

Cote 431

Chapter 431: Was She Actually the Most Behind?

Kaoru handed her the towel and took the shopping bags, only to notice her puffing her cheeks slightly.

"What's wrong?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"...Thank you?"

"No, silly! When coming home, shouldn't you say that phrase?"

"You didn't say it either."

"Hehe, because I'm a little shy."

Ichinose Honami completely avoided his gaze, glancing elsewhere in embarrassment.

This wasn't her home, after all—she couldn't just casually say "I'm back" without permission.

So, she had to wait for Kaoru to take the initiative.

Moreover, she noticed an extra pair of indoor slippers by the entrance.

Whose were they?

If it were just someone who visited occasionally like her, Kaoru wouldn't need to keep a dedicated pair of slippers ready—unless that person stayed over often, maybe even showered here.

How sneaky.

She had never done that before.

Thump—

Kaoru suddenly tapped her forehead, snapping her out of her thoughts.

"Welcome back, Honami," he said. "Would you like to eat first, or take a bath first?"

"Huh?" Ichinose covered her forehead, momentarily dazed, before suppressing a giggle and pretending to think seriously for a moment.

"Let me see... Is there no third option?"

"Pervert." Kaoru tapped her again.

Ichinose flushed, slightly annoyed. "I didn't even say what it was!"

"You asked for a third option, so of course I get to decide what it means."

"Uwah, so you're the pervert here!"

"If you could guess what I'd do, doesn't that make you the bigger pervert, Honami?"

"Guh..."

Watching her puffed-up cheeks, Kaoru chuckled before tilting her chin up and pressing a light kiss to her soft lips.

"Dinner isn't ready yet, and the bathwater isn't drawn," he murmured. "So the first two options are useless anyway. Besides, I just wanted to kiss you."

Ichinose covered her reddening face.

This guy always ambushed her like this.

"Go sit in the room for a bit," Kaoru said, carrying the shopping bags toward the kitchen.

"W-Wait, I should be the one cooking!" Ichinose hurriedly kicked off her shoes at the entrance.

She was wearing black tights—velvet, thin yet warm—and her small feet padded across the clean floor as she chased after him.

"In that case, let's work together." Kaoruk began unpacking the ingredients.

He could cook too—he often took care of the idols living in the dorm.

"But I'm not that skilled. I'll assist you instead."

Ichinose eyed him skeptically.

Did guys in this world really know how to cook?

Back in school, most of the boys in her class either had their mothers make bento for them or bought convenience store meals.

Even now, her classmates mostly ate in the cafeteria.

Soon, Kaoru shattered her stereotype.

"W-Wow, Kaoru, your knife skills are amazing! Can I take a picture?"

"Is this also miso soup?"

"It's delicious!"

"No way, how are you this good at this?"

"Do you cook alone often, Kaoru?"

Since there was only one apron, Kaoru tied it around her waist and handled smaller tasks beside her—never expecting her to react so excitedly.

"Ugh, this is frustrating. I was supposed to be taking care of you."

Watching Kaoru move so skillfully, Ichinose felt oddly dejected, as if she wasn't needed.

"Aren't you taking care of me right now?" Kaoru tilted his head. "If you hadn't brought ingredients, I probably would've just bought instant noodles from the convenience store."

"Hey hey hey, why are you eating that!" Ichinose Honami was stunned, then quickly became dejected.

"What I wanted was for Kaoru to do nothing and just sit beside me, waiting obediently for me to feed you."

"..." Kaoru fell silent.

Did she really not know what she was saying?

"At home, my little sister would sit in the living room doing homework while I cooked in the kitchen. Mom wouldn't come back until later, so I was always the one taking care of my sister," Ichinose said.

"Later I tried working part-time for a month or two, but it just didn't work out because I couldn't balance studying, work, and taking care of my sister."

"So now you want me to play the role of your little sister?" Kaoru guessed she must have seen something about her sister that suddenly made her nostalgic.

"That's different!" Ichinose became flustered. "Kaoru is my... my boyfriend after all. I was thinking I should properly show my feminine side."

"You've made me bento before, haven't you?" Kaoru recalled.

"Bento doesn't count! And before me, I heard you ate bento for a long time—it must have been from someone else!" Ichinose's mood inexplicably heightened as she stared intently at Kaoru.

Kaoru subtly averted his gaze.

To be fair, Horikita Suzune hadn't been making them for that long either.

"And also... Kaoru left school just for me, found my sister, and then..." Ichinose's voice gradually grew quieter.

Though she didn't know how Kaoru had managed to leave school, that didn't lessen how touched she was by his actions.

"Compared to that, it feels like I haven't done anything for Kaoru..."

She lowered her head slightly.

Kaoru glanced at the ingredients on the cutting board, then washed his hands and gently cupped her face with his still-cool fingers.

"Whoa, that's freezing!"

In an instant, Ichinose Honami startled and swatted his hand away, instinctively taking a small step back.

"I'll leave this to you. I'll go prepare some hot water."

Seizing the moment before she could react, Kaoru quickly slipped away.

Ichinose puffed her cheeks in dissatisfaction, muttering something about him being a jerk, but still curled her lips into a smile as she rolled up her sleeves and resumed chopping.

By the time Kaoru had finished filling the tub with hot water, she was still busy in the kitchen.

He glanced outside—the sky was gradually darkening.

Come to think of it, he seemed to have forgotten the Christmas gifts for Sakura Airi and Yamamura Miki.

Should he make it up to them during New Year's?

No, that wouldn't work.

Who gives gifts for New Year's? And if he did, he'd have to give them to everyone to be fair.

Kaoru checked his phone.

Thanks to Karuizawa and Kushida's frequent visits, he now strictly required both of them to notify him in advance.

Good—neither of them planned to come over tonight.

Next were messages from Amikura Mako, Sakayanagi Arisu, Kamuro Masumi, and Sakura Airi.

He replied to each, though he found it a little strange that Airi had mustered the courage to message him.

It seemed to be a selfie—bolder than her usual posts, with a deliberate focus on her legs.

Kaoru wasn't sure how to interpret it, so he defaulted to standard responses like "You look great," "That hairstyle suits you," and "You're too cute—send more, please."

Before long, Ichinose finished cooking her specialty dish.

Kaoru took a couple of bites—it tasted slightly better than last time.

She must have been refining the recipe these past few days.

"It's delicious."

"Really?"

"If last time was a hundred points, this time it's a hundred percent delicious."

"Eh? Doesn't that mean it's just as good?"

"Because it's Honami's cooking. No matter what, it's always delicious."

"..."

By the end of his words, Ichinose's face was completely red, and she silently focused on eating.

Since she had cooked, Kaoru dutifully took care of the dishes.

"Tonight..." Her voice trailed off hesitantly, and even without turning around, he could picture her expression.

"No one's coming over, right?"

"Do you really think people stay over at my place every night?" Kaoru retorted, though guilt crept into his tone.

"Isn't that the case?" The girl's voice carried a hint of sharpness.

"The only one who stays over is Kei. The slippers you saw earlier are hers." He wasn't lying—though Kushida Kikyo and Horikita Suzune visited often, Karuizawa Kei was the only one who actually stayed the night.

Ever since they crossed that final line, Kei had grown increasingly clingy, frequently spending the night.

At first, she used the emergency stairwell, but eventually, she stopped pretending and just took the elevator down.

Once, she had proudly told him she'd nearly been caught—but cleverly rode the elevator to the first floor before sneaking back up to the second via the stairs.

"Staying over..." Ichinose murmured. "She wasn't upset? I took up your entire Christmas day for our date."

She assumed Kei had the evening slot, unaware that her date was actually scheduled for the next day.

"A little bit."

Although Karuizawa didn't say it out loud, Kaoru knew girls could get jealous over such things.

After all, Ichinose Honami had already made their relationship public, while she hadn't.

Ichinose remained silent for a while before speaking up, "Why don't you go on a date with her too, right in front of everyone?"

"Wouldn't that affect you?" Kaoru could already picture the scene—something many would find unacceptable, too shocking to comprehend.

"Aren't we in a normal relationship?" Ichinose said. "Besides, no one said you can only have one girlfriend. If I'm okay with it, what can others say?"

Kaoru was momentarily at a loss for words.

If it were just Karuizawa Kei, he might have considered the idea.

But he had too many partners, and neglecting their feelings could lead to an explosion.

"You seem a bit hesitant. Worried about someone?" Ichinose hummed teasingly. "Is there someone who doesn't know about your harem tendencies?"

That "someone" naturally referred to his other partners, like Tachibana Akane and Airi Sakura, who were still in the dark.

Kaoru felt slightly awkward, and Ichinose Honami, seeing his silence, knew she had guessed right.

"Can I meet Karuizawa-san?"

"Anytime."

"Mm, I mean the three of us—in your room, just talking."

She deliberately emphasized her words, making sure he heard her clearly.

"So, giving me a taste of having both arms full in advance?" Kaoru rubbed his chin.

"Not a bad idea. Honestly, I've been wanting you two to meet."

Though he didn't voice his thoughts, Ichinose could guess a little.

Her face flushed as she glared at his back.

"What are you imagining? Karuizawa-san and I won't indulge your wild fantasies."

Two at once? That was too shameless.

Even if she didn't mind getting intimate with Kaoru, this scenario pushed the limits of her maidenly sensibilities.

"Didn't you say we'd just talk?"

"Yes! Talking only!"

"That sounds boring."

"F-fine, I'll allow some kissing. Happy now?"

"What about touching?"

"Hey, hey, hey! Is this how you usually treat Karuizawa-san?"

"I like how Honami feels."

"Guh..."

There was no helping it.

If he insisted, Ichinose Honami knew she wouldn't refuse him.

She could only accept this humiliating compromise.

"By the way, are you staying tonight?" Kaoru emerged from the kitchen.

She had been lingering, even taking off her coat, leaving only her cardigan and undershirt, paired with a pleated skirt.

Her legs were pressed together, clearly showing no intention of leaving.

As if suddenly exposed, Ichinose's face burned red, her eyes filled with flustered panic.

No matter how hard she tried to suppress her shame and nervousness, she could only stammer under his gaze.

"I-is that not okay?"

"It's not that, but I don't have spare clothes for you here."

"I... I brought some."

She actually had another bag with her. Ichinose Honami was too embarrassed to pull out her pajamas, but she had come prepared tonight.

Kaoru gave her a strange look before suddenly smiling.

"I don't mind, but you better not regret it."

Ichinose understood what he meant and couldn't help but blush as she nodded, whispering softly.

"I-I've heard that living together can strengthen a couple's bond... I mentioned it to Mako... I'll be staying with you for the next few days..."

Kaoru was taken aback—it wasn't just about staying the night, but several days?

This was bad.

If that were the case, the others would definitely have strong opinions about it.

"Would this bother you?" Ichinose peeked at his reaction, her heart pounding.

Since she had offered to take care of him, staying for several days would naturally count as proper care, right?

Kaoru exhaled, calming down slightly.

Judging by the girl's expression, she genuinely seemed to believe this—but that very realization made him aware that her possessiveness hadn't diminished in the slightest.

Perhaps because of their Christmas date, she had grown even more eager to monopolize Mitoma Kaoru.

She just hadn't noticed it herself—or perhaps she thought she had suppressed her possessive urges.

"No, not at all." Kaoru didn't reject the request.

Maybe this could also be an opportunity for her to meet the others.

"Hehe, then I'm relieved!" Ichinose seemed delighted.

"The hot water probably hasn't cooled yet. You should go take a bath first so you don't catch a cold."

Ichinose nodded reflexively before suddenly realizing something and staring at Kaoru in surprise, leaving him baffled.

"Is there something on my face?"

"N-no, nothing!"

Of course, the girl couldn't say it out loud—she had expected him to take the chance to do something mischievous, but his serious demeanor instead left her feeling strangely unaccustomed.

Suggesting they bathe together or something like that was completely out of the question now.

Ichinose steadied her emotions and was about to head to the bathroom when she suddenly remembered something and froze.

Wait—staying over, bathing together?

Hadn't he mentioned earlier that Karuizawa had stayed here before?

That meant the two of them had likely bathed together, right?

No, no, no—they might have even gone much further than that!

He wasn't a coward, and a lecher like him would never let a delicate girl like her slip away!

In an instant, Ichinose wavered.

Was she actually the most lagging-behind girlfriend?

Chapter 432: Kikyo, Full of Naughty Thoughts

Though she was in the bath, Kaoru had no intention of peeking.

Instead, he answered a call from Kushida.

At first, she might have called him with an overwhelming sense of humiliation, but as time passed, Kushida had grown comfortable enough to call him casually—even enjoying their conversations.

"Perverved foot fetishist, I need to pee now!"

"Address me properly."

"Perverved Master."

"Never mind, hold it in."

"Master~ I really need to pee~"

Listening to her carefree laughter, Kaoru didn't know how to respond.

Their exchanges were neither like a normal couple's nor like a typical master-servant relationship.

Not only that, but Kushida sometimes used these calls to vent about her day.

The pure little angel, who usually maintained her sweet persona by patiently listening to others' troubles, completely dropped the act in front of Kaoru.

She openly criticized the idiots in their class, spewing nothing but negativity.

Today, however, she seemed to be in a good mood.

Instead of complaining, Kushida spent the call teasing Kaoru.

"Hey hey, pervy master, wanna see how I look right now?"

The sound of splashing water came from the other end - even an idiot would know what situation she was currently in.

"Sure, send me a video," Kaoru replied without hesitation.

"You really don't hesitate at all, do you?" Kushida pouted, then suddenly changed her tone to a sweet voice.

"No way I'm sending a video~ But if you come up here, I'll give you a 100% live show?"

"You just want to know what I'm doing tonight, don't you?" Kaoru saw through her intentions.

"Hah, you think I care that much about you?" Kushida sounded displeased. "It's just that your Ichinose is so clueless - carrying a whole bag of stuff up to the second floor. Everyone knows what you're up to!"

"We're not doing anything. She's just staying over for a few days," Kaoru explained.

"Staying over?" Kushida couldn't hold back. "Even I haven't stayed over yet! Just how many games are you two playing?"

"I told you, nothing's happened between us." Kaoru genuinely wasn't planning anything - these past few days had been too comfortable, and he didn't want to get caught up in daily battles and female temptations.

"Heh." Kushida didn't believe him at all, then asked somewhat nervously, "Does she know about... us?"

"Actually, I wanted to tell you - she wants everyone to meet up. You should come by when you're free these next few days."

Kushida muttered something under her breath.

This "meeting" was probably just Ichinose trying to establish her position.

Everyone knew only the main wife could call such gatherings.

Then again, why should she care about such things?

She wasn't competing for status anyway.

It might be more fun to see how others would react.

Besides, with so many people together... doing naughty things would be extra exciting, wouldn't it?

Kushida's mind filled with images of mischief.

Their last "duet" had left a deep impression - nothing was more satisfying than watching Horikita Suzune transform from her haughty self into a dazed, lustful woman.

Now she realized she might get to witness even more scenes like that!

What expression would Ichinose make? How would Karuizawa react? Would Sakayanagi stick out her tongue?

Kushida grew excited.

Under normal circumstances, she'd never get to see these people's fallen expressions - especially not those geniuses and popular figures she'd once envied.

Just imagining them now being in the same position as herself made the last traces of unease and humiliation in Kushida's heart completely vanish.

So Kushida readily agreed, hanging up before Kaoru could react.

Kaoru couldn't quite understand her thoughts.

Without being able to use Emotion Perception right now, he couldn't tell if she was angry, shy, or nervous.

Soon after, Ichinose emerged cautiously from the bathroom, wearing only thin pajamas.

Perhaps due to having just bathed, her hair carried a damp sheen, with glistening droplets moistening the strands by her ears.

The faint scent of shampoo made the girl appear even softer and more delicate.

Her fair skin was smooth and refined, while the thin fabric strained against her prominently raised chest, revealing just a hint beneath.

The buttons accentuated her slender waist, so narrow it seemed one could encircle it with a single hand.

The full curve of her hips tapered into slightly loose sleep pants, leaving her bare feet exposed—dainty and exquisite like porcelain, with pink-tinged soles resting soundlessly against the floor, leaving only faint footprints.

It was only then that Kaoru realized he had forgotten to prepare slippers for her and hurriedly fetched a pair of disposable ones.

Girls tend to be particular about their personal belongings, and he couldn't possibly let Ichinose wear Karuizawa slippers—both of them would feel uncomfortable.

"Your turn to bathe, Kaoru," Ichinose said shyly.

It was the first time she had appeared before Kaoru in such a state, and she felt utterly self-conscious, as if he could see right through her.

"Your hair isn't dry yet, let me blow-dry it for a while." Kaoru noticed that most of the girls kept their hair quite long—except for Ibuki and Manabe, everyone had long hair.

Ichinose Honami had initially planned to do it herself, but then she realized that having him blow-dry her hair was a first-time experience, and she couldn't help but feel a flutter in her heart.

However, she had underestimated just how overwhelming this "first time" would be.

When Kaoru's fingers ran through her hair, she sat with her back to him, a shiver running down her spine.

Then came the warm breeze from the hairdryer, making her feel as if her entire body was floating.

"Mm..." Ichinose shifted slightly, her shoulders hunching as she buried her face in embarrassment.

Who knew having someone blow-dry your hair could be this mortifying?

Kaoru had helped many girls with their hair before, so he was quite skilled at it.

One should never underestimate a girl's long hair—if mishandled, they might just kill you.

"Um, is Nagumo-senpai problem going to be alright?" Ichinose asked, trying to distract herself from her shyness.

"Don't worry, he's the one who should be anxious right now." Kaoru gently stroked her hair—it was smooth and silky.

The nape of her neck was fair and flawless.

Given how prominent the girl's chest was, Kaoru could even catch glimpses of the snow-white, voluptuous peaks from behind, the deep crevice between them almost mesmerizing.

"Thank goodness the school stepped in to stop it. That was way too reckless." Ichinose puffed up her cheeks, completely unaware of how much she was exposing.

Even if she knew, she probably wouldn't care.

Kaoru nodded in agreement, then suddenly realized something was off and cautiously asked.

"Aren't you going to ask me about it, Honami?"

"Huh? About you, Kaoru?" Ichinose didn't quite understand what he meant.

"The Shinomiya Financial Group thing," Kaoru said, surprised that someone wouldn't be curious about it.

"Oh, that? I saw it, but what about it?" Ichinose still didn't get it.

Kaoru fell silent for a moment.

Though she could be sharp at times, she could also be incredibly naive.

Even if she knew her boyfriend was wealthy, she probably wouldn't think much of it.

After all, giant financial groups were something far removed from ordinary people's lives.

"Never mind. So, Honami, when do you plan to get married?"

"M-Married?!"

The sudden question nearly made Ichinose Honami bite her tongue, her face turning bright red.

"Yeah, you can get married right after high school, right?" Kaoru recalled Japan's legal age—she was clearly old enough now.

Not that he intended to strictly follow the law anyway.

"Mmm..." Ichinose Honami lowered her head deeply, her voice barely above a whisper, her crimson ears looking utterly delicious.

Kaoru smiled.

It didn't matter if his girlfriend didn't understand the influence of a financial group—she'd find out soon enough after marriage.

Chapter 433: Can Whine to Honami's Mom

After finishing with her hair, Kaoru enjoyed the bathwater his girlfriend had used.

Of course, this only meant they shared the same hot water in the tub—he didn't have any particular perverted desires.

When he returned to his room, Ichinose Honami who had been sitting on the edge of the bed, seemed startled and quickly hid her phone, tucking both hands behind her back as her gaze darted around nervously.

"What time do you usually go to bed, Honami?" Kaoru pretended not to notice her actions.

"Eh, I, I usually... go to bed around ten o'clock," Ichinose stammered slightly, particularly when mentioning the time.

She paused inexplicably for a brief moment, her tone dropping a few notes lower.

Kaoru checked the time—it was exactly 8:30 PM.

Was she expecting something?

"How about we chat for a bit?" Kaoru sat down beside her.

The faint fragrance of the girl wafted over, carrying the familiar scent of shower gel, more alluring than usual.

"W-what should we talk about?" Ichinose stiffened her posture.

The moment the words left her mouth, she regretted it—didn't that make her seem too nervous?

Kaoru thought for a moment before saying, "Actually, I can apply for permission to leave campus now. If you'd like to see your sister, I can take you out."

Ichinose froze for a while, her previously tense expression gradually softening.

She murmured, "Thank you... for always thinking so much about me."

"No, it's Honami who reminded me of things I should be doing." Kaoru didn't regret his past actions.

If not for that, the two might not have grown as close as they were now.

All he had to do was nurture this relationship step by step.

"But... I don't feel like I've corrected Kaoru at all. Instead, it's Kaoru who... who's led me astray," Ichinose said shyly.

"It feels like I've just been relying on Kaoru, enjoying all the benefits you've given me."

Kaoru's hand, resting on the edge of the bed, slowly moved over and took hold of the girl's small hand, intertwining their fingers before locking them together.

Softly, he whispered, "That's enough. I know Honami likes me, which is why you're willing to indulge in mischief with me."

"N-no, that's not it!" Ichinose shook her head slightly, as if trying to shake off her embarrassment. Her voice was tiny as she added.

"I... I want to do something for Kaoru too."

Kaoru turned his face toward her, gazing at the girl's delicate features before suddenly smiling.

"Alright, then kiss me right now."

Under his intense stare, Ichinose's face flushed red.

Her long lashes fluttered slightly, but she pressed her rosy lips together, leaned in slightly, and bravely kissed him.

"L-like this?" The girl didn't dare meet his eyes, her reddened ears drooping as if in shame.

"Mhm, close enough." Kaoru's throat moved slightly.

The girl before him was clad only in thin pajamas, her full chest seemingly ready to burst through the strained buttons, faintly outlining her voluptuous curves.

The slight rise of her flushed peaks drew his gaze, while her silky hair cascaded over her fair neck, adding to her delicate charm.

Her slender legs were pressed tightly together, poised like a well-behaved honor student.

"Not enough."

Under Kaoru's gaze, she kissed him again before burying her burning face against his chest.

"L-let's... do... something bad?"

As she threw herself into his arms, her incredibly soft chest pressed against him.

Her shoulders hunched slightly, and she couldn't bring herself to look at him.

Combined with those words, Kaoru felt his blood surging through his veins.

Thankfully, he had vented some energy over the past few days—otherwise, he might not have been able to suppress the impulse.

"Honami, what mischief are you up to?" Kaoru embraced the girl before him, his hand resting on her slender waist as a peculiar glint flashed in his eyes.

"Could it be that you wanted to stay over precisely to get naughty, you little minx Honami?"

"I-I don't know! And I'm not a minx!" Ichinose grew even more flustered, yet the emotions swirling in her heart compelled her to voice the question trembling on her lips.

"Y-you've... done it with Karuizawa-san, haven't you?"

Ahem. Kaoru cleared his throat.

"To be honest, I didn't plan it initially. She didn't refuse me, and then... we just did it."

Even to his own ears, the explanation sounded like something a scumbag would say, making him feel increasingly guilty.

"When did this happen?" Ichinose's voice gave no indication of her feelings.

With her face still buried in Kaoru's chest, her expression remained completely hidden.

After a moment's hesitation, Kaoru decided to come clean about his relationship with Karuizawa Kei—omitting only the more intimate details.

"So that's how it was. You threatened her too, and gave her a ring." Ichinose mumbled against his chest, her words slightly muffled.

"No wonder she broke up with Hirata-kun so decisively. I've noticed she's been deliberately keeping her distance from other boys lately... And people have seen her going out at night frequently."

"Aren't you angry?" Kaoru felt somewhat awkward—by any normal standard, his involvement with Kei would qualify as cheating.

"Just a little. The thought of my boyfriend being... consumed when I wasn't paying attention..." Ichinose pouted, pressing her forehead petulantly against his chest.

"Mmm... it's somewhat frustrating."

Shouldn't it be that I consumed Karuizawa?

Yet her sulky demeanor struck him as utterly adorable.

Gently stroking her hair, Kaoru murmured, "You're right, this is my fault. I failed to control my desires."

"No! It's not Kaoru's fault at all! You shouldn't have to restrain your desires!" Ichinose insisted. "This happened because I failed in my duties as your girlfriend. That's why you... vented with Karuizawa-san instead."

Kaoru blinked, momentarily stunned by her unexpected logic.

"So... so should we... do something naughty now?" the girl whispered. "But... I'm a little scared. We don't have any protection... Could I... do what we did last time?"

Last time—meaning blowjob?

Kaoru swallowed hard. "Honami, do you feel like this is how you should make it up to me?"

Perhaps witnessing his various transgressions had planted in Ichinose's mind the notion that she needed to compensate him in this manner.

"A little... But truthfully, I... I also want to be naughty. Your Honami has become quite corrupted." She moved to cover her burning cheeks.

"Ever since we got together, my mind keeps filling with images of us being intimate—wanting your kisses, your embraces, your touch."

Kaoru opened his mouth but found himself at a loss for words.

Suddenly, the girl lifted her lovely face from his chest to plant another kiss on his lips, her small hands already wandering with increasing boldness.

"Honami."

"D-do you want me to take it out?"

"Can I ask you to do something a bit unusual?"

"Hmm? Of course! You can ask me for anything, Kaoru."

"Could you give me a lap pillow?"

"...Eh?"

At first, Ichinose was puzzled—what mischief could possibly come from a lap pillow?

Under Kaoru's guidance, she quickly realized just how strange this position was!

"S-should we... undo it?"

"I want to take a bite, Honami Mama."

"Mmm... P-please don't suddenly call me something so weird... I-I'll start acting strange too, ah..."

Kaoru rested his head on the girl's plush thighs, his eyes lazily narrowing in contentment.

Meanwhile, the crimson-faced girl leaned slightly forward, her body trembling.

The winter air had ripened her like a sweet, succulent fruit, tempting and fragrant.

The biting wind howled outside, while proud plum blossoms stood tall amidst the endless snow, their delicate scent lingering on the lips like melting frost, silver threads of moisture dripping silently.

"Mmm, good boy... You're... you're... Mama Honami's favorite little baby..." The girl's cheeks burned so red they seemed ready to bleed.

Her delicate, boneless hands not only stroked Kaoru's head but also tightly gripped his lifeline.

"Mmm... This is still so embarrassing!"

"I always thought Honami would make a great mom," Kaoru mumbled indistinctly.

"Is that what this is about?" Ichinose belatedly understood, but it was too late to cry now.

She bit her lip.

"Kaoru... are you usually too tired?"

"Why do you ask?" Kaoru replied.

"B-because this is a little weird, but... you're acting spoiled with me." As she spoke, her mood inexplicably lifted, and a happy smile spread across her face.

"I thought you'd hate it," Kaoru blinked.

"No way! I was startled at first, but knowing you're being clingy with me makes me really happy, ehehe~" She continued petting his head.

"Mmm, fine, I'll be your mama! As long as Kaoru is happy, you're always welcome here. You can do whatever you want to your Honami Mama!"

As her words trailed off, Kaoru shifted slightly.

"Wah! I-It's like this again... So intense... What do we do now?"

Chapter 434: I'm Here to Join You.

The next day, Ichinose Honami brought over more of her belongings.

Kaoru's room soon housed her personal items—her slippers, a little frog for the bath.

Their logic was hard to follow.

It seemed they always needed a toy or two while bathing.

The two didn't stay cooped up in the room.

Taking advantage of the pleasant afternoon weather, they strolled outside together.

Though nothing eventful happened, the slow, easy companionship was nice.

She shared many things about herself with Kaoru.

Perhaps out of shyness, she couldn't bring herself to bathe with him afterward.

In the end, Kaoru "accidentally" opened the bathroom door, leading to their first fully unguarded encounter.

Truthfully, Kaoru wanted to push past the final barrier in one go.

But Ichinose was far too embarrassed.

Even as she insisted she was fine, her body stiffened, frozen in place—clear signs of nervousness.

Kaoru had no choice but to abandon the idea.

He wasn't in a hurry.

If Ichinose wasn't ready yet, they could take it slow.

Once she grew accustomed, they could cross that line when the time was right.

Afterward, the two indulged in a bit more mischief before finally falling asleep in bed.

When Kaoru woke up, the first thing he saw was a pair of large, red-eyed rabbits—no, it was Ichinose Honami beside him, already awake, her cheeks tinged with a tipsy flush as she gazed at him intently.

"Good morning."

At the sound of the girl's voice, Kaoru realized she was holding him in her arms.

The delicate, pleasant fragrance of her body filled his senses, and faint traces of pink lingered on her fair neck.

Her eyes shimmered with a misty haze, like the surface of a river at dawn, where faint traces of damp fog flickered with the girl's lingering emotions.

"Good morning, Mommy Honami."

The moment Kaoru spoke, his lips accidentally brushed against her skin, making her shoulders twitch slightly.

"D-Don't call me that... it's so embarrassing!"

Ichinose Honami's face burned crimson.

She didn't resist what Kaoru had done to her, but that didn't mean she wasn't flustered.

Especially when she recalled how shamelessly he had called her "Mom," and how she, bewitched, had actually agreed to it.

The memory sent all the blood in her body rushing to her face, turning it unbearably red.

"But you seemed really happy at the time?"

Kaoru shifted his position, pulling the girl tightly into his embrace.

"Mmm... that's not the point. Being called 'Mom' is just... weird..."

Ichinose couldn't quite explain it.

Being called "Mom" was strange in itself, but when it came from someone she loved, it stirred something inexplicable inside her—as if some strange desire had awakened, making her unbearably shy.

Kaoru chuckled and pinched her little nose.

Ichinose let out a few muffled whimpers, as if protesting, then nuzzled against his chest a few times, as though trying to press even closer.

Listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat gave her a sense of security.

Though Kaoru had no particular intentions, the girl's softness pressed against him in an overwhelmingly pleasant way.

Just holding her like this, her graceful curves evoked an indescribable sensation—like the warmth of melting snow in early spring, so comforting it made it hard to suppress the restlessness in his heart.

And most importantly... it was still early morning.

Just as Kaoru tried to rein in his impulses, the girl in his arms suddenly froze.

Her face flushed as she lifted her head slightly and whispered.

"Hey... do you want me to pretend to be asleep again, and then you can..."

The restraint he had been struggling to maintain nearly shattered.

Kaoru took a deep breath and flicked her nose.

"Seems like Honami's getting more and more shameless, huh?"

"I'm not shameless," Ichinose pouted, her voice small. "Not at all. You're the shameless one. As your girlfriend, I'm just... trying to keep up with my shameless boyfriend."

Faced with her self-deceiving response, Kaoru wore a half-smile, wondering who had been the proactive one last night.

"Alright, fine, I'm the shameless one. We've already done plenty last night—any more and I'll turn into an idiot."

Kaoru gently patted her head.

Constantly indulging in mischief was no small burden for her either.

Ichinose's face burned as if on fire, yet she still whispered, "Kaoru... do you think I performed poorly?"

"Not at all."

"But... even Karuizawa-san could manage it."

"Honami, we can take our time. It doesn't have to be these few days. Besides, I'm already satisfied."

"I still feel a little frustrated..."

"..."

Kaoru pressed a kiss to the girl's lips.

It was only natural to feel fear and nervousness the first time.

After a brief moment, Ichinose found herself growing dazed, only to snap back with a start.

Her expression shifted several times before she gritted her teeth and muttered.

"Maybe... you should just do it while I'm asleep, and then—"

Kaoru expressionlessly rapped his knuckles against her forehead.

What was she even thinking? What could he possibly do while she was asleep?

"This is all your fault! You're the one to blame!"

Ichinose grew increasingly agitated, her temper flaring until she directed it all at Kaoru, shoving and kicking before burying her head under the blankets like an ostrich.

Lying on the bed, Kaoru couldn't shake the feeling that he was doomed to fall into their hands sooner or later.

And the Wish Machine wouldn't care about his feelings—as long as the wish was fulfilled, she wouldn't spare a thought for whether he lived or died.

Just then, the door to the room suddenly swung open.

Kaoru looked up to see Kushida and Horikita standing at the entrance.

Their gazes locked onto his face in unison before shifting to Ichinose Honami.

"Well, well, perfect timing!"

Kushida immediately broke into a radiant smile. "Good morning, Master~ And Ichinose-san!"

Horikita Suzune awkwardly averted her delicate face, fighting the urge to leave.

For some reason, Kushida had grown increasingly unpredictable lately.

"Ah—ah-ah-ah-ah!"

Ichinose scrambled out from under the covers, her face beet red. In her haste, she nearly choked.

"Y-you two... Wh-what are you—I-I-I—waaah—"

Her brain seemed to short-circuit, steam practically rising from her head as she panicked and hid behind Kaoru, pressing her face into a pillow as if playing dead.

"What are you two doing here?" Kaoru couldn't help but sound exasperated.

Hadn't he told them to announce their visits beforehand?

"Huh? Didn't you and Ichinose invite us?"

Kushida kicked off her shoes and strode confidently toward Kaoru, her white-stockinged feet padding against the floor.

Horikita, meanwhile, wore a long half-skirt paired with a vest and blouse.

Her exposed calves were clad in sleek black knee-high socks, perfectly complementing her poised, intellectual demeanor.

Yet, with the two of them standing there, Kaoru couldn't shake the feeling of being out of place—as if he'd been caught in some compromising situation.

Especially with Horikita remaining silent, her cool expression unreadable, refusing to even meet his gaze.

"But at least knock first?" Kaoru still hadn't put his clothes back on.

"Who knew you were already awake? I was planning to sneak in quietly, squeeze into your bed, and give you a little surprise."

Kushida climbed onto Kaoru's bed, sitting on his lap, then kissed him right in front of Ichinose Honami.

"Don't be mad. Horikita and I came to join you."

Kaoru froze for a moment, instinctively turning to look at Horikita Suzune, who had turned away, only the tips of her ears tinged with a faint blush.

Chapter 435: No One Can Beat Him

"J-join us?"

Hearing Kushida's words, Ichinose, who had been hiding behind them while getting dressed, peeked out her small head.

"Right, weren't you two about to do something naughty just now?"

Kushida sat in Kaoru's arms, her hands resting on his shoulders, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Since we'll all be together sooner or later anyway, why not do something naughty together? It'll help us bond."

She spoke so convincingly that Ichinose Honami was left dumbfounded, utterly confused about the current situation.

"Don't listen to her nonsense. She just thinks it's too embarrassing to be the only one corrupted, so she wants to drag you all down with her."

Kaoru smacked her pert backside in annoyance.

Even though it was winter, she was wearing a pleated skirt with only a pair of white thigh-high socks covering her legs.

Kushida pouted, seemingly displeased, but then a sly smile crept onto her lips.

She knew there was no way her thoughts could escape Kaoru's notice—and she hadn't planned to hide anything in the first place.

Being open and honest was the best way to enjoy doing naughty things!

Ignoring her, Kaoru turned and asked, "Suzune, are you planning to join too?"

With the spotlight suddenly on her, Horikita Suzune could no longer pretend she wasn't there.

Her face remained cold as she replied, "I only came because she said you wanted to see us."

Kaoru gave her a strange look.

If Kushida told you to jump off a cliff, would you actually do it? Aren't you afraid of being dragged into this mess?

"Mmm, someone's sure energetic this morning."

Kushida muttered under her breath.

Sitting in Kaoru's lap, she was the one who could feel it most clearly.

Seizing the opportunity, she deliberately rubbed against him while winking at Ichinose.

"What do you think, Ichinose?"

"Huh?"

Ichinose was still dazed.

Seeing Kushida sitting so casually in Kaoru's lap had left her mind buzzing.

"What I mean is, don't you think doing naughty things with him feels really good?"

Kushida was like a devil tempting an innocent girl.

"Honestly, I feel the same way. If we all enjoy it and are open with each other, wouldn't that bring us closer?"

"R-really?"

Ichinose's thoughts hadn't quite caught up yet. "Are you saying we should... do it together?"

"Since we'll all end up with him eventually, and he'll have us together sooner or later, why not take this chance to get to know each other now?"

Kushida smiled faintly. "Even though we've met before, this is the first time we're seeing each other as his girls. Let's get along well, okay?"

"Y-yes, let's get along."

Ichinose responded reflexively, watching as Kushida continued grinding against Kaoru—until it finally clicked.

"W-wait a second! You don't mean we're going to do that, do you?!"

It was Kushida's turn to be stunned for a moment as she tentatively asked.

"You two... haven't done it yet?"

Ichinose blushed, unsure how to respond.

The fact that neither Kushida nor Horikita reacted to seeing her with Kaoru meant their progress was further along, making her feel increasingly embarrassed.

"No, what exactly are you doing?"

Kushida was shocked. "I gave you a whole day, and you didn't do anything?"

"Were you expecting me to do something?"

Kaoru's expression remained blank as he grabbed her slender waist, his fingers brushing against a sensitive spot.

"You dare ride on your master right after meeting? This little puppy seems to need some discipline."

Kushida instinctively stiffened, then noticed Ichinose's expression and understood—another conflicted soul.

"I was just thinking of you! Don't you plan to Take all?"

The girl pouted slightly. "If everyone bares themselves, wouldn't any barriers between us disappear quickly?"

Kaoru nearly fell for her twisted logic and retorted irritably.

"Not everyone likes an audience, Kikyo. Even if I wanted a group activity, it'd be on my terms. Your recklessness could make others direct their frustration at you."

Kushida froze briefly before softening her gaze and murmuring, "Sorry, my bad."

Kaoru didn't intend to scold her.

Holding the girl, he cooled his thoughts—what now?

"Um... have you two... done it?"

Ichinose ventured timidly.

"Hehe, Master forced me and Horikita a few days ago."

Kushida spoke with the air of a seasoned veteran. "It hurt at first, but it gets good fast—Master's technique is amazing, mmmph—!"

She couldn't finish because Kaoru had already silenced her.

Just as Kaoru was about to explain, Ichinose whispered.

"I-I don't mind... doing things together... If Kaoru's happy... I can even watch and learn!"

"Cough! Cough!"

Horikita broke first, her aloof persona crumbling.

This was even more shameless than her own terms to Kaoru!

Even Kaoru and Kushida were stunned, but Kushida recovered fastest, grabbing Ichinose's hand.

"Exactly! If two people misbehave alone, it takes a whole day, leaving less time for others. But together, the timing's perfect!"

"Eh, really?"

"I get shy being watched too, but what can we do? With this man, we'll all end up as companions anyway. Think of it as a game."

"Kushida-san, you're different from what I imagined... You're quite proactive here?"

"Only because he forced me. But don't worry—I'm used to it now."

"Ohh!"

Having been threatened by Kaoru before, Ichinose showed no extra reaction to the word "forced."

Kaoru couldn't hold back anymore.

"Honami, do you even understand what she's implying?"

"Didn't you just say that?" Ichinose asked curiously. "Kushida-san felt too lonely by herself, which is why she wanted us all to do something mischievous together. And I think it's a good idea too. We're all the same—I can't keep avoiding someone just to do naughty things with you, right?"

Kaoru was momentarily speechless, while Kushida flashed a radiant smile.

"And also..." Ichinose grew slightly embarrassed. "You... you haven't been slacking off at all... If Kaoru wants to do it... you don't have to mind me..."

As she spoke, she covered her face with both hands.

Uttering such embarrassing words in front of Kushida and Horikita was too mortifying!

Kushida looked at her with a strange expression—she seemed to have guessed the reason Ichinose lacked experience.

....

Kaoru stared at the ceiling.

Today was the first time he had experienced the limits of this body.

"This is so weird. We actually couldn't take on one person."

Beside him, Kushida looked utterly drained.

Had she known Kaoru was this strong, she wouldn't have been so smug.

As it turned out, she had taken the most hits and was still feeling the pain.

"Are you even human?!"

"Who was the one just now shouting for another round?" Kaoru's retort left her speechless.

"I also think Kaoru is amazing," Ichinose Honami said, her face flushed as she gazed up at him from below.

"Do men... always keep going... like this... without stopping?"

"They shouldn't. That would defy biological limits."

Horikita struggled to prop herself up.

She had tried to escape earlier, only to be dragged back by Kushida and Kaoru.

"I looked it up online—he's definitely an exception!"

"You looked it up online?"

Kaoru and Kushida exchanged odd glances.

What kind of research was there to do on this? Unless she was reading...

Horikita Suzune's face turned red as she snapped, "Don't look at me like that! I was just doing research, okay?!"

"Alright, now it's all clean."

Ichinose smiled happily at her handiwork.

While the other two were still recovering, she had taken the initiative to tidy up for Kaoru before nestling into his arms with a contented smile.

"Did you have fun today, Kaoru?"

"If he dares say no, I'll bite him to death!"

Kushida sneered, feeling cheated.

She had wanted to see Horikita Suzune and Ichinose Honami posing with peace signs, but in the end, it was her who ended up doing it.

So frustrating!

But this frustration was relative.

Despite taking the most hits, Kushida was actually quite happy—for no particular reason.

Just recalling the earlier scenes filled her with joy, as if her mind was completely occupied by him now.

"I'm very happy. Having you all by my side is the most blissful moment for me." Kaoru wasn't lying.

After dying and being reborn, arriving alone in an unfamiliar world, he had once viewed everyone as mere NPCs in a game—until his bonds with them deepened.

"That line is so cliché!" Kushida mercilessly teased him.

Kaoru pulled her into his embrace, then waved at Horikita standing nearby.

"I don't need that. Honestly, I don't even like you." Horikita averted her gaze.

"Such a tsundere!"

Kushida was the first to scoff before yanking her over.

"Who was it that willingly put on cat ears earlier? And who was the one who volunteered to help?"

Horikita's face flushed red, but before she could retort, Kaoru had already pulled her into his arms.

Her cheek pressed against his chest, and she could feel the warmth of his heartbeat beneath.

Watching the two of them, Ichinose couldn't help but chuckle.

"It's a little different from what I imagined."

"How so?"

"I thought at least... Never mind, I won't say. Horikita-san and Kushida-san are both acting so unlike themselves right now."

"He's the one who corrupted them."

"Agreed."

"Do you two really have to be so united right now?"

"Who here hasn't been threatened by you at some point?"

"..."

"Actually, I've been wondering about something."

"What?"

"Look, I'm on the right, Ichinose is above you, and Horikita is on the left. What happens if there's one more person?"

"..."

"Why aren't you saying anything?"

"..."

Chapter 436: Mixed Training Camp

Perhaps Kushida Kikyo's twisted logic had some effect—afterwards, the girls didn't end up fighting at all.

In fact, their relationship seemed to improve, and even Horikita didn't reject the idea of group activities.

This surprised Kaoru.

Was it because they were now accomplices?

Of course, he didn't forget about the others either.

Taking advantage of the New Year, he secretly went out with Karuizawa for a while and also took Ichinose off-campus so she could spend half a day with her younger sister.

Once the New Year ended, before everyone could fully enjoy the rare break, the school suddenly announced that all students would be leaving campus.

They were instructed to bring spare gym clothes and underwear, though personal belongings weren't prohibited.

Not only that, but the students also realized that the third semester was about to begin—coinciding with the date of their departure.

In an instant, even the first-years guessed that the school was preparing another special exam, likely similar to the uninhabited island test.

While the first-years groaned in despair, the upperclassmen remained calm—they were included in the notice as well.

Thus, at the tail end of winter break and the start of the new semester, all students of Advanced Nurturing High School boarded buses arranged by the school in the early morning, heading toward an unknown destination.

Since this was their second time leaving campus, Class A's first-years found everything fascinating, with many staring out the windows at the outside world.

"Wait, isn't this just like when we first came to school?"

Totsuka Yahiko blinked in confusion at the city outside.

"I thought we'd see giant robots or spaceships or something, but nothing's changed at all!"

"It's only been a year. How could there possibly be spaceships?"

Hashimoto Masayoshi sighed in exasperation.

"But it feels like so much longer."

Totsuka muttered under his breath.

His words resonated with the others.

Trapped in an isolated school, seeing the same scenery every day with only the Keyaki Mall and campus grounds to explore—no matter how well-equipped the facilities were, it was still a little lonely.

Even though the school didn't prohibit internet access, some students still missed their past lives, old friends, and families.

For a moment, the bus grew noisier as people exclaimed in surprise upon recognizing familiar places outside the windows.

Kaoru wasn't looking at the scenery.

The person seated beside him was Naoki Shimizu—the school had arranged seating based on alphabetical order of names.

Because of this, the seats in front of him were occupied by Sakayanagi Arisu and Miki Yamamura, with Kamuro Masumi sitting a little further ahead.

"Sakayanagi-san, what's this?"

A girl seemed to have noticed something unusual.

"Hehehe, this is an engagement ring from my fiancé," Sakayanagi replied with a smile.

Kaoru Mitoma, sitting behind her, froze for a second.

She was wearing a Wedding Ring on her finger and openly showing it to their classmates?

"Huh?! No way, Sakayanagi-san has a fiancé?!"

"Seriously?!"

"Wow, that's such a beautiful ring!"

"What's your fiancé's name, Sakayanagi-san?!"

Before the boys could even process the situation, the girls were already staring at Sakayanagi with sparkling eyes, practically ready to crowd around her.

Kaoru couldn't see her expression, but he was certain she was smirking by now.

"I'm sorry, I'd love to tell you his name, but he's quite shy. If I reveal it, he might even divorce me."

For just a fleeting moment, Kaoru thought he saw a fox's tail flicker from her seat.

"Ugh, what a terrible guy!"

"Yeah, if he proposed, he should at least have the courage to stand by it!"

"How awful!"

While Kaoru remained silent, the girls of Class A mercilessly tore into his image.

"I never expected Sakayanagi-san to have a fiancé," Naoki Shimizu beside him remarked with a sigh.

Kaoru didn't mind the sigh—but did he have to look at him while saying it?

"Hehehe, please don't say such things. After all, he's also a student at this school. He might hear you."

Sakayanagi's voice carried over to them.

For some reason, the girls' gazes lingered on Kaoru for a second before unanimously looking away.

Everyone knew which boy was usually the closest to Sakayanagi.

...

After the bus entered a tunnel, Mashima stood near the driver's cabin, facing the entire first-year Class A with a microphone in hand.

He looked like a tour guide, except his expression was far too stern.

"Apologies for interrupting, but please listen carefully to my explanation."

Though the bus had already fallen silent the moment he spoke, every student was now watching him intently.

"Some of you may have already guessed the nature of this trip. The school doesn't do things without reason, so what awaits you is a special exam—a Mixed Training Camp."

As Mashima's voice echoed through the bus, the students exchanged glances.

A training camp as a special exam?

"In about an hour, you'll arrive at a forest school. Just like during the sports festival, you'll cross the barrier of grade levels and engage in eight days and seven nights of group activities."

Mashima distributed materials to the students in front while explaining.

"Although the details are outlined in the documents, I can briefly summarize them for you."

Under Mashima's explanation, Kaoru grasped the general concept.

This special exam—or rather, the mixed training camp—was designed by the school to evaluate students' mental growth, particularly their interpersonal skills and ability to work in groups.

As such, the exam would be conducted in small-group units.

Both male and female students would be divided into six groups each, with each group having a minimum and maximum number of participants—no fewer than eight and no more than fifteen.

The exact size would depend on the total number of students in each grade.

For example, since there were eighty first-year male students, each group would consist of around ten to fifteen members.

This structure accounted for potential dropouts, as student numbers varied significantly across grades—especially in the second year, where Nagumo Miyabi was enrolled.

Additionally, each group had to include students from at least two different classes; otherwise, the group would not be valid.

This condition was similar to the rules of the Privileged Test and the sports festival.

The school discouraged students from always operating strictly within their own classes and encouraged cross-class collaboration.

Beyond the small groups, Kaoru and the others would also be assigned to larger mixed-grade groups, combining first, second, and third-year students. In other words, the six small groups would merge into six large groups.

The school would evaluate each large group's performance based on average scores.

The top three groups would receive Personal Points and Class Points as rewards, while those ranked fourth to last would face corresponding deductions as penalties.

Rewards & Penalties:

1st Place: +10,000 Personal Points per student, +3 Class Points

2nd Place: +5,000 Personal Points per student, +1 Class Point

3rd Place: +3,000 Personal Points per student

4th Place: -5,000 Personal Points per student

5th Place: -10,000 Personal Points per student, -3 Class Points

6th Place: -20,000 Personal Points per student, -5 Class Points

...

Rewards and penalties would be distributed or deducted based on the group's size.

For instance, if a ten-member group secured first place, they would collectively receive 100,000 Personal Points and 30 Class Points.

Moreover, as Mashima explained, the top three groups would receive additional multipliers based on the number of different classes represented within them:

If a group consisted of students from two classes, the rewards remained unchanged.

If from three classes, both Personal and Class Points would double. If from four classes, the rewards would triple.

On top of this, an additional size-based multiplier would apply:

10-member group: $\times 1$ 15-member group: $\times 1.5$ (maximum) 9-member group: $\times 0.9$

Furthermore, each group had to appoint a leader.

The leader's class would receive an additional doubling of rewards.

Therefore, in this mixed training camp, Class A students could maximize their gains by forming a fifteen-member group primarily composed of their own classmates, with one student each from Classes B, C, and D.

At the same time, if they secure first place in the upcoming exam and the leader is a student from their own class, Class A could theoretically obtain 1.08 million Personal Points and 336 Class Points.

Combined with the girls' group victory, Class A could easily win nearly 700 Class Points in one go.

However, this is purely theoretical.

Chapter 437: The Forest School.

Aside from the enticing rewards, Kaoru also noticed an important note.

"There's one thing you should be aware of—the lowest-ranked large group in this exam will face expulsion penalties. Of course, it won't be a full-group expulsion. If any small group within that large group has an average score below the school's prepared baseline, the leader of that small group will be expelled."

The students in the car exchanged uneasy glances.

Katsuragi frowned—it seemed the double rewards for leaders weren't so easy to obtain after all. With great gains came great risks.

"Wait, wait, if someone gets expelled, who in the world would volunteer to be the leader?" Totsuka Yahiko asked in confusion.

"Are we supposed to decide that ourselves too?"

"Correct. You must decide the leader among yourselves and inform me by tomorrow morning," Mashima replied. "If you fail to select a leader, the entire small group will face Mandatory Expulsion."

"Entire group expulsion?!" Totsuka Yahiko was shocked—this was the harshest penalty so far.

Still, no one would be foolish enough to let the school expel the entire group.

At the very least, they could decide the leader by drawing lots.

"Additionally, once a leader is expelled, they can invoke joint responsibility and choose one other student from the group to be expelled alongside them."

"W-What?! Doesn't that mean we could be dragged down by students from other classes in a mutual destruction scenario?!"

Even Katsuragi couldn't stay composed—this condition fit Nagumo Miyabi's demands all too well!

"Don't be so nervous. Not just anyone can be designated as a scapegoat. The school must first determine that the student in question is indeed one of the factors affecting the group's performance—someone who has hindered the team. Only then can they be nominated."

Upon hearing Mashima's words, the tense atmosphere in the vehicle eased considerably.

As long as they couldn't arbitrarily nominate just anyone, things were manageable.

Sakayanagi Arisu chuckled softly. "Hehehe, someone who hinders the collective... it sounds like the ancient Greek practice of ostracism."

Kaoru felt the same way.

On the surface, it seemed like all they had to do was take the exam normally.

But in reality, it would be easy for the group to ostracize someone—by making it impossible for them to participate properly in the exam, thereby turning them into a hindrance to the collective, and then nominating them for expulsion.

"For every expelled student, the corresponding class will lose one hundred Class Points. If the class's Class Points fall below the deducted amount, the deficit will be settled when the class earns future Class Points."

Mashima recalled the previous Class D.

Even the school hadn't anticipated that a class could score zero points twice in a row.

If they hadn't managed to scrape together a hundred points in the final exams, he suspected Chabashira Sae would have gone berserk.

Perhaps because no first-year students had been expelled so far, Mashima emphasized once again the cost of [rescinding an expulsion].

To save an expelled student, the expelled student's class must pay the school twenty million Personal Points and three hundred Class Points.

Both are mandatory—without either, the expelled student cannot be reinstated.

"The final exam results will be evaluated on the last day. Until then, no one is allowed to withdraw or replace group members midway. After arriving at the mountain lodge, you'll receive a schedule detailing the order and nature of the tests on the final day."

Kaoru reviewed the instructions in the materials.

The official program would begin tomorrow, Friday morning, and end next Wednesday—eight days and seven nights in total.

The final day, next Thursday, would involve all grades participating in the last round of tests and evaluations.

Boys and girls would be separated, each forming six small groups.

These would then merge with senior-year groups to form six larger teams.

Exam results would be based on the performance of these larger teams, and the lowest-ranked team might have failing subgroups facing expulsion.

This was the upcoming training camp exam.

There were two possible strategies: either strive to earn as many rewards as possible, or target other classes to force their students into expulsion.

If they could compel another class to rescue an expelled student, that class would pay a staggering price in this exam—enough to cripple even the current Class A.

However, Kaoru felt that, aside from Class A, the other three classes likely couldn't afford the redemption cost.

Ichinose Honami might barely manage, but that was it.

Targeting them now would feel like bullying children.

The first-years could be left alone for the time being—but what would Nagumo think?

Kaoru took out his phone.

Seizing the moment, he contacted second-year students Tonokawa and Iijima, curious about Nagumo's current thoughts.

...

Before disembarking, Mashima confiscated everyone's phones, gaming devices, toys, and snacks—none of which were permitted inside the mountain lodge.

"Hehe, I didn't expect boys and girls to be separated. It seems I'll only get to see Mitoma-kun during breaks." Sakayanagi smiled faintly at Kaoru, leaning on her cane with Kamuro by her side, looking every bit the reluctant caretaker once again.

During summer vacation, it seemed Kamuro had been taking care of her too.

"Mashima-sensei just said that even during breaks, we need permission to go outside."

Kaoru was actually a little frustrated.

This time, the boys and girls were staying in separate dorm buildings, meaning they'd essentially be living apart.

"Except during meals."

Sakayanagi suddenly paused, then stood on her tiptoes in front of him to adjust his tie.

"Even though we'll be wearing gym clothes tomorrow, you should still pay attention to your appearance now."

Was she deliberately provoking him?

Kaoru averted his gaze from the ring on her finger, only to notice the strange looks from those around them.

Given that he had a girlfriend, shouldn't they be eyeing the suspicious Sakayanagi instead?

"See you later, Mitoma-kun."

Sakayanagi curled her lips like a little fox, not giving him time to react before quickly stepping off the bus.

"Don't do anything so suspicious next time."

Kamuro shot him a sidelong glance before following Sakayanagi off the bus.

Kaoru reflexively felt wronged, but then it hit him—Kamuro must have known the ring on Sakayanagi's finger was from him.

No wonder she was upset.

"The girls will have to be Sakayanagi's responsibility. Mitoma-kun, what do you think we should do on our end?"

Katsuragi patted Kaoru's shoulder, lowering his voice. "If we team up with other classes, Nagumo-senpai will definitely make his move."

Not just would—he absolutely would.

Katsuragi was now considering whether to fully back Kaoru to avoid getting swept away by the student council president's schemes.

"No need to rush. Let's assess the situation first."

Kaoru had already arranged a coded communication system with Tonokawa Sosuke and the others.

Nagumo's intel was practically an open book to him now.

Stepping off the bus, Kaoru was greeted by a vast expanse of snow-covered mountains, silver threads of mist drifting between the peaks.

The trees stood tall against the white landscape, their branches reaching toward the sky.

Ahead of him stood two old school buildings.

The wooden structures had clearly been around for years, but regular maintenance had kept them from falling into complete disrepair.

"It's freezing out here. Shouldn't a forest school thing be a summer event?"

Someone nearby complained, making Kaoru unconsciously touch the scarf around his neck.

His gaze shifted to Ichinose in the distance, who noticed him and waved cheerfully.

If only this could just be a normal training camp, Kaoru couldn't help but think.

"Excuse me."

Morishita Ai spoke up from behind him.

Kaoru silently stepped aside for her, even though he hadn't really been blocking the way.

Chapter 438: Group Assignments

"You'll finalize your group assignments indoors. The school will assign rooms based on your groups, after which you can head to the cafeteria. The afternoon is free time."

After giving these instructions, Mashima split the class into two lines—the boys heading to the main building, while the girls went to the other dorm.

Kaoru watched as Ichinose was pulled back into formation.

She had been about to come greet him, but now they had to separate.

On the way, Katsuragi spoke up beside him, "I plan to form a group of fourteen students, plus one from any class. That way, there's no risk."

For Class A of the first year, there was no need to pursue maximum gains at this point—maintaining their position was victory enough.

Kaoru gave a slight nod, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with his words.

"This group will consist entirely of our people. Even if Nagumo wants to do something to you, he won't be able to," Katsuragi added another reason.

"Moreover, if anyone is worried about us tampering with things, I can personally take charge as the leader and even offer some compensation if necessary."

A group composed of fourteen Class A students would essentially signal that Class A was voluntarily stepping back from pursuing further gains.

With Katsuragi as the leader, most concerns would be alleviated.

Even if Class A intended to manipulate things, they wouldn't go so far as to have their leader personally involved.

Rescuing Katsuragi would cost twenty million Personal Points and four hundred Class Points—far too steep a price.

"That makes sense," Kaoru paused, "but it's unnecessary."

Katsuragi was taken aback. "Do you plan to keep increasing our Class Points?"

"No, these points are enough for now. If we run short, we can always reclaim them later," Kaoru countered.

"The real question is, if you can think of protecting me, why wouldn't Nagumo think of it too?"

Katsuragi fell silent.

That did seem plausible.

"Dealing with me isn't just about forcing me to drop out. Even if Nagumo could have someone take me out in one move, do you really think I'd be expelled?" Kaoru could already see the school building ahead—an aged structure with the scent of wood, its roof dusted with snow, the dark floorboards worn by countless footsteps.

"Unless you and Sakayanagi-san both decide not to save me, I doubt Nagumo would be foolish enough to target me directly."

Listening to Kaoru's words, Katsuragi's expression turned pensive as he followed the group until they entered what looked like an indoor gymnasium.

Suddenly, it dawned on him.

"Nagumo plans to drain our points first, then go after you?"

Although Class A had never revealed that they pooled their Personal Points under Morishita Ai's management, their Class Points were simply too high.

Nagumo had to consider this—that Class A likely had enough Personal Points to protect someone.

Therefore, unless he could strip away Class A's safety net, expelling Kaoru would be difficult.

While everyone assumed he was fixated on Kaoru, his real target might actually be Class A itself, disrupting their rhythm entirely.

Someone like Katsuragi, if not for Kaoru's warning, might not have realized Nagumo's plan until it was too late.

Katsuragi's expression darkened.

If this were the case, every member of Class A could become Nagumo Miyabi's target—unless they were willing to abandon their classmates and focus solely on protecting Mitoma.

But that approach was clearly unworkable.

Since both Personal Points and Class Points belonged to the entire class, if students knew they might be sacrificed, they'd surely stop contributing points.

What should they do now?

Katsuragi was racking his brain for countermeasures when Kaoru noticed Kanzaki Ryuji leading the boys from Class 1-B into the gymnasium.

Before long, male students from Class 1-C and Class 1-D also arrived, finally bringing some noise to the previously quiet gym.

However, as soon as the upperclassmen appeared, the chatter gradually died down, and everyone waited silently for further instructions.

A teacher stepped onto the podium, microphone in hand, and addressed the assembled students.

"I assume you all understand the exam rules by now, so I won't go into detail. You may now form your own teams. Additionally, at 8 PM tonight, we'll allocate time and space for you to organize into larger groups. That's the basic arrangement."

Kaoru glanced around.

Several teachers stood silently on the sidelines, seemingly unwilling to intervene in the team-forming process—just like in previous exams.

Among the upperclassmen, he spotted Nagumo, whose face was cold and eyes shadowed with gloom.

Meanwhile, Tonokawa Sosuke and the others stood at a distance—not because they were avoiding Nagumo, but because Nagumo himself was pushing them away.

At this moment, Nagumo was surrounded only by a few die-hard loyalists—those he had secured through a mix of Personal Points and threats.

These were the only subordinates he could still rely on.

Kaoru's expression turned odd when he noticed that Iijima was now standing closer to Nagumo than Tonokawa and the others.

"Hirata, Kanzaki, Katsuragi, Mitoma—let's discuss team formations."

At some point, Ryuen had approached them, hands in his pockets, a slightly arrogant smile on his face as he eyed the other leaders.

Kanzaki Ryuji's eyes flashed with disdain, but Hirata Yosuke asked, "Do you have a team formation plan, Ryuen?"

"Obviously," Ryuen chuckled. "Everyone knows the exam rules. A fifteen-member team is ideal—twelve students from one class, plus three from other classes."

His meaning was clear: for example, Class 1-C could send twelve students and supplement them with one student each from Classes A, B, and D.

By the rules, such a team could maximize benefits if they secured first place.

"How do we know you won't maliciously target our people?" Kanzaki frowned. "If your class ends up last, won't you just nominate our students?"

Ryuen looked at him like he was an idiot. "Do you really think I wouldn't worry about you using joint responsibility to expel my people?"

Kanzaki fell silent for a moment before retorting, "It's hard to trust someone like you. And even if each class sends twelve students, what happens to the rest?"

If each class formed a fifteen-member team centered around themselves, the total would only be sixty students—but there were eighty first-year boys.

"What else can we do?" Ryuen spread his hands. "We just abandon them. Form two ten-member teams from the leftovers—problem solved."

Kanzaki froze.

Was he suggesting they dump their own class's deadweight to avoid dragging everyone down?

Ryuen glanced at Kaoru and Katsuragi, who had yet to voice their opinions, then turned back to Hirata.

"Hirata, what do you think?"

Hirata Yosuke pondered for a moment. "I'll need to discuss this with my classmates first."

There was actually no need for discussion.

Ryuuen Kakeru openly addressed them with these words, loud enough for most students to hear.

"Hurry up then."

Ryuuen showed little interest in this D-class leader. "I don't see any issue with my suggestion. Don't you all want more rewards?"

"Compared to rewards, are we just going to abandon the remaining groups?"

"Who said anything about abandoning them? This is fair competition. Do you really think dividing into groups now will determine everyone's rankings?"

"..."

"Kanzaki, are you afraid I'll scheme against you?"

Ryuuen seemed to see through Kanzaki Ryuji's concerns—no, he noticed the hostility from the boys standing behind Kanzaki.

After all, Class 1-B had suffered numerous attacks from Ryuuen, so it was only natural they held resentment toward him and Class 1-C.

"Verbal promises mean nothing. Who knows what you're plotting this time?"

Kanzaki Ryuji couldn't deny it.

Deep down, he feared Class 1-B might end up with a dropout—because Ichinose Honami would undoubtedly go to any lengths to save them.

"Heh, of course I know that. So, as a guarantee to ease your worries, how about I join your Class B's group?"

A fearless smile spread across Ryuen's face.

"If you sense anything suspicious, you can just name me as the one to be expelled alongside you."

In an instant, Kanzaki Ryuji and the boys behind him wore expressions of utter shock.

Joining Them Voluntarily?

Was this about placing one's safety in the hands of a rival with whom they had unresolved grievances?

At this point, Kaoru who had been observing silently, finally took action.

He turned to Katsuragi and said, "We'll agree to Ryuen proposal as well. Our group leader will be Totsuka Yahiko. You stay in the group, and I'll join the remaining one."

"W-Wait, you're going to the remaining group?"

Katsuragi barely had time to process why Kaoru had specifically named Totsuka Yahiko.

"Ryuen might be targeting you!"

"He's not targeting me—he's targeting Class A. His conditions are too reasonable to refuse. Both Class B and Class D will agree to them."

Kaoru added, "Oh, and pull Hashimoto out too. He'll have to come with me to the remaining group. I won't feel at ease without him around."

Katsuragi seemed to realize something—was Kaoru deliberately making himself the bait to draw Nagumo Miyabi's attention onto himself?

But... were he and Hashimoto really that close?

Kaoru had no idea what Katsuragi was thinking.

The reason he wanted Hashimoto with him wasn't just because he was Sakayanagi's subordinate, but also because the guy was a bit dangerous.

Previously, Hashimoto had shamelessly claimed he could pledge loyalty to two masters—as long as he graduated from Class A, he didn't care who the leader was.

That alone made Kaoru realize he needed to keep Hashimoto on a tight leash.

Otherwise, he was too flexible—who knew if he might suddenly swear allegiance to Nagumo Miyabi?

Chapter 439: Stop Watching, You're Next.

However, things took an unexpected turn.

Kanzaki Ryuji felt trapped in a passive position.

Though Ryuen had boldly staked himself as collateral in Class B's group, no one knew what he was truly planning.

If he deliberately dragged Class B down—even just slightly—without outright landing them in last place, Kanzaki wouldn't be able to force Ryuen's expulsion.

Yet, Ryuen's proposal was the most beneficial for everyone.

Who wouldn't want more rewards?

"Hey, hey, hey, Kanzaki. I've shown so much sincerity—does Class B still not trust me?" Ryuen shrugged.

"If there's a way to convince you, just say it. Otherwise, this is giving me a headache."

"Given your past actions, it's hard to take your word at face value." Kanzaki replied. "Besides, Class A and Class D haven't given their stance yet. There's no need for me to commit early."

At that moment, Ryuen finally turned his gaze toward Kaoru and Katsuragi.

"Mitoma, are you scared too?"

Though his tone was mocking, Kaoru could see the wariness in his eyes.

As mentioned earlier, if Class B detected even the slightest sign of trouble, they could nominate Ryuen for expulsion.

But there was one oversight.

Expulsion was a complicated process—it required the entire large group containing the targeted small group to rank last, and the small group itself had to score below average.

For Class B, the price was too steep.

Meanwhile, Ryuen only needed to ensure Class B's group didn't take first place.

If he played a few minor tricks during the exam, would Kanzaki really sacrifice himself just to expel Ryuen?

But—

"Class A will follow this proposal. However, Ryuen, I want you in our group." Kaoru said indifferently.

"Kanzaki and the others don't have the ability to expel you, but we in Class A do."

Indeed, Class 1-A now had the authority to expel anyone at will, and Ryuen was the core of Class 1-C.

Taking him down would only be a minor inconvenience for Class 1-A at most.

Ryuen fell silent for a moment before laughing.

"That's quite the terrifying threat. I didn't realize I held such weight in your minds. Heh, fine—I'll accept your threat!"

Kaoru knew Ryuen was unaware that he had already discovered his collaboration with Nagumo Miyabi.

Ryuen probably thought he had the confidence to face this threat head-on.

Even if expulsion became a possibility, would Nagumo really step in to save him?

If that was the case, how exactly would Ryuen help Nagumo deal with him?

Kaoru didn't doubt the intelligence of either of them.

If they were planning something within the boys' group, he would likely notice quickly.

Moreover, Ryuen had agreed so readily—meaning he had already anticipated Mitoma's reaction.

So, were they targeting the girls' group instead?

Tonokawa Sosuke and the others hadn't been able to provide much useful information, only mentioning that Nagumo Miyabi had been using his phone to contact someone, though the content remained unknown.

Thinking this, Kaoru spoke up. "Whatever you're planning, no one can afford the astronomical cost of failure."

Ryuen, believing he understood the implication, smirked. "Relax, I won't do anything."

Kanzaki Ryuji, observing this, felt something was off.

However, Kaoru's move had shouldered the risk for them, leaving him no reason to refuse.

"If Class A agrees, then Class B will join as well."

With that, only Class 1-D remained.

Kaoru glanced over and saw Hirata Yosuke still discussing with his classmates.

It wasn't that Class 1-D refused the proposal—rather, most of the boys wanted to team up with Hirata Yosuke and avoid being assigned to the remaining two groups.

Based on the numbers, each class would have eight students separated from their original groups, with five of them joining the leftover teams.

Though no one outright admitted it, most understood that weeding out potential liabilities early would increase their chances of securing first place.

As a result, the boys of Class 1-D feared that being reassigned might put them at risk of expulsion.

It wasn't that they were stupid—just self-aware.

Take Ike Kanji and Yamauchi Haruki, for example.

After a while, Hirata finally approached Ryuen, looking somewhat exhausted.

"We've discussed it and agreed to your proposal."

Ryuen raised an eyebrow, his expression hovering between amusement and mockery, before turning to head back toward his own class.

"I'll send seven people over shortly. You can pick whoever you want."

Seemed he was going to sort out the groups.

Upon returning to Class 1-A's area, Kaoru expected questions about his reasoning, but instead, everyone obediently waited for Katsuragi's arrangements.

"Hah? Me as the leader?"

Totsuka Yahiko pointed at himself, utterly shocked.

"Think of it like the deserted island. The leader doesn't actually have any responsibilities—you're just a figurehead," Kaoru replied.

"Oh... I guess that makes sense."

Totsuka Yahiko scratched his head.

'No, the real reason you were chosen is because you're dumb and blindly loyal to Katsuragi.'

Kaoru didn't voice this thought aloud, instead immediately leading the bewildered Hashimoto away.

"Did Sakayanagi give you any instructions?" Kaoru asked him bluntly.

"Instructions?"

Hashimoto looked puzzled.

"Even if she did, why would I tell you? If that were the case, she might as well have told you directly."

If there were important instructions, there was no way he'd let Kaoru know!

"Good, that puts me at ease. Follow me from now on,"

Kaoru said. "Sakayanagi is no longer someone worth your loyalty."

Hashimoto recalled his own experiences and found it hard to argue, so he simply nodded.

It wasn't until Katsuragi finished selecting his team that Kaoru led him toward other classes—only then did Hashimoto finally react.

"Wait, are you going to join another class's group?"

"No, I'm going to form one."

"..."

When Kanzaki Ryuji and Ryuen Kakeru saw Kaoru approaching with Hashimoto in tow, their expressions mirrored Hashimoto's earlier confusion and bewilderment.

"Mitoma, what are you up to?"

Ryuen instinctively tensed, his mind racing.

There was no way he didn't know Nagumo was targeting him—shouldn't he be hiding within his own class's group right now?

"I plan to select a few people to join my group, with me as the leader."

Kaoru glanced at the boys behind him. "Albert, Ishizaki, and Ib—never mind, I'll take these two."

For a moment, he almost mistook Ibuki Mio for a guy—fortunately, she wasn't here.

Ryuen's face darkened.

Losing two of his subordinates in one go wasn't a big deal in itself, but for some reason, it still irked him.

Annoyed or not, this suggested Kaoru hadn't realized anything—otherwise, he wouldn't have taken his trusted aides.

Was he planning to act as bait, or did he think he already had Ryuen under his thumb?

Ryuen couldn't help but fall into deep thought.

Meanwhile, Kaoru walked over to Kanzaki Ryuji's group, gave them a quick once-over, and said.

"Send a few guys over. I won't pick them myself."

What did that mean?

Kanzaki froze for a long moment.

Fortunately, he had always been skilled at reading people.

After a brief consideration, he realized Kaoru was leaving the selection to him—meaning he should choose capable and trustworthy male students to send over.

After all, he was also aware of the situation between Kaoru and Nagumo.

But... did Kaoru really trust him this much?

Kanzaki Ryuji was a little lost.

By then, Kaoru had already arrived at Class 1-D, where Hirata Yosuke had already finalized the group assignments.

Thus, Kaoru's gaze immediately landed on the most conspicuous figures—Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, Kouenji Rosuke, Yukimura Teruhiko, and a few other lone students.

Before Kaoru could even speak, Kouenji Rosuke burst into laughter.

"Long time no see, Mitoma Boy! It seems we're about to share another joyful stretch of time together!"

Kaoru turned his gaze away.

He hadn't said anything yet, but this guy shamelessly sidled up to him—probably nostalgic for that one million yen from before.

Not that Kaoru held any particular dislike for him.

To Kouenji, approaching like this was probably his way of bestowing an honor upon Kaoru.

Just as Kaoru was about to pick his next member, he noticed Ayanokoji quietly retreating behind the others.

Well, that settled it.

No need to deliberate further—he was the one.

Chapter 440: Asahina Senpai Is Also My Girlfriend

Class A: Kaoru Mitoma, Hashimoto Masayoshi, Machida Koji.

Class B: Hamaguchi Tetsuya, Yonezu Haruto, Moriyama Akimi.

Class C: Albert, Ishizaki Daichi.

Class D: Kouenji Rosuke, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

...

Exactly ten people—enough to form a team.

Since Kaoru had taken the lead in organizing the group, and seeing that no one objected, he assumed the role of leader and reported the results to Mashima in front of everyone.

Apparently, Mashima hadn't expected the first-years to act so quickly.

He told Kaoru that they could now form teams with the upperclassmen.

"This is bad... I don't think I know any of the upperclassmen," Hashimoto said with a troubled expression, turning to Kaoru.

"We'll have to rely on you, Mitoma-kun."

He had asked the right person.

At the moment, Kaoru was likely the only first-year who had a good grasp of the upperclassmen.

Information about the second-years was practically an open book to Kaoru, while the third-years were a bit more challenging.

Still, with Horikita Manabu as references, he could identify suitable groups for them.

"Before we team up with the upperclassmen, I want to know what you all think," Kaoru said. "Do you want to aim for first place, or just scoring above average enough?"

Hashimoto and Machida Koji exchanged glances.

Could they really secure first place?

"Don't talk big, first place is impossible, right?"

Ishizaki Daichi sneered, his expression full of disdain.

With Ryuen around, how could their group possibly take first place?

"Heh, Mitoma Boy, you decide how we handle the exam."

Kouenji Rosuke crossed his arms, watching the upperclassmen nearby with great interest.

Kaoru turned his gaze to the students of Class 1-B, where Moriyama Akimi spoke bluntly.

"Even if you can help us get first place, it doesn't matter. You're the one in charge."

Indeed, the composition of their group was too scattered. Even if they secured rewards, the contribution to their respective classes would be minimal. Besides, the leader was Kaoru Mitoma from Class 1-A.

"Alright, I get the general idea."

Kaoru nodded. "Then our goal is to exceed the average score. As long as no one gets expelled, that's the best outcome."

"Mitoma Boy, he's coming over." Kouenji Rosuke suddenly remarked.

The next moment, Nagumo's voice reached the ears of the first-year students.

"I'd advise you all to stay away from Mitoma. The reason he left his A-class group to team up with you is because he didn't want to drag his own classmates into trouble."

Many instinctively glanced toward Kaoru's direction before turning their eyes to Nagumo Miyabi, whose expression remained calm.

"You think running away to another group will solve everything?"

Nagumo Miyabi continued, "Your off-the-field tactics won't work here. Everyone, listen carefully—he's just a shareholder in the Shinomiya Financial Group at best. He might not even have the ability to pull out cash, let alone make you a company president. And the school won't vouch for you. If he backs out later, you'll have no choice but to swallow the loss."

The moment they clashed, Nagumo went all out, showing none of the apologetic attitude from before.

Kaoru glanced at Ryuen, who stood not far away.

In such a short time, the two couldn't have exchanged information.

That meant Nagumo had seen him request leadership from Mashima and decided to provoke him.

"One more thing—he's the group leader, right? If your group's performance is too low, he might just take one of you down with him."

A faint smile played on Nagumo's lips, but his eyes were icy.

"Don't forget what's between him and me. I'll be targeting you all. Some of you might even end up expelled because of it."

"Hahaha, how amusing. He's openly threatening us. What will you do, Mitoma Boy?"

Kouenji Rosuke couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"If you can pull it off, go ahead."

Kaoru had a rough understanding now—Nagumo was trying to divert his attention, making him overlook the situation with the girls' group.

No, perhaps he was simply trying to provoke him.

Nagumo Miyabi sneered. "Fine. Let's see who gets the last laugh this time. If you believe he can give you benefits, go ahead and follow him. But dropping out of school just for a bit of cash would be a real shame."

There was no denying the persuasive nature of his words—deliberately emphasizing his conflict with Kaoru while sowing distrust among the others.

"Who wins or loses isn't decided yet, Nagumo-senpai."

Kaoru smiled. "And who said I can only offer cash? My phone holds quite a few Personal Points—many of them gifted by you, Nagumo-senpai. That's more than enough."

Nagumo Miyabi's face turned ashen as his old wounds were reopened.

Not going all out against Kaoru Mitoma back then had been a complete mistake!

Although he had only lost a few million, Nagumo now couldn't estimate Kaoru's current Personal Points.

He had known about the uses of Personal Points early on and had likely been collecting them from Class A for a year.

Therefore, it wouldn't be surprising if Kaoru had tens of millions of Personal Points.

"Heh, probably all used to protect himself," Nagumo sneered. "Next, you'd better hope he can help you."

"Nagumo-senpai, isn't this exam time right now?" Kanzaki Ryuji spoke up from nearby.

Nagumo glanced at him before saying, "You sure have a lot of people, Mitoma."

After saying this, Nagumo returned to his group, while Tonokawa Sosuke subtly gestured to Kaoru.

"Did you really steal his childhood sweetheart?" Hashimoto asked gravely.

This statement instantly lightened the tense atmosphere, turning Nagumo's threat into a comical scene of humiliation.

Even the usually expressionless Ayanokoji Kiyotaka showed a flicker of curiosity.

At this moment, Nagumo's retreating figure looked like nothing more than a pitiful, defeated man.

"Yes, Asahina-senpai is now my girlfriend," Kaoru replied earnestly.

Unfortunately, his sincerity only made those around him even more skeptical.

....

Next was the formation of cross-grade teams.

Horikita Manabu specifically came to Kaoru.

"Want to join us?"

"No. Nagumo has other ways to attack me. He's probably already considered that you might help me, and I don't want to cause trouble for you."

"I see. Who do you plan to team up with?"

"Sato-senpai from Class 3-C. He's the only upperclassman I know."

Sato Keisaku had been Kaoru's buyer back then, so with that connection, he likely wouldn't screw him over.

After Horikita left, Moriyama looked at Kaoru strangely.

"No wonder you're the student council vice president. Your relationships with the upperclassmen are complicated."

"Feels like everyone's watching us," Hashimoto remarked, stroking his chin as he glanced at the upperclassmen's groups.

"Hahaha! Looks like things won't be boring from here on out!" Kouenji Rosuke began walking away.

"I'll go rest in my room first. Team up with whoever you want."

"Isn't this guy way too carefree?" Ishizaki Daichi sneered at Kouenji and Ayanokoji. "No wonder you're both in Class D."

"To be fair, even we in Class D can't stand him," Ayanokoji replied matter-of-factly.

"Whatever. Let's hurry to our rooms too," Kaoru said, heading toward the upperclassmen's groups.

Unlike the first-years, the upperclassmen weren't as clearly divided.

He chose an ordinary second-year group and Sato's team.

However, perhaps due to Nagumo's lingering influence, the second-years seemed somewhat hesitant.

As Kaoru formed his team, the first-years also began pairing up.

Katsuragi chose Kiriya and Horikita's group, while Kanzaki seemed to pick upperclassmen he knew.

Kaneda Satoru joined Nagumo's team, and Hirata Yosuke selected his preferred group.

Hmm, why weren't the upperclassmen choosing the first-years?

Maybe they wanted to look after their juniors.

After all, letting the upperclassmen decide the pairings would feel like bullying.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka silently followed behind the group, feeling inexplicably unsettled at the moment.

If Kaoru was from the White Room, now would be the easiest time for him to get Ayanokoji expelled.

However, considering Kaoru had exposed his own identity, Ayanokoji doubted he could be from the White Room.

But he didn't bear the name "Shinomiya" either—could he be an illegitimate child? After all, the White Room was full of them.

The more he thought about it, the more anxious he became.

Outwardly, Ayanokoji maintained perfect composure and calmness.

Normally, he wouldn't overthink like this, but his father had personally come to the school last month trying to drag him back.

Should he take precautions?

Ayanokoji glanced back at the senior students' group but quickly dismissed the idea—Class 1-D couldn't afford the cost of seeking help.