as I don't catch you in the act, the student council can turn a blind eye." Kaoru rummaged through her bag and pulled out a canned drink.

"Consider this my Christmas present from you."

"Hey!" Masumi glared at him.

Who was the thief here, really?

"In return, this can be my gift to Masumi." Kaoru shoved the reward he'd just redeemed into her hand, giving her no chance to refuse.

Masumi examined the item—a rather gender-neutral-looking hair accessory.

"Your gift-giving approach is downright aggressive. Anyone would think you're mugging me."

"If I didn't do it this way, would you have accepted it?"

"Tch. Is this how rich boys always act?"

"Can you not use that term? It sounds weird."

"Am I wrong? By any measure, you're a playboy surrounded by admirers."

"..."

Kaoru was momentarily speechless—until Masumi snatched the drink back from him.

"Hey, wasn't that your gift to me?"

"I never said that. Someone just decided unilaterally."

"Are you trying to scam the scammer?"

"What's that supposed to mean? You're the scammer here." Masumi twirled a lock of her hair, avoiding his gaze.

"Christmas is already over. This kind of gift is basically unsellable now."

Kaoru gritted his teeth.

'If you think it's unsellable, then just give the damn hairpin back!'

'That reward boosts mental stats, you know!'

Buzz—

Kaoru's phone suddenly vibrated.

When he checked, the caller ID showed an unknown number.

The school-issued phones came with pre-installed SIM cards, so unknown numbers shouldn't exist.

Plus, he'd never shared his number with anyone.

"Mind if I take this?"

"Be my guest."

Kaoru answered the call and heard a gentle male voice.

"Is this Mitoma-kun?" The man sounded familiar, as if they'd met before.

"If you're referring to Mitoma from Class 1-A of ANHS, then yes, that's me." Kaoru searched his memory.

Since the caller could reach his number, they must be affiliated with the school.

The voice carried a mature quality.

"Might this be Chairman Sakayanagi?"

"It's me. My apologies, I hadn't intended to disturb students during their rest time," Sakayanagi Narumori said.

"But when those below couldn't reach a decision, I had to step in personally."

Apparently, the school had verified his identity, considering Kaoru hadn't disguised himself when registering.

"Has my conflict with Nagumo caused trouble for the school?" Kaoru asked rhetorically, knowing full well the administration wouldn't remain passive.

"The school was founded to cultivate talent for our nation's future. Though we've established thousands of rules, even the most comprehensive systems have loopholes - nothing in this world is perfect," Narumori said gently.

"As chairman, I've always hoped students would actively contemplate how to approach examinations, gaining life-enriching experiences through the process."

"My apologies, I didn't consider this sufficiently," Kaoru maintained a humble demeanor.

If wealthy heirs started emulating his money-throwing tactics, the school's regulations would become meaningless.

"No, I'm not reprimanding you, Mitoma. In fact, I've observed your school performance closely," Narumori continued.

"By our standards, you truly embody the qualities expected of a Class A student."

"I'm flattered, but I believe even Class A students must remain vigilant. Anyone could face expulsion at any moment, so taking necessary measures at critical junctures is essential," Kaoru said gravely.

"As the saying goes, it's easy to dodge an open attack, but hard to guard against hidden arrows."

Narumori fell momentarily silent.

"Personally, I'm indifferent about potential expulsion. However, when certain individuals exploit their wealth to openly bounty-hunt classmates, rallying others to expel targets, I find this contradicts the school's founding principles."

Kaoru pressed his advantage, unconcerned about provoking Sakayanagi Narumori.

Since Nagumo Miyabi had initiated the bounty system, if cash bounties were prohibited, why were Personal Points bounties permitted?

Essentially, did this mean anyone with sufficient

Personal Points could issue school-wide bounties?

Wouldn't this degenerate into autocratic rule by the powerful, where might always makes right?

Though ANHS preached meritocracy, Kaoru understood Sakayanagi Narumori wouldn't tolerate absolute power dynamics - otherwise, why maintain the ABCD class system?

After a prolonged pause, Narumori finally spoke.

"I've already instructed Nagumo to retract his bounty and issue a public apology on the forum. Does this satisfy you?"

Under normal circumstances, no apologies would be necessary - Narumori could simply warn both parties simultaneously.

But Kaoru's current status differed.

Even externally, Narumori had to carefully consider Kaoru's perspective.

Kaoru now wielded influence in certain spheres.

Checking the forum, Kaoru found Nagumo's bounty post had indeed been replaced by an apology, expressing regret for misusing public resources and causing disturbances.

"I see. That was impulsive of me earlier. I'll withdraw my post immediately."

After all, as Sakayanagi Arisu's father, Kaoru owed him some deference.

"It's alright, I can understand the thoughts of you young people." Narumori smiled faintly.

"However, if you plan to leave the school, you can inform me in advance. I'll have the security office let you out."

Considering Kaoru's current status, it wasn't surprising he'd make such a decision.

At the very least, Kaoru would need to attend the Shinomiya Financial Group's shareholders' meeting, wouldn't he?

What was truly surprising was that Sakayanagi Narumori didn't even ask how he'd managed to leave.

"That would be too much trouble for Chairman Sakayanagi," Kaoru replied with an equally faint smile, having achieved his goal.

"It's no trouble at all. Though I wonder—am I interrupting your date with a young lady right now?" Narumori's voice carried a teasing lilt.

Kaoru froze for a moment before turning to glance at the surveillance camera not far away, his expression darkening.

Like father, like daughter—both so fond of sneaky observation.

As Kaoru hung up, Kamuro Masumi, unaware of the conversation, asked curiously.

"Who was that just now?"

She thought she'd heard Chairman Sakayanagi's name.

"The school just reminded me to keep a low profile. Nothing important." Kaoru took the confused Masumi's hand and led her away from the surveillance range.

After letting him pull her along for a while, Masumi tried to shake off his grip—until she accidentally caught sight of his bracelet.

"I heard you went on a Christmas date with Ichinose?"

"Didn't I already tell you about that?"

"Is this her Christmas gift to you?"

Kaoru was about to nod when he noticed her gaze fixed on his wrist. His expression turned odd.

"This... isn't from her. It's a gift from Kei."

"Who's Kei?" Masumi wasn't familiar with students from other classes.

"Karuizawa Kei, from Class D. My girlfriend." Kaoru finally admitted it outright.

"Your second girlfriend?" Masumi's expression remained unchanged, though she showed mild surprise—the kind any normal person would display upon hearing such a thing.

"I suppose so." Kaoru wasn't sure how else to explain his relationships.

"No wonder you never have time." Masumi shot him a sidelong glance. "Are you going to let go now?"

Kaoru gave her small hand a light squeeze, refusing to release it, his eyes locked onto hers without blinking.

"Why are you staring at me?" Masumi felt goosebumps rising under his gaze, an uncomfortable shiver running through her.

"Where's my gift?" Kaoru asked shamelessly.

His audacity amused her. She'd initially planned to ignore him, but an inexplicable emotion stirred in her chest.

"Let go of me first."

Kaoru hesitated, but seeing Masumi's irritation flare, he quickly released her hand.

"Actually, I did prepare something for you. But you can only look—no touching." Masumi wore an uncharacteristically stern expression, the most serious he'd ever seen her.

"Fine, hurry up and show me." Kaoru sulked.

What kind of gift can you look at but not touch?

Though it made no sense to him, he didn't care much—as long as he could take it back with him.

"No closing your eyes. No weird noises. If you call anyone over, I'll beat you to death." Masumi's face flushed inexplicably.

This seemed serious. Kaoru cautiously asked, "Can I take a photo?"

"No." Masumi said firmly. "Stand still. Keep your eyes on me. No sounds."

Kaoru watched as she took a few steps back, growing increasingly puzzled and unable to make sense of the situation.

Then, he saw Kamuro Masumi take a deep breath before suddenly gripping the hem of her skirt with both small hands.

Under his astonished gaze, she gradually revealed her plump thighs, the snow-white, smooth skin now fully exposed, tiny goosebumps rising from the slight chill.

"See... see now?" Masumi feigned composure, but her reddened ears betrayed the shame and nervousness in her heart.

"Why... why is it white?" Kaoru blurted out, his mind blank.

"Hah? Are you an idiot?" Masumi immediately regretted her decision. "Since you've seen, that's enough!"

"W-wait, I haven't seen the back yet!" Kaoru's expression changed as he hurriedly tried to stop her.

"Moron, who's going to show you the back?! You should be grateful for what you got!" Masumi was so angry she nearly kicked him.

"Front and back are different—you can't generalize." Intimidated by her glare, Kaoru didn't dare step closer.

"Pfft, so the others don't show you either?" Masumi's face was icy.

"They do, but right now, I'd rather see Masumi's." Kaoru replied. "Besides, this is your first time doing something like this, right? Does that mean... you don't hate me?"

"I—I-I..." Masumi's cold demeanor quickly melted. After a brief fluster, she forced herself to stay composed.

"It's because you're such a pervert! The moment we met, you asked to see down there—so are you satisfied now?"

Kaoru froze.

Had she really remembered the teasing remark he'd casually thrown at her back then until now?

"Can you step on me now?" he ventured.

"Degenerate!" Masumi finally snapped, throwing a punch that sent Kaoru dodging.

"Hold on, let me check if you even have the urge to hit people!"

"Who cares about that?!"

"The Masumi I remember is a gentle, sweet girl who'd never hit anyone."

"Cut the crap!"

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Truthfully, Masumi wasn't that angry. After letting her land a few hits, Kaoru quickly soothed her temper.

"Hey, wanna hang out together for New Year's?"

Masumi shot him a sidelong glance, watching as he took half a step back. She wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or amused.

"You're hoping for another gift, aren't you?"

"I really want to see it again."

"Keep dreaming."

"And after I dream?"

"How should I know?"

"I like you, Masumi."

"..."

Masumi stopped in her tracks as Kaoru took the shopping bag from her hands.

"I'll carry it back to your dorm."

"What did you just say?"

"That I like you."

"..."

Masumi couldn't pretend she hadn't heard.

Why did he say it so naturally, as if he were just answering whether he'd eaten or not?

"What's wrong?"

"You said you like me."

"I know. Masumi doesn't have to rush—you can take your time liking me back. Until then, I'll keep liking you."

"I never said I would."

"And I never said you couldn't refuse. Until you agree, I'll keep feeling this way."

"..."

Kamuro Masumi watched his retreating figure with a jumble of thoughts, wanting to follow yet frozen in place until a clump of snow fell from nearby treetops, startling the girl back to awareness.

"Too slow."

Kaoru barely registered the girl darting past him before she snatched the shopping bag from his hand.

"I was waiting for you."

"If you were waiting, you shouldn't have walked so fast."

"Hey, now you're saying I walked too fast?"

"I showed you earlier—what did you think?"

Kamuro Masumi clasped her hands behind her back, walking backward while keeping her gaze fixed on Kaoru as if guided by radar.

"Thanks...?" Kaoru ventured.

"Disgusting," Masumi shot back without hesitation before adding, "Actually, I don't even know why I showed you. It felt like an impulse."

"More impulses like that, please," Kaoru said earnestly.

"Why do you like me?" Masumi asked.

Kaoru thought for a moment before countering, "Do you like snow?"

"No," Masumi answered bluntly.

"..." Kaoru fell silent for a long moment.

"Truth is, I don't like snow either. But I do like walking home with you when it snows."

"You like being with me?" Masumi frowned.

"I like you, and I also like the version of myself when I'm with you," Kaoru said with a smile.

"If that's the case, you shouldn't have said to look down there," Masumi muttered, pursing her lips.

"The more I like you, the more I want to see—because I can't help wanting to be closer to you, Masumi." Kaoru took a small step forward.

Masumi retreated a step. "I don't understand what liking someone feels like."

"Then don't think about it," Kaoru said. "When you do like someone, you'll realize it."

Masumi considered this and found it made sense.

"Aren't you going to brainwash me?"

"Brainwash you how?"

"Aren't you good with words? This would be the perfect chance to fill my head with weird ideas. Or pin me to the bed and threaten me, saying this is your leverage—tell me to give up resisting."

"...I never should've brought you along in the first place."

"I saw you kissing the senpai."

"I know. Why did you bring Yamamura along?"

"Who would've thought you'd be so bold."

Kamuro Masumi turned around and finally started walking normally.

The sway of the girl's skirt occasionally brushed against her plump thighs, reminding Kaoru of the scene from earlier.

"Would you obediently comply if I threatened you?"

"No." Masumi rejected the idea without hesitation. "If you dare threaten me, I'll take you down with me."

"Is that so? Well, I never planned to threaten you anyway," Kaoru Mitoma said.

After a moment of silence, Masumi spoke up: "I'm boring, and not as cute as others."

"I like you," Kaoru replied.

"Even if you like me, I won't like you back," Masumi said flatly.

"I'll still like you," Kaoru continued.

"Suit yourself," Masumi said. "I won't like someone who has multiple girlfriends anyway."

"As long as you don't hate me," Kaoru smiled slightly. "New Year's is coming up in a few days. Let's get along well next year too, Masumi."

As he spoke, he extended his hand toward the girl.

"Don't call my name like that..." Masumi hesitated for a moment before taking his hand.

"Let's get along well... as classmates."

"Yeah, as classmates for now," Kaoru agreed with her words but didn't let go of her hand.

Seeing how tightly he was holding on, Masumi realized she had no chance to break free and simply allowed him to keep holding it.

Chapter 430: Mommy!

Although both Nagumo Miyabi and Kaoru Mitoma's bounties had been revoked by the school, they left a deep impression on the students.

First-years were shocked that someone had actually achieved the 20 million Personal Points goal, while second and third-years were stunned by Kaoru's true identity—especially the graduating senpais, who deeply regretted not approaching him earlier.

However, the quickest to react were likely Tonokawa Sosuke and Mizuto Mizowaki from Class 2-A.

Even if the school banned such overt bounties, it was difficult to restrict student behavior.

If Kaoru offered cash to certain people under other pretexts, there would naturally be those willing to serve him and mercilessly attack Class 2-A.

Under the temptation of a major financial conglomerate, the privileges of Class A seemed particularly insignificant and powerless—even the students themselves were somewhat tempted, let alone others.

For lower-ranked classes who saw no hope of advancement, the temptation was too great, and they might fully align themselves with Kaoru.

Even upperclassmen might join in.

Could one class withstand the assault of the entire school?

Thus, Class 2-A would become the primary target in Kaoru's confrontation with Nagumo.

This development exceeded Tonokawa Sosuke's initial expectations.

He had planned to play both sides between Kaoru and Nagumo as long as his class's interests weren't harmed.

Who knew Kaoru would turn out to be an ultra-rich heir? Now they had to make a decision quickly.

As soon as Kaoru returned to his room, Katsuragi came to visit him.

"Tonokawa-senpai mentioned that there might be a joint exam next semester. Though the format is still unclear, they'll follow our instructions while asking us not to interfere in the second-years' competition."

Kaoru handed him a cup of barley tea and added.

"Their stance is quite firm—they're afraid I might help Kiriyaama reclaim Class A's position, which would make them reluctant to lose Nagumo."

"We can't really meddle in upperclassmen affairs anyway," Katsuragi said, taking a sip of the tea.

In events like the sports festival's joint exam, they were teammates with Class 2-A and couldn't just attack another class arbitrarily.

Otherwise, upperclassmen might exploit their advantage to bully lower-year classes—something the school had considered, given their access to more information.

"By 'instructions,' do they mean I can order them around freely?"

"They likely mean acting as spies, feeding us intel without taking direct action. After all, Nagumo is their classmate."

"Planning to sell someone out but still worried about that?"

Kaoru was speechless.

If they truly saw Nagumo Miyabi as an ally, they wouldn't be plotting to betray him.

If they really believed in meritocracy, this level of hesitation was just hypocritical.

"Many in their class are die-hard loyalists to Nagumo," Katsuragi explained. "Not just in Class 2-A—he has followers in the second and third years too."

He pulled out his phone and showed Kaoru a list.

"These are people Nagumo frequently interacts with. Tonokawa marked the loyalists, the wavering ones, and those we can potentially sway."

Kaoru's expression turned odd.

It felt like Nagumo was some super-villain, and they were underground operatives trying to dismantle his faction.

"By the way... are you really from the Shinomiya Financial Group? That... thing they say?" Katsuragi suddenly gave him a strange look.

"You mean, am I just bluffing?" Kaoru knew what Tonokawa Sosuke and the others were thinking—crossing Nagumo now would be far costlier than abandoning him.

Katsuragi fumbled awkwardly.

"I heard the Shinomiya main and branch families don't have anyone named Mitoma. Some say you're the illegitimate son of the Mitoma conglomerate..."

Kaoru's face darkened.

"I'd love to satisfy your curiosity, but I can say with full certainty—I'm no one's illegitimate child, nor am I anyone's heir. I'm just me."

Katsuragi inexplicably sighed in relief.

Honestly, having a close friend suddenly turn out to be some elite scion was hard to digest.

"So, do we accept Tonokawa-senpai terms?"

"No rush. We're not the ones in a hurry." Kaoru showed Katsuragi his phone. "Even if I delete the post now, people are still reaching out. Some even offer help without payment."

Katsuragi's expression grew complicated.

The allure of a major financial group was more terrifying than he'd imagined—no wonder the school had stepped in to handle their bounty.

"Has the school asked anything of you?"

Even Nagumo Miyabi was forced to issue a public apology.

It was said he had quite the tantrum in the student council office.

Katsuragi was surprised that Kaoru received no punishment at all.

"It wasn't my fault to begin with. Even if we concede a step, doesn't the school share some blame?" Kaoru said.

"When admitting students from wealthy families, the school should have anticipated situations like this. Yet they only think about patching things up after the fact."

Katsuragi's lips twitched.

No, he thought the school probably never imagined this scenario.

Not every rich kid could casually produce tens of millions, or even hundreds of millions in cash.

Moreover, he suspected most of these children had received instructions from their families before entering school.

Take Kouenji Rosuke for example—aside from being a freeloader, he did nothing at all, completely at odds with his rich second-generation status.

Besides, how many wealthy heirs would even be willing to attend this kind of fully enclosed school?

Kaoru saw Katsuragi out, then returned to his room.

After playing with his laptop for a while and reading news about himself, he glanced around the unusually quiet surroundings.

Suddenly, he felt like calling them over for a party—it was about time they met each other.

But the thought vanished as quickly as it came.

Kaoru quickly dismissed the idea.

In their current situation, forcing them together might just tear the house apart.

Better let things take their natural course.

Click—

Hearing the door unlock, Kaoru looked toward the entrance to see Ichinose Honami carrying shopping bags.

She folded her umbrella, her coat still dusted with snowflakes, even her hair sprinkled with white.

"Mmm, you really are home."

Noticing his gaze, the girl's lovely face broke into an especially cheerful smile.

"Where else would I be? The snow's getting heavier outside—I can't believe you went out." Kaoru picked up a towel, walked over, and wiped her face before ruffling her hair.

"It started snowing halfway! What was I supposed to do?" Ichinose narrowed her eyes playfully.

"Besides, isn't New Year's coming up soon?"

"Going to wish me a happy new year?" Kaoru glanced past her—she seemed to be alone—and casually closed the door.

"Of course I will! But I thought we should have some nice food for the occasion, so here I am." Ichinose lifted her shopping bags, packed full of ingredients.

"Let me take care of you these next few days, Kaoru!"

Watching her radiant smile, Kaoru fell into deep thought.

Should he call her "mom" right now?