

Cote 441

Chapter 441: Himeno Yuki.

Since this was a training camp, sharing rooms was inevitable.

When Kaoru and the others arrived at their room, Kouenji Rosuke had already claimed the best bed.

"Hey hey, sneaking in to grab the best spot before everyone else is pretty underhanded, don't you think?"

Faced with Ishizaki's accusation, Kouenji lay comfortably on the bed with his hands behind his head and legs crossed, showing no intention of responding.

Ishizaki gritted his teeth but didn't push further—this group wasn't under his authority anyway.

"So it's bunk beds... I'm not really used to this kind of setup," Hashimoto remarked, patting the upper bunk near the door.

"Though it somehow feels nostalgic."

"Did you have training camps before?" Kaoru asked.

"Sort of. We had study trips in middle school—went to Hokkaido back then," Hashimoto replied as he lazily climbed onto the bunk.

Meanwhile, Ishizaki also climbed onto the opposite upper bunk.

"Uh, shouldn't we at least discuss this first?" Moriyama Akimi said, dumbfounded.

"Do whatever you want, but let me make one thing clear," Kaoru stated. "Aside from quarreling, fighting, or skipping activities, you're free to do anything."

"Pfft—what's the point of saying that?" Ishizaki burst out laughing.

"Like what Nagumo said earlier, I don't know what you're thinking—whether you plan to cooperate with me or team up against me. But if I determine you're disrupting the exam, I'll have no choice but to nominate you for expulsion."

The room fell silent at Kaoru's words.

After a pause, Ishizaki grumbled, "If that's the case, why didn't you just join your Class A group?"

"Because I'm rich," Kaoru declared matter-of-factly. "I have enough Personal Points to avoid expulsion, so it doesn't matter where I stay."

"Tch!" Ishizaki turned away, refusing to engage further.

"Ahahaha, I must say I quite agree with Mitoma Boy here. A peaceful environment is important," Kouenji chuckled before settling back into silence.

Eventually, the remaining members chose their beds.

Kaoru took the lower bunk by the door—right below Hashimoto.

After resting for a while, Hashimoto suddenly spoke from above.

"So boring. Should've brought something to play with."

"Life without phones is torture," someone agreed.

"Isn't it about time for dinner?" Ishizaki sat up from his bed. "To be honest, I haven't eaten anything besides breakfast today. Having to leave at six in the morning is brutal!"

As he spoke, he climbed down from the top bunk, where his classmate Albert slept below.

"Albert, get up quickly! We're going to eat!"

Albert was an international student from Africa, usually quiet and reserved.

It took Ishizaki calling his name several times before he finally responded.

"Does he even speak Japanese?" Hashimoto Masayoshi asked.

"Of course he does! How could he study in Japan without knowing Japanese, right, Albert?"

Ishizaki glanced uncertainly at Albert.

"..."

Seeing the tall, dark-skinned man remain completely silent, Hashimoto grew even more doubtful.

...

In the usual cafeteria setup, the division between grade levels was clear.

Upperclassmen wouldn't approach underclassmen, and underclassmen wouldn't mingle with upperclassmen—everyone had their own designated areas.

However, the situation had now descended into chaos.

Kaoru could see many upperclassmen and underclassmen moving together, likely due to being in the same group, gathering to share information.

Although the cafeteria here was also quite large, having four or five hundred people packed inside made it somewhat suffocating, with dense crowds and noisy chatter filling the space.

As Kaoru carried his tray, searching for a spot, someone tugged at his sleeve from the side.

"There's space here."

Following the girl's voice, someone suddenly bumped into him, pressing a soft, ample chest against him.

"Whoa—!"

"Be careful."

Kaoru quickly steadied Ichinose, who stood before him, her cheeks slightly flushed with embarrassment.

"Thank you..."

With his help, Ichinose regained her balance. "B-but, I'm still not used to being affectionate with Kaoru in crowded places."

'Affectionate? There wasn't really any room for that just now' Kaoru thought in confusion.

Nevertheless, Ichinose soon brightened up, her small hand gripping the hem of his clothes.

"Ehehe, Kaoru, come this way with me!"

Not far away, Karuizawa silently retraced her steps.

"Not going over?"

Kushida smirked mischievously beside her, startling her.

"Huh? G-going where?!"

A flicker of panic flashed in Karuizawa's eyes. "There's no space left there! Let's find somewhere else!"

With that, she quickly retreated with her tray to her group of close friends.

"What were you just talking to Karuizawa about, Kikyo?"

"Nothing~ Let's hurry and find a seat too, Mako!"

"..."

Unaware of the commotion on the other side, Kaoru was pulled by Ichinose to her group of friends—Amikura Mako, Shiranami Chihiro, and the others—but there was also an unfamiliar face among them.

The girl had long twin tails, a hairstyle that should have been lively and playful, but her lifeless eyes gave her an icy, striking beauty instead.

The corners of her eyes tilted slightly upward, and her small lips were pressed tightly together, as if she were utterly disinterested in everything—or as if someone owed her a million dollars, leaving her perpetually sullen and impatient.

Though dressed warmly for winter, glimpses of her snow-like skin were still visible.

Her soft figure was wrapped in a snug vest, her modest chest not as full as Ichinose's but with its own charm.

Below, she wore a pleated skirt, her slender legs sheathed in black tights that traced the curves of her slightly plump thighs.

Kaoru noticed her immediately.

Like Amikura Mako, she radiated numerous desires—though so perverse that he briefly considered abandoning the idea of fulfilling them.

"Kaoru, you haven't met Himeno Yuki yet, right?"

Seated beside him, Ichinose introduced her companion.

"Himeno is part of our group now and will be joining us from today onward!"

Actually, they had met before.

Kaoru noticed Himeno Yuki glancing away with disinterest.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Mitoma from Class A."

Though reluctant, Himeno still muttered a quiet "hello" in response.

"Ah, Himeno is such a handful." Kobashi Yume pouted slightly, seemingly dissatisfied with this somewhat antisocial classmate.

"Hahaha, you shouldn't speak about your classmates like that."

Ichinose smiled, though she seemed a little worn out.

Could it be because of the group assignments?

Kaoru had a strange expression.

Someone as popular as Ichinose probably had every girl in the class wanting to team up with her.

Yet, while trying to form groups, she also had to find ways to reassure her classmates—after all, leaving their comfort zones could make the girls uneasy.

Just then, he felt a light tap against his calf.

The person sitting across from him happened to be Amikura Mako.

Chapter 442: One Less Ring

"Phew, thank goodness you were here today, Honami-chan. Otherwise, who knows how long it would've taken to sort out the groups."

"I thought things would be easier with the girls, but it turned out to be so exhausting. Everyone's attitude toward people they like or dislike is so obvious."

"Because the other classes are enemies, right?"

"Mmm, not entirely enemies, I suppose. How about you, Kaoru? Is everything okay on your side?"

As they chatted, Ichinose suddenly shifted the topic to Kaoru.

Still unsure about what had just happened, Kaoru remained composed.

"I think it's fine. There were some minor issues, but the grouping went smoothly overall."

"I see. Maybe the boys can't really understand the situation on the girls' side."

Ichinose muttered before smiling again. "Still, you worked hard too, Kaoru."

"Honestly, I think you're the one who had it toughest."

Kaoru could see the faint exhaustion hidden beneath her cheerful demeanor.

Dealing with the girls' affairs must have brought her quite a few headaches.

"Mmm... Well, everyone trusts me, after all. Thankfully, Sakayanagi-san and Kushida-san were there to help."

Ichinose sighed deeply.

As the most popular girl in the grade, she inevitably ended up being the leader everyone turned to.

In other words, trouble didn't just find her—people actively brought it to her, hoping she could resolve it.

"You've worked hard. Here's a piece of chicken as a reward."

Kaoru picked up a piece of fried chicken and, right in front of Amikura Mako and the others, fed it to Ichinose.

"Ah—!"

After swallowing the bite, Ichinose belatedly realized this wasn't like when they were living together.

Her face flushed bright red. "Th-That was kind of embarrassing! Don't do that again!"

"Eh? What's embarrassing about it?"

Kobashi Yume grinned mischievously. "Honami-chan's other side is so cute!"

"P-Please stop!"

Ichinose wanted to cover her burning face.

For some reason, Shiranami Chihiro gritted her teeth and aggressively shoveled down a bowl of rice.

Kaoru found it a little odd—why was she acting jealous?

Just then, Amikura Mako tapped his leg again with her foot, as if reminding him of something.

Her stocking-clad toes rubbed against his calf, tracing slow circles.

Kaoru held back, watching her expression remain unchanged as he tried to figure out what she meant.

"I'm done eating. I'll head back first."

Himeno Yuki, seemingly uncomfortable staying with them, quickly stood up to leave.

"See you later, Himeno-san!"

Ichinose smiled warmly.

"She never seems very enthusiastic," Kobashi mused suspiciously. "Does she just not like exams?"

"And you do?" Amikura Mako joined the conversation as usual.

"I hate it. I really dislike exams, and isn't the training camp supposed to be for fun?"

Kobashi Yume grimaced. "And now we might get expelled? Whose rule is this?"

"Surely no one will actually be expelled, right?"

Amikura Mako hesitated, then glanced at Kaoru across from her.

Had he still not picked up on her hint?

"As long as we all work hard together, no one will be expelled. Don't worry!"

Ichinose Honami smiled warmly before turning to Kaoru, her small hand grasping his beneath the table.

"I believe in you too, Kaoru. Always have."

With his girlfriend gazing at him like that and others causing trouble below the table, Kaoru felt the pressure mounting.

"I can't help but want to kiss you right now."

"Wha—?!"

...

After the meal, the group parted ways—after all, the school had only allotted them an hour.

Kaoru spotted Shiho Manabe and the others but didn't approach them.

Instead, he communicated through subtle glances and gestures, signaling for them to pass him the information tomorrow.

Perhaps due to his tyrannical nature, Ryuen had developed a peculiar habit—he never explained his plans to his subordinates, only forced them to comply.

In a way, this served as a form of operational secrecy.

However, he didn't know that Shiho Manabe had already sided with Kaoru.

In the upcoming operation, he wouldn't be able to keep her in the dark.

This was an advantage in intelligence.

Realizing that Shiho Manabe had understood his message, Kaoru suddenly wondered—had Amikura Mako also been trying to signal him earlier?

A short while later, he arrived at a secluded corner of the school building.

"You're so slow!"

Amikura Mako frowned upon seeing him, clearly displeased.

"Why meet here?"

Kaoru looked at the girl curiously. "Is there something you couldn't say in front of Honami?"

Amikura Mako's expression darkened with irritation. "Sakayanagi-san has a ring."

Kaoru froze.

What did that mean?

Seeing his blank stare, Amikura Mako grew even more frustrated.

"She didn't say it outright, but she kept mentioning her 'fiancé'—who else could it be but you?"

It seemed Sakayanagi had already declared her claim to the world, despite her earlier reluctance.

The thought left Kaoru feeling somewhat vexed.

"Do you want one too?" He asked bluntly.

"W-w-what?! That's not what I meant!"

Amikura Mako flushed red. "It's about Honami! She doesn't have a ring from you!"

Ichinose Honami didn't usually wear a ring, so it was natural that Amikura Mako wouldn't know.

Or perhaps Honami had simply forgotten to mention it.

Kaoru smirked. "Are you standing up for Honami?"

"Shouldn't I?"

Amikura Mako suppressed her embarrassment. "She's your girlfriend, yet you're also engaged to Sakayanagi-san. Isn't that going too far?"

Was she questioning whether he was just toying with them?

"Engagement... you could interpret it that way. But is there a rule that says you can only give an engagement ring to one person?"

"Huh?"

Stunned by his shameless reasoning, Amikura Mako was at a loss.

"Then... Honami...?"

"Right, Honami has one too. She just doesn't wear it often. Have you noticed her necklace?"

"A Christmas gift?"

"Do you like it?" "..."

Amikura Mako fell silent.

At first, she thought Kaoru had simply bewitched Ichinose Honami, but it turned out he genuinely intended to Take all—he'd even given out two rings.

No wonder Ichinose showed no reaction upon seeing Sakayanagi's ring—she already had one herself!

"Still, I'm surprised, Mako. You seem quite concerned about Honami."

Kaoru walked up to Amikura Mako, who instinctively took a small step back.

However, he caught her wrist before she could retreat further.

"I'm at least your friend, so you could trust me a little, couldn't you?"

Suddenly pulled close with her wrist in his grasp, Amikura Mako's heart raced wildly—as if he might kiss her at any moment.

"I-I get it. Next time, I'll try to trust you a little more."

"Just a little?"

"Only as much as a friend would."

"Hmm, your definition of 'a little' is pretty strict."

Kaoru took her hand and, as if out of nowhere, slipped a [Wedding Ring] onto her finger.

Amikura Mako was too stunned to react, watching blankly as he slid the ring onto her.

"As good friends, this is a friendship ring—not an engagement ring. Remember that, Mako."

Hearing his words, her thoughts spiraled into chaos.

Was he proposing to her?

Even as she tried to rein in her imagination, the girl couldn't help picturing her own wedding—the white dress, the solemn ceremony, walking down the aisle with her best friend, taking Kaoru's hand, successfully getting pregnant together a few months later, naming their child Mitoma Mami, and then having their child grow up as sisters with Ichinose's kid...

Well... that wouldn't be so bad.

Aside from the slightly excessive number of brides, Amikura Mako felt like she probably couldn't refuse.

Wait—

What am I even thinking?!

Snapping back to reality, she wanted to loudly denounce Kaoru's underhanded scheme—but the moment she saw the beautiful ring on her finger, she hesitated.

"A f-friendship ring? Are you joking?" she stammered, masking her flustered emotions. "Who gives a girl a ring if it's not a proposal?"

"So Mako thinks I'm proposing?" Kaoru Mitoma asked.

"Uh, th-that's not what I meant!" Amikura Mako's face burned red. "Don't you think this is weird?"

"Not really. I want to be with Mako forever, to stay close friends for life. That's why I gave you this ring—it's a symbol of our friendship."

The more serious he sounded, the redder she became, torn between running away and staying rooted in place.

"Would Mako say yes if it were a proposal?"

"No!"

"Exactly. So it's a friendship ring. Unless... Mako wants to cut ties with me?"

"Guh..."

Under his gaze, Amikura Mako felt utterly helpless and could only reluctantly accept his reasoning.

"F-fine, I'll take it."

"That's more like it. I'm happy."

Kaoru smiled faintly. "Oh, and in return, I'd like Mako to give me a friendship gift too."

She had to give something back?

Amikura Mako blinked in confusion.

She hadn't brought anything with her—

Wait, how did he even bring that ring in here?

Was this all planned?!

The realization made her lower her head, though her flushed ears betrayed her emotions.

"I-I didn't prepare anything..."

"That's fine. You can give it to me later."

Kaoru didn't mind.

He just wanted things to be fair between them—though now, he was down another [Wedding Ring].

'Guess I'll have to draw another one next time.'

However, Amikura Mako fell silent for a moment, as if steeling herself for something.

The next instant, she stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on Kaoru's cheek.

Kaoru froze for a second, instinctively touching his face where she had kissed him.

The girl before him was flushed crimson, her eyes darting away as she took a small step back, fingers fidgeting nervously.

"T-This is a friendship kiss!"

As if afraid he might misunderstand, Amikura Mako loudly declared the meaning behind her action.

Kaoru blinked.

Was this really how things worked?

"I don't think I felt it just now. Can we do the friendship kiss again?"

He expected her to refuse, but instead, the blushing girl leaned in once more, pressing another sweet peck against his cheek.

Kaoru was completely stunned.

"Still didn't feel it. Can I kiss you back this time?"

This time, she didn't fall for it—Amikura Mako punched him several times in retaliation.

Chapter 443: Negotiating Terms.

After taking the beating, Kaoru watched as Amikura Mako's anger melted away, replaced by a soft laugh.

The slight upward curve of her lips suggested she felt she had finally gained the upper hand.

"Are you that happy about it?" Kaoru sulked.

"Because this is the first time I've ever received a ring like this. Starting today, I'm going to wear it all the time."

Amikura Mako was no longer shy—why should she be? If this was all part of his long-planned scheme, she might as well face it head-on.

"If anyone asks, I'll just say you gave it to me."

Not to be outdone, Kaoru shot back, "In that case, I'll go around telling everyone you kissed me."

Remembering her earlier boldness, Amikura Mako's face burned, but she met his gaze with feigned composure.

"Say whatever you want. Not only did you tell me you'd 'take all,' but you also did something really awful to me before. I'm sure people will have the basic judgment to figure out who the real pervert is."

After a brief staring contest, Kaoru realized she wasn't joking.

His mood soured further—it seemed he had accidentally unlocked something in her, and now she was turning the tables on him.

Seeing that he didn't argue back, Amikura Mako's mood brightened even more.

Her fingers brushed against the ring—so he hadn't forgotten about her. He had even prepared one specially for her.

But why hadn't Ichinose mentioned it?

"Next time, don't touch my calf. Someone might see." Kaoru suddenly spoke up.

"W-What was I supposed to do? I didn't have a phone to contact you! Besides, no one saw!"

A faint blush reappeared on Amikura Mako's cheeks, and her voice grew quieter.

"Should we set a specific time or something?"

"Wouldn't it be bad if Honami found out?"

Kaoru felt a pang of guilt—his girlfriend's best friend.

The whole thing had an oddly sneaky undertone.

Amikura Mako paused, then a dazzling smile spread across her face.

She blinked, leaning slightly closer until her breath tickled Kaoru's face.

"What would happen if Honami found out?"

Thanks to their height difference, Kaoru caught a glimpse of her fair neck and the slight swell of her chest peeking from her collar, her skin flushed pink—irresistible.

Kaoru studied her for a moment.

Her lips curled in triumph, as if she believed she had complete control of the situation—maybe even eager to see him squirm.

The next instant, Amikura Mako felt a warm fingertip lift her chin, followed by the soft, tender press of lips against hers.

"Eh?" The girl stared at him blankly.

Kaoru licked his lips, as if savoring the taste, and smiled slightly.

"Now I've kissed you too."

Amikura Mako stumbled back several steps, her heart pounding wildly, her face burning as if on fire.

What had just happened?

Had she been tricked?

Th-this was too much! Taking advantage of her inattention to launch a sudden sneak attack!

"Y-you... you just kissed me?"

"Mako kissed me too just now."

"N-no, it's different... That was... my first kiss..."

"Even better. Mako's first kiss is mine."

Amikura Mako subconsciously puffed out her cheeks.

Honestly, she was getting angry, yet this guy was still grinning.

But considering the ring, she'd let it slide this time.

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In the afternoon during free time, Kaoru returned to the boys' main building.

As he passed through the corridor by the entrance, someone knocked on the wall at the corner.

"Restroom."

After saying this, the boy turned and walked toward the other end of the hallway.

Kaoru followed the corridor to the restroom, then noticed someone making a gesture in a distant corner before turning to approach.

As expected, he saw Tonokawa there.

"You're really being cautious, even though Nagumo already knows I have people in your class."

Faced with Kaoru's slightly mocking tone, Tonokawa Sosuke didn't get angry but sighed instead.

"Are you planning to deal with Nagumo-kun, or help Kiriya-kun against us?"

"Actually, Kiriya-senpai made me an offer that's hard to refuse."

"What if we have a better offer?"

"So you're abandoning Nagumo to seek my support?"

"You'll be the next student council president, even if Nagumo-kun calls for an election."

"I can still get the president position after making him drop out."

"We can help you with that too."

"Your attitude changed quite quickly."

"Some people are already eager. Your identity can tempt quite a few."

At this point, Tonokawa Sosuke had essentially revealed their current predicament.

On one hand, Nagumo Miyabi was exploiting the Personal Points of their entire class, even the whole grade, causing growing dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, Kaoru's capabilities couldn't be underestimated.

Leaving aside the Shinomiya Financial Group for now, Tonokawa Sosuke shared Nagumo's suspicion that Kaoru possessed a substantial amount of Personal Points—enough to potentially buy over the second years.

"I don't really need to negotiate with you now. This exam might be enough to make Nagumo drop out."

Kaoru smiled. "Besides, I've already accepted Kiriya-senpai's terms."

"To be blunt, even if Nagumo-kun ends up in last place, he has enough points to protect himself."

Tonokawa Sosuke said, "Compared to Kiriya-kun, we better fit your requirements."

"What can you offer?" Kaoru seemed interested.

Tonokawa Sosuke didn't rush to answer, instead asking, "Do you know what's most needed for the graduation exam, Mitoma-kun?"

Kaoru thought for a moment. "Personal Points?"

"You clearly understand the value of Personal Points."

Tonokawa Sosuke laughed. "To many, Personal Points are only for transferring classes or saving expelled students—seemingly useless otherwise."

"But everything here can be bought with Personal Points."

Kaoru stated. "That's right. As long as the school deems it possible to provide, you can buy anything with Personal Points."

Tonokawa Sosuke said, "Take the previous sports festival for example—substituting players required Personal Points. And for future exams, especially the graduation exam, you'll need even more Personal Points."

Kaoru seemed intrigued: "How do you know what future exams will entail?"

"Just like how I'm telling you now, our seniors warned us about it before."

Tonokawa Sosuke smiled faintly.

Kaoru felt that he was deliberately holding back, but he didn't mind now and asked.

"Are you planning to bribe me with Personal Points?"

"Right now, Class 2-A can provide Personal Points to Nagumo-kun, but in the future, we might just as well offer them to Mitoma-kun. As long as we remain Class A, the flow of Personal Points will never stop."

"Isn't that placing too much trust in me?"

"Cross-grade influence isn't unheard of. With just a little effort from you, we can coexist peacefully for a year."

Tonokawa Sosuke felt he had shown enough sincerity—helping to expel Nagumo Miyabi from their class, supporting Kaoru's bid for student council president, and even offering Personal Points.

What better terms could there be?

Yet, Kaoru refused.

"I have no reason to help you. Nagumo's expulsion is already a foregone conclusion. You can't use an outcome as a bargaining chip—that's impossible."

Tonokawa Sosuke was stunned.

Wait, they hadn't even lifted a finger yet, and Kaoru was already certain Nagumo would be expelled?

"We can give you half of our class's Personal Points—half of everything!"

Kaoru shook his head.

Honestly, if he put on the [Black-framed Glasses] now and made the school believe he was Nagumo, he could submit a withdrawal application that would leave the real Nagumo utterly baffled.

"Why won't you agree?"

Tonokawa couldn't understand.

Kaoru smiled faintly. "I didn't say I wouldn't agree—just that your terms aren't acceptable."

Tonokawa's expression eased slightly. As long as there was room for negotiation, things were fine.

"First, I won't help you, but I also won't help Kiriya-senpai. You can rest assured on that point."

If Kaoru remained neutral, that was acceptable.

A year should be enough to prevent Kiriya Ikuyo from catching up.

Tonokawa nodded.

"Second, you must continue interacting normally with Asahina-senpai, no matter what objections Nagumo might raise."

Tonokawa's face twisted in bewilderment.

So the rumors about you two were true after all?

"Is there a problem?"

Kaoru raised an eyebrow.

"No, it's just... we never planned to do anything to Asahina-san in the first place."

Tonokawa felt a pang of guilt—some in their class had indeed been distancing themselves from Asahina Nazuna.

"Good."

Kaoru continued, "Third, if anyone wants to terminate the contract, you must agree—even if Nagumo opposes it."

"Contract?"

Tonokawa was confused.

"The contract binding your entire grade—the one where you hand over Personal Points to Nagumo."

Kaoru hadn't forgotten this.

Without it, Nagumo Miyabi wouldn't have such terrifying influence or an overwhelming stockpile of Personal Points.

To bring Nagumo down, they had to not only strip him of his revival armor but also cut off his supply of Personal Points.

Tonokawa's eyes widened in realization, then he nodded without hesitation.

After all, those points never benefited their class—they were just tools Nagumo used to exploit lower-ranked classes.

"Finally, until Nagumo is expelled, you'll follow my instructions. If anyone gets expelled in the process, I'll provide them with meaningful employment."

At this, Tonokawa's expression finally shifted.

He couldn't help but swallow hard.

Was this the allure of a major conglomerate?

No wonder people had been eyeing them resentfully lately, itching to act.

The offer was undeniably tempting.

"Those are my terms. Any objections?" Kaoru spoke calmly.

Tonokawa thought for a moment, then ventured, "Mitoma-kun... don't you need Personal Points?"

These conditions were more favorable than he had anticipated—there was actually no harsh treatment?

Could it be due to Asahina Nazuna's influence?

"Are you sure your class won't resent this?"

Kaoru smirked faintly. "Besides, in exchange for just a few Personal Points, I'd have to protect your position in Class A. That's hardly worth the effort."

Tonokawa Sosuke laughed awkwardly.

If you can't beat them, join them—no shame in that.

"None of this is a problem. We can offer you assistance."

At this point, Tonokawa had no choice but to side with Kaoru.

Still, he remained confident in Nagumo Miyabi's abilities.

Forcing Nagumo Miyabi to drop out would take at least half a year, right?

At the very least, a full semester?

Tonokawa Sosuke wasn't sure, but he knew he had to change the mindset of his entire class.

After all, many still instinctively followed Nagumo Miyabi.

Chapter 444: The Delinquents Know How to Have Fun

That evening, during dinner, Kaoru met with Shiho Manabe to get a general idea of the situation among the girls.

Unlike the straightforward approach of the boys, the girls mostly kept to themselves, with many small cliques forming within groups.

Even so, they had reluctantly made the same decision as the boys—each group consisted of students from all four classes, led by their respective leaders.

However, in the group that should have been led by Ichinose from Class 1-B, she had taken in quite a few problem children.

Aside from her close friends, her group was mostly filled with troublemakers from other classes, like Ibuki Mio.

According to Shiho Manabe, Ibuki Mio had almost no friends in her class, so it was natural for her to be excluded.

In truth, it wasn't just Ibuki Mio—Shiho Manabe herself was also a troublemaker.

"So, the one who became the leader in your group is Rika?"

At his question, Shiho Manabe nodded and added, "Right. Ryuen pushed us to make Rika the leader, but he didn't tell us why."

Shiho Manabe's group was centered around Class C, with nine members from their class alone, while the other classes only contributed six members in total.

Meanwhile, Ibuki Mio was in a different group.

It was unclear how they had divided things up.

Still, Kaoru remembered Rika, the girl Shiho Manabe and her small group of delinquents had been looking out for.

During summer vacation, Karuizawa Kei had bumped into Rika without apologizing, which had angered Shiho Manabe and the others.

"Master, is there a problem?"

Shiho Manabe looked worried.

More than anything about Rika, she was now concerned about Kaoru's safety.

"Should we try to frame Ryuen and Nagumo?"

"Frame them how?"

Kaoru found it strange.

"Like... sexual harassment or something."

Shiho Manabe was eager. "Besides, I know Ryuen gets into fights all the time. I'll provoke him on purpose, and you can film it. Then we can report him for bullying!"

Kaoru flicked her forehead with his finger. "If I wanted to frame him, I wouldn't need you to sacrifice yourselves."

Leaving aside the harassment angle, did she really expect him to stand by and watch his own people get beaten up?

"Oww..."

Shiho Manabe clutched her forehead, tears glistening in the corners of her eyes.

"Today's just the first day. If he's planning anything, he'll probably give you instructions tomorrow." Kaoru had already reviewed the school's schedule for the upcoming exams, which consisted of four subjects.

Zen meditation, public speaking, relay races, and written exams.

Starting tomorrow morning, students would begin with seated meditation and labor in the dojo, followed by breakfast, then either study sessions or speeches.

The afternoon would bring new assignments, continuing until evening.

Just reading the materials alone made it hard to grasp what exactly was expected.

Zen meditation was likely spiritual training, public speaking would build confidence and mental fortitude, and the relay races were probably athletic events?

"Understood. I'll report to you daily, Master."

Shiho Manabe's voice interrupted Kaoru's thoughts.

She licked her lips, her eyes seductive and half-lidded. "But shouldn't Master also reward his little servant?"

She had bathed earlier in the afternoon and was now dressed in athletic wear.

Beneath her jacket, only the slight curve of her chest was visible, while her long, straight legs were entirely hidden beneath the track pants—only a small section of white socks peeked out, her petite feet clad in black indoor shoes.

Though her figure wasn't fully on display, the faintly outlined curves carried a youthful allure.

Under the flickering light, her delicate face was partially obscured, her flushed lips slightly parted, revealing a glimpse of pink.

"What kind of reward do you want?"

"Anything from Master is fine~"

"It's only been a few days, and you've gotten even better at seduction. Hard to believe you used to be a delinquent."

Kaoru lifted her chin, studying her face.

He could feel her breathing grow slightly uneven, her eyes glistening with moisture.

"With Master, even if I was a delinquent, now I'm just your most loyal pet."

Shiho's throat moved as if craving something. "If Master doesn't like it, maybe you should punish this delinquent?"

How should he punish her?

Kaoru sealed her lips with his own, then quietly pressed his hand over the rapid pulse at her chest.

His slightly rough handling only made her eyes light up with delight, as if she had finally received the acknowledgment she longed for.

Far from resisting, Shiho even adjusted her posture to make it easier for him.

"Mmm... Ngh..."

Before long, Shiho was straightening her clothes, her face flushed.

Her mood had improved drastically—even if she saw Sakayanagi putting on airs later, she'd probably just ignore her.

Meanwhile, Kaoru let out a deep exhale.

He had to admit, delinquents really knew how to play.

If this kept up, he'd be completely drained sooner or later.

Ding-ding—

The school bell rang. It was about time to head back.

"Starting tomorrow night, we'll meet here every day."

Kaoru gave Shiho the instruction—life without a phone was truly inconvenient.

"Absolutely!"

Shiho was overjoyed.

She would have loved nothing more than to cling to her Master twenty-four hours a day, her thoughts consumed by him.

Kaoru pinched her cheek affectionately before urging her to leave early, avoiding any chance of being seen together.

By the time he returned to the dormitory, Hashimoto and the others were already back, even inviting him to join them for a bath.

After a long day, a bath was definitely in order.

The baths were separated by gender, and the girls' side was guarded by teachers—much to the disappointment of many male students.

Since lights-out was at 10 PM, after taking showers, everyone had nothing to do.

After chatting for a while, they fell asleep.

By the next morning, the alarm rang again.

"This sound is so annoying!"

"Seems like we have to get up at 6 AM every day—earlier than usual for classes."

"There are no surveillance cameras here, so why not just skip it?"

"Idiot, they'll definitely do a roll call later!"

Kaoru listened to their complaints, feeling somewhat unaccustomed to it.

He usually wouldn't hear such voices—normally, it would be Kushida calling to wake him up.

Speaking of which, Kushida must be used to making those calls by now.

Could she still use the bathroom normally?

For a fleeting moment, Kaoru had this strange thought.

She probably could, right?

"Hey, where's Kouenji?"

Hashimoto noticed something was off—their dorm was missing a person.

"Did he run away?"

Ishizaki Daichi speculated maliciously.

Given how terrible Kouenji's reputation was, everyone thought it was entirely possible.

However, Kaoru quickly informed them that Kouenji had just gone out for morning training.

"So, Mitoma-kun woke up early too?"

"A little earlier than you guys."

"Lucky you."

While Hashimoto and the others were getting dressed and washing up, Kouenji also returned, his forehead covered in fine sweat.

"Hey, you're all awake!"

"Wait, you actually went out for morning exercise?"

"I was feeling pretty good today, so I decided to go for a workout."

"Hey, it's still winter, you know. What if you get sick? We'll lose points!"

"Hahaha, my body isn't that weak."

No matter what was said, Kouenji wore an indifferent expression.

Ishizaki glanced around and realized he seemed to be the only one bothered, so he gave up on scolding Kouenji.

"Seriously, this group is full of weirdos. We might actually end up in last place."

This complaint was less of a mutter to himself and more directed at most of the group—especially their leader, Kaoru, who had chosen them.

Kaoru shot him a glance, and he immediately shut his mouth.

Chapter 445: A New Day

Since the meeting place had been arranged in advance, Kaoru and the others quickly arrived at a classroom.

Classes at the school were organized by large groups, and everyone present belonged to Kaoru's group.

With fewer than forty students in the entire grade, the understaffed second-year group stood out the most.

Kaoru greeted Sato Keisaku and then quietly waited for the teacher.

After a few minutes, an unfamiliar teacher appeared before them.

He was the homeroom teacher for the second-year class.

After taking attendance for Kaoru's group, he announced the day's schedule.

"Starting today, you'll be cleaning designated outdoor areas. After that, you'll clean the school building. This will be your daily routine, except when it rains."

Cleaning duty—Kaoru hadn't heard that term in a while, though he did take turns with chores normally.

Perhaps because the teacher and upperclassmen were present, even Ishizaki Daichi and Kouenji Rosuke obediently followed the group to the outdoor cleaning area.

Though it was called cleaning, the task wasn't particularly heavy.

The school had already been maintaining the old building before their arrival, so their job was simply to keep it tidy.

After about ten minutes, the teacher inspected their work and then led them to the dojo.

"After cleaning, you'll meditate here every morning and evening."

Kaoru examined the dojo.

It seemed to be a shared space, as many other groups were already seated cross-legged inside.

"How long do we have to sit?" Hashimoto asked.

"You can leave at seven," the teacher replied. "But today, you'll probably spend a lot of time on explanations."

"Huh? Explanations?" Ishizaki didn't quite understand.

"Have you ever meditated before?" the teacher countered.

"No," Ishizaki Daichi admitted honestly.

The teacher nodded slightly and said, "Line up in a row and listen to my instructions now."

Kaoru had never meditated either and listened with interest as the teacher explained everything from posture to etiquette.

He hadn't realized there were so many details to sitting meditation.

"This posture is called the full lotus position. You'll be tested on it later, and you know the consequences if you fail to learn it." The homeroom teacher crossed their legs and demonstrated the posture for them.

The so-called full lotus position involved placing the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh.

It was said to be the most stable sitting posture for practitioners of Buddhism, as it helped settle both the body and the mind.

Kaoru tried a few times but failed—it seemed to require a certain degree of flexibility.

"What kind of torture is this? It hurts so much!"

Since it was everyone's first time attempting meditation, naturally, no one could succeed immediately.

The posture made Ishizaki grimace in discomfort, not to mention their group also included Albert.

Given his build, it was questionable whether he could even manage it.

However, Kaoru noticed that Ayanokoji and Kouenji had already begun meditating.

The full lotus position didn't seem to pose any difficulty for either of them.

"If you can't do it, there's also the half-lotus position, where you only place one foot. Start with this and practice gradually."

The homeroom teacher understood their struggles and didn't demand immediate success.

"This posture is so much easier!"

Ishizaki tried the half-lotus position and succeeded quickly, his face lighting up with joy—until he saw Ayanokoji and Kouenji's flawless full lotus poses.

His expression immediately fell. "What's up with these two? Seriously?"

"So jealous. They can do whatever they want with ease."

Hashimoto also took notice of this scene.

After a few more minutes of trying, Kaoru finally managed the full lotus position.

However, the meditation session didn't last long before the homeroom teacher called it off.

"Breakfast today will be provided by the school, but starting tomorrow, you'll have to figure it out yourselves."

"W-Wait, we have to handle it ourselves?!"

"You won't need to prepare the ingredients—the school will provide those. Your job is to cook and feed yourselves. How you go about it is up to your group to decide."

Though the memory of the deserted island flashed through their minds for a moment, their expressions quickly relaxed. Having ingredients was enough—cooking was just a hassle.

The homeroom teacher led the group outside the school building, where cooking utensils had already been set up in designated areas.

The boundaries between the kitchen and dining spaces were clearly marked.

As the teacher had mentioned, a warm meal awaited them today.

"Ugh, I'm totally hopeless at cooking!"

"If we have to cook, doesn't that mean waking up early every day?"

"And we still have classes later, right?"

"Why do we even have to attend classes?"

"Because there are exams!"

Listening to the voices within the group, Kaoru stared at the simple, unremarkable breakfast before him and fell into brief contemplation.

"How about we take turns cooking?"

Hashimoto beside him blinked in surprise, while Ishizaki asked blankly.

"What do you mean, take turns?"

"Starting tomorrow, we'll have to make breakfast for six consecutive days. If that's the case, our larger group can rotate responsibilities—each grade only needs to wake up early twice."

Kaoru's suggestion was reasonable, leaving little room for objection.

"No way, I can't cook!"

Ishizaki resisted immediately. "If you want to wake up early and cook, go ahead—but count me out!"

"Fine. I'll wake up early, but I won't make a portion for you if you skip." Kaoru replied calmly.

Ishizaki was dumbfounded.

If he were starving, he'd probably be standing to the side, drooling while watching them eat, wouldn't he?

"I—I get it, I'll do it! But don't expect much from my skills!"

Since the core of this group was Kaoru, Ishizaki had no choice but to obediently back down.

Kaoru didn't spare him another glance and turned to the other side.

"Kouenji-kun, you should join us too."

"Ohohoho, do you have expectations for me as well?" Kouenji chuckled.

"We don't know what the exam scores will be yet. If even daily performance is being evaluated, then making breakfast might be a hidden subject," Kaoru said. "Either way, expulsion is a hassle. I doubt you'd want to end up in that situation."

Kouenji stroked his chin and laughed. "I can agree to that, but I'll say this upfront—filthy things disgust me."

It wasn't clear what exactly he meant by "filthy," but it probably wasn't the kitchen knives.

Kaoru then checked with Moriyama Akimi and the others to confirm there were no objections before heading toward the senior group.

The quickest to agree was Sato Keisaku, followed by the second-year group, led by Mutou Hiromichi from Class 2-C.

Even at first glance, Kaoru could tell Mutou's group was disorganized, their morale low.

Perhaps they were still under the psychological pressure of being exploited by Nagumo Miyabi, harboring both resentment and fear toward their fellow Class 2-A students.

"Starting from the lower grades, first-years go first, then second-years, and finally us third-years. Each grade will be responsible for cooking breakfast for two consecutive days. Does that work?"

Sato Keisaku proposed his idea—rotating daily would only breed complaints, so it was better to get it over with in one go.

"Fine. Tomorrow and the day after, we first-years will handle it," Kaoru agreed with a nod.

"We don't mind either way."

Mutou Hiromichi seemed indifferent, but the students around him were clearly very interested in Kaoru.

Kaoru could practically see the curiosity burning in their eyes.

Not just them—even the third-years were sizing him up with keen interest.

After all, he was now a shareholder in a super-conglomerate.

After answering some of their questions, Kaoru returned to his own group.

Once breakfast was over, their homeroom teacher informed them that classes would be held in the classrooms that morning—with each large group assigned a separate room.

The lessons were simple.

Kaoru had expected something more formal, but they turned out to be just general knowledge questions, most of which were related to the current training camp exam.

Still, noon break finally arrived.

Kaoru headed to the familiar cafeteria, but with so many people around, he couldn't immediately spot Ichinose.

Just as he was wondering what to do, someone across the room waved at him.

"Yahhooo, Mitoma-kun!"

Even in her gym clothes, Karuizawa gyaru aura remained undiminished—or perhaps that was just her current persona.

Chapter 446: She Seems Easy to Please.

Besides Karuizawa, there were a few other girls with her, likely from the same group—even eating together.

Kaoru greeted her, then noticed the slightly odd expression on Chiaki Matsushita's face beside her.

"Why are you alone?"

Karuizawa spoke in a tone one might use with a friend, curious, though it was clear she was suppressing a faint smirk.

Kaoru knew what she was asking and replied, "Originally, Hashimoto wanted to come with me, but I refused. I'm used to being alone."

"Oh, so you're what they call a lone wolf?"

Karuizawa patted her chest in mock relief. "As long as it's not because you have no friends, I can rest easy."

Kaoru fell silent for a moment.

What's with this sharp tone? Has she been upset these past few days?

'Still, going all out like this in front of friends might raise suspicions, Kei.'

"By the way, Mitoma-kun, are you dating Ichinose-san?"

Karuizawa brought up the recent rumors.

"I saw you two together yesterday too—is it true?"

When it came to romance, girls were naturally curious.

Karuizawa easily diverted the attention, and even Matsushita looked interested, not to mention the others.

"Yeah, we're dating."

"Wow, since when?"

"Before Christmas."

The first semester, before Christmas, Kaoru wasn't planning to reveal the truth.

If people knew they'd been dating for a while, they might start imagining all sorts of scenarios.

"I'm even more curious now—what was the moment that made you two start dating?"

Karuizawa played dumb, seizing this opportunity to push a little.

"Can't say. It's a bit embarrassing." Kaoru raised an eyebrow.

What was she thinking?

"Eh? First time I've heard a guy say something like that."

Karuizawa looked genuinely surprised. "Could it be... something a little naughty?"

"How naughty do you think it was?"

Kaoru remained calm.

He'd deal with her later.

"Well... maybe just..."

Karuizawa suddenly felt guilty and stammered, making Matsushita and the others recall certain images.

Their faces flushed.

"I-I don't know, but I heard you might have something going on with a second-year senpai."

It was obvious she was clumsily changing the subject.

"Second year... are you talking about Asahina-senpai?"

Kaoru followed her lead, already guessing her little scheme.

"Yeah, that's the name."

Karuizawa nodded. "What's... what's the situation between you two? Some say you stole someone's childhood friend?"

In an instant, the atmosphere around them grew strange.

Kaoru understood—Karuizawa was laying the groundwork for him.

If he admitted to Asahina, she could also step forward without causing an uproar.

"It's a long story. While things might look like what you're suggesting, even if I had those intentions, Asahina-senpai might not agree. So, for now, let's put aside that bold idea."

His words were cautious and ambiguous.

At first glance, it seemed like he was denying Karuizawa claim, yet he never outright rejected it.

The implication was clear—if Asahina gave her approval, he'd admit to it.

Karuizawa wasn't entirely satisfied, but since they were in public, she couldn't press further without being rude.

So, she gave Kaoru a hand signal.

...

After he left, Nene couldn't help but speak up. "Mitoma-kun seems to have a lot of trouble. I heard from the boys that senpai is planning to expel him again."

"So he really did steal someone's childhood friend!"

"But he's so handsome... I kinda wish it was me he stole."

"Rino?!"

"Ahaha, just kidding."

Truthfully, Karuizawa wasn't worried at all about the conflict between Kaoru and Nagumo.

She had complete faith in him.

Even if he really got expelled, she could just drop out too.

In fact, that might be better.

Out in the real world, they wouldn't have to worry about prying eyes and could do whatever they wanted.

Karuizawa was a little concerned about whether she'd make a good housewife, though.

"Are you and Mitoma-kun friends, Karuizawa-san?" Chiaki Matsushita asked.

Caught off guard by the sudden question about their relationship, Karuizawa panicked for a split second before suppressing it.

"Yeah. Is there a problem with me being friends with Mitoma-kun?"

"N-no, not at all." Matsushita quickly denied, "I was just thinking... apart from Hirata-kun, Karuizawa-san doesn't seem to pay much attention to other boys."

Since Hirata Yosuke used to be her boyfriend, she had to maintain appearances.

Besides, the boys in class were just too disgusting, Karuizawa thought to herself.

"Judging by appearances, Mitoma-kun is more handsome than Hirata-kun, isn't he?"

"So Karuizawa-san likes that type of handsome guy?"

"Yes. I only realized later that Hirata-kun wasn't right for me. I really like Mitoma-kun's type."

"Ahaha, is... is that so?"

Matsushita couldn't continue the questioning.

She felt Karuizawa wasn't lying—this girl might genuinely think this way.

Although Karuizawa's persona was that of a gyaru, and bold statements weren't unexpected from her, this didn't seem like an act.

There was even a sparkle in her eyes.

...

After the meal, Karuizawa naturally didn't return to the girls' dormitory but went to the outer corridor instead.

When she didn't see Kaoru there, her initially cheerful expression suddenly fell.

"Over here."

At the familiar voice, Karuizawa quickly spotted Kaoru sitting on some steps not far away—a rather inconspicuous spot that was easy to miss if you weren't looking carefully.

"At least you're sensible. I thought you'd be playing with Ichinose again."

Karuizawa walked slowly toward him with her hands behind her back. "Was that engagement ring Sakayanagi's been bragging about really from you?"

"I gave it to her."

Kaoru looked somewhat frustrated. "I didn't expect her to make such a fuss about it. When I gave it to her, she seemed completely reluctant."

"Girls often say one thing but mean another."

Even so, Karuizawa still felt dissatisfied. She had never flaunted anything like that!

"So, are you still angry now?"

Kaoru stretched out his hands toward her, making her blush instinctively.

"N-no, I'm not angry!"

Karuizawa denied it at first, then gritted her teeth and lowered her voice. "Even if I were angry, what could you do? Do you even know why I'd be angry?"

"I'll go on a date with you next Christmas."

Seeing she wasn't coming closer, Kaoru took her small hand in his. "But Christmas is too far away. Can I have Valentine's Day instead?"

Karuizawa had been keeping a stern face, unwilling to agree, but for some reason, her cheeks grew hot, her body softened, and she was effortlessly pulled into his embrace.

"P-people might see us!"

Flustered, her heartbeat quickened, yet she could feel his familiar warmth again in his arms.

"Even if it causes public outrage, Kei is my girlfriend."

Kaoru lightly tapped her nose, smiling faintly. "Where's that bold attitude from earlier?"

That was then, this is now—how could she possibly keep it up?

"I don't know. Maybe I gave it all to you."

Blushing, Karuizawa adjusted her position, sitting on his lap and facing his chest.

She nuzzled against him a few times, breathing in his familiar scent as her heartbeat gradually steadied.

"I don't care anymore. Even if someone sees us, it's all your responsibility!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Kaoru wrapped his arms around the girl's slender waist, his palm resting on her back.

Her slightly plump, perky bottom pressed against his thighs, soft and supple.

The scent of the girl enveloped him like the fragrance of early spring, faintly teasing his primal instincts.

Karuizawa giggled, her eyes curving into crescents.

She hadn't meant to look so happy.

But clinging to someone she liked was inherently joyful, enough to wash away her earlier unhappiness.

"Are you really going to spend Valentine's Day with me?"

Karuizawa felt both anticipation and worry. "What about Ichinose?"

"If you want, I can bring both of you along." Kaoru was dead serious.

Karuizawa flushed with embarrassment.

Two girls accompanying one boy—how shameful!

Not to mention dates, every time they were together, they'd inevitably end up doing something naughty.

Did that mean they'd have to do those naughty things together too?

Chapter 447: Don't Hold Back

Kaoru hadn't planned on doing anything, but seeing her like this stirred something inside him.

The sight of her pale, delicate arms alone could make him think of things like having children.

Even the slightest movement, an innocent gesture from the girl, suddenly conjured up wildly indecent images in his mind—despite him not even being in the mood right now.

Perhaps it was because of everything he'd been through lately.

Kaoru recalled his days at the agency, where outsiders envied him for living with several idols.

In reality, he was the one who suffered the most.

After the initial adjustment period, the girls gradually let their guard down.

He often caught glimpses of suggestive sights, and their teasing constantly tested his resolve.

Just like now—with Karuizawa merely rubbing against him a few times, his instincts as a man were already stirring.

"By the way... did you really get involved with that senior?"

Unaware of his thoughts, Karuizawa felt a pang of frustration.

Even though she had accepted his so-called "Take all" approach, why was the number still increasing?

"Compared to you, progress has been slow."

Kaoru suppressed his urges.

"Honestly, I don't know how to explain it to you. Situations like this shouldn't happen again—any more, and I won't be able to control it."

"You can't even call this just being lustful anymore. You're a full-blown pervert!"

Karuizawa gritted her teeth and punched his shoulder.

"You even dared to make a move on a senior! Are you planning to play around with a first-year or two this year as well?"

"Stop hitting me. I didn't even have that idea, but you might just talk me into it."

Kaoru caught her flailing fist.

This only made Karuizawa angrier.

She was just venting—were you actually considering it?!

Then again, given Kaoru's usual behavior, it wouldn't be surprising if even first-years couldn't escape his grasp.

"Are you really just lustful?"

Karuizawa eyed him suspiciously. "For the sake of one senior, you ended up clashing with a second-year, and now you're even giving us rings."

"Not lustful?"

Kaoru was curious about her perspective.

"A little perverted, but not lustful."

Karuizawa's face reddened, her voice dropping unconsciously.

"A lustful person would only care about... that kind of thing. They wouldn't care about me..."

As she spoke, she placed both hands on the hem of her clothes and lifted it right in front of Kaoru, revealing her pale, delicate stomach—where a faint, ugly scar was clearly visible.

"This... you've never once looked at it with disgust..."

The girl studied his expression. "Even though it's so ugly, why don't you frown, Kaoru?"

"It's just a scar, why would I be disgusted?"

Kaoru could imagine the terror and despair she must have felt back then.

For an ordinary person, bearing such a horrific scar would have left a lifelong psychological scar.

Yet, Karuizawa didn't withdraw into herself.

His voice made Karuizawa's heart clench.

Her eyes grew slightly damp.

Even as she tried to suppress the emotions surging within her, they spread wildly like weeds, breaking through the weight of a massive boulder.

In the gentle breeze and slanting rain, she felt a clear light—even in the churning darkness, the moon still shone brilliantly.

Humans had invented language and writing to better understand each other's feelings, but at this moment, none of it was as moving as the look in his eyes.

The so-called "gyaru" persona had always been just that—a persona.

Under his gaze, Karuizawa felt as though her ship had begun sinking long ago.

The seawater had already risen to her chest, suffocating her.

This sensation of being accepted by the whole world only made her feel utterly beyond redemption.

"Kei?"

Kaoru called her name, slightly puzzled.

Snapping out of her thoughts, Karuizawa finally flashed a radiant smile. "Actually... I've always thought Kaoru isn't the lecherous type."

"What kind of person do you think I am, Kei?"

Kaoru felt that he was lecherous—when he was with them, it was pretty much nightly revelry.

"You really want me to say it out loud?"

Karuizawa curled her lips, unable to resist teasing him with a more assertive tone.

"I can't guarantee I'll say anything nice, you know! Kaoru should have some self-awareness!"

Kaoru averted his gaze, pretending not to hear her last remark. "If you don't want to, we can talk about it next time."

"I never said I was unwilling. After being with you for so long, I've more or less figured out what kind of person you really are."

Karuizawa spoke with an air of confidence.

"You're not a pervert, are you?" Kaoru reflexively blurted out.

Karuizawa suppressed a laugh—this guy actually had some self-awareness.

But even if the person she liked was a complete pervert, she'd accept it.

So it wasn't a flaw, much less something to label him as a pervert over.

"No."

The girl kept a straight face. "Haven't you noticed, Kaoru? There's a serious problem with you."

"Being too easygoing?" Kaoru sounded uncertain.

"What? No, not that at all."

Karuizawa sighed deeply. "You're just too greedy."

Kaoru froze for a moment.

He was too greedy?

"When we first met, you said you were just experimenting with me, right?"

"Yeah. At the time, I groped your chest."

"D-don't just say it out loud like that! Is my chest all you ever think about?"

"Because Kei is irresistible."

"Guh...! T-that's not the point right now! The point is, you're too greedy. You didn't even plan to take responsibility for me at first, but less than a month later, you changed your mind."

Now that he thought about it, that was true.

Kaoru corrected her, "But back then, you were the one who kept clinging to me, weren't you?"

"I—I—! Even if I was the one clinging to you, the one who made the decision was still you!"

Karuizawa flushed with embarrassment.

"You could've just kept treating me as a transaction. I never expected you to care about my feelings—you were the one who brought it up!"

"What's wrong with that?"

Kaoru simply didn't want to see Karuizawa end up with someone else in the future.

"There is something wrong! If you were just a horndog, you wouldn't have needed to do that. You're just too greedy."

As she spoke, Karuizawa sighed again. "You get one thing, then immediately want the next. You're just collecting the things you like."

Someone else had told him something similar before.

Kaoru fell into thought.

Seeing his silence, Karuizawa worried she had been too harsh.

Gently, she pulled his head into her arms and softened her voice.

"I'm not angry. If you keep going like this, the one who'll end up exhausted is you, Kaoru."

The desire to collect was endless.

For most people, it might just mean hoarding figurines that matched their tastes, but Kaoru was collecting real people—people who could talk, who had their own thoughts.

Once the numbers grew, a harem conflict wouldn't just be some idle joke.

And honestly, Karuizawa truly believed this would be too exhausting for Kaoru.

Just dealing with Asahina meant he had to compete with Nagumo Miyabi.

Would he have to keep fighting over every new underclassman too?

"But I'm not telling you to give up on anyone. If it's someone you like, I'll do my best to accept them too."

Karuizawa lowered her voice. "I think it's fine if you let loose sometimes, Kaoru. No need to take responsibility—just bully whoever you want."

The corner of Kaoru's mouth twitched. "Are you telling me to be a villain?"

"Villain sounds too harsh. Like you said, aren't you just a horndog?"

Karuizawa's face reddened. "You don't have to be a villain. Just be a lecher. You don't always have to worry about our feelings—you can do whatever you want."

As she spoke, Kaoru felt her shift slightly, as if pulling something out of her pocket.

Seeing what she took out, Kaoru Mitoma fell silent for a long time.

"What is this?"

"Don't you want to today, Kaoru?"

"That's not what I meant. How did you even bring this in?"

"The teachers only confiscate electronics. This can just stay in my pocket."

"Didn't anyone see you?"

"Honestly! I was being careful the whole time!"

Karuizawa puffed out her cheeks, clearly displeased with Kaoru's lack of trust in her.

"Let's just forget about this. Someone might see us here."

Kaoru hadn't expected her to be so bold—he hadn't even considered the idea himself.

After all, this was a training camp.

There was always a chance someone might stumble upon them.

"We can make it work."

Even Karuizawa herself felt embarrassed, but her resolve was firm.

"There's a forest outside. Who would go out there? Everyone's staying in the dorm. It'll be fine."

"Kei, you're making it hard for me to hold back."

Kaoru's voice was low and strained.

He was already struggling to keep his nerves in check.

If she teased him any further, his last shred of rationality might evaporate entirely.

"Then don't hold back. Like I said earlier, sometimes you worry too much about us. It's exhausting."

Though flustered, Karuizawa's stance was clear.

"No matter what you want to do, I'll go along with it. In fact, I'm asking you to choose me. I'm the only one who can really help you, Kaoru."

If she went through all this trouble only for Kaoru to decide to go find Ichinose Honami instead, Karuizawa knew she'd be furious.

Kaoru took a deep breath and was about to act when suddenly, footsteps approached.

Then came a timid voice.

"Um... can I join you?"

Chapter 448: Completely Corrupted.

In an instant, Karuizawa felt her heart nearly stop.

Someone had seen her with Kaoru!

Even though she'd acted nonchalant earlier, she couldn't help feeling ashamed now.

She was still holding that box in her hand—had the other person even overheard their conversation?

This was bad!

As Karuizawa panicked, Kaoru simply sighed and looked at the intruder.

"How long have you been here?"

At his question, Kushida blinked with a sly smile playing at her lips.

"Since Karuizawa called you a pervert."

Kaoru went silent.

So she'd been here from the very beginning?

Had he really grown so careless in this carefree environment that he hadn't noticed Kushida's presence?

"Kushida-san?"

Karuizawa, still in his arms, looked shocked before letting out a relieved sigh.

At least it wasn't an outsider.

"You two are really bold. Hugging is one thing, but planning to do something shameless outside?"

Kushida crossed her arms, leaning against a nearby pillar with a faint smirk, her gaze lingering on Karuizawa.

"Tsk. Who knew Karuizawa had this side to her?"

"I—I— Wait, why are you even here?"

Flushed with embarrassment, Karuizawa also felt guilty and awkward, like a child caught misbehaving in her room.

She hurriedly stuffed the item back into her pocket.

"It's not just you who cares about him. When I saw you didn't leave with Mori and the others, I thought you might be sneaking off to meet him, so I followed you."

As she spoke, Kushida walked over to Kaoru and Karuizawa, casually sitting on the steps beside them.

Even her athletic sweatpants couldn't completely conceal her perky bottom, with the rounded curves of her hips and full thighs inadvertently exposed to Kaoru's view.

"That's practically stalker behavior!"

Karuizawa seemed genuinely shocked, as if seeing Kushida's true personality for the first time.

"If I'm a stalker, then you're a pervert."

Kushida fired back without hesitation, flashing a dark smile.

"Who would have thought Karuizawa would actively invite a boy out? If I told everyone about this, they'd be stunned, wouldn't they, Karuizawa-san?"

Truth be told, Karuizawa was already stunned. Though she'd heard Kushida's name from Kaoru and knew they were on the same side, this behavior was a complete character breakdown, wasn't it?

Kaoru raised his hand in a mock karate chop and lightly tapped Kushida's head.

"Keep this up and I'll get angry too."

"Oww... I was just joking. I wouldn't actually tell anyone."

Kushida rubbed her head, quickly switching from her dark expression to the pure, cute smile Karuizawa was familiar with.

"Besides, I only became like this because you corrupted me."

"How exactly did I corrupt you?"

Kaoru looked utterly bewildered.

"What do you think... Master?"

With a playful smile, Kushida leaned in closer, wrapping both arms around Kaoru's.

Her ample chest pressed against him, the firm yet soft elasticity rubbing against his arm as she whispered near his ear in a murmur that carried an electric tingle.

"My mind is completely filled with thoughts of you, Master. I crave your affection every moment. Come on, let's do something naughty together~"

Her bold move was dangerously effective.

Kaoru could feel his blood heating up.

"W-what's with this 'Master' nonsense? How shameless!"

Seeing her attempt to seduce Kaoru and recalling her earlier words, Karuizawa quickly tightened her grip around Kaoru, glaring protectively like guarding her food.

This was supposed to be her moment—this wasn't fair play!

As soft sensations transmitted through their contact, the faint fragrance of the girls tantalized Kaoru's senses, with stray strands of hair tickling his neck.

"Who's shameless? Have you forgotten what you just said?"

Kushida's eyes sparkled mischievously. "If you're going to take care of him, why not include me?"

"You—"

Karuizawa fumed but couldn't find the right words.

She wanted intimate time alone with Kaoru, not with an audience watching.

However, as she pondered how to handle this, a familiar sensation suddenly made her freeze.

Karuizawa shifted her slender waist slightly, then her face burned crimson as she confirmed the current situation.

There was no mistaking it—she knew this feeling all too well.

"Stop moving,"

Kaoru whispered urgently. "Both of you, get up now. This isn't the time for jokes. There might not be cameras here, but teachers could be patrolling the area."

Seeing the reactions of the two, Kushida already understood.

"You thought we were joking?"

The girl pressed against his arm, her softness washing over him like waves.

"Karuizawa, do you think we should let him off?"

Karuizawa's face was flushed as she lowered her head in Kaoru's embrace.

Though she didn't want Kushida interrupting their rare alone time, words once spoken were like water spilled—impossible to take back.

"D-doing a little is fine..."

Karuizawa was shy but didn't pull away from Kaoru's arms, her voice small.

"If that's too much... I-I can help Kaoru with something else instead."

As for what that "something else" was, she didn't elaborate.

Kaoru felt a shameless stirring in his heart.

"Mhm, I'll help too."

Kushida quietly moved behind him, her voice gentle as she cradled his head in her hands, letting him rest against her.

"Just like Karuizawa said, it's lunch break now. Close your eyes and relax."

Having the cutest little angel in the whole grade as his pillow was far more comfortable than a lap pillow.

"I really feel like one of these days, you two are going to be the death of me."

Kaoru leaned against the girl while also feeling Karuizawa Kei's movements.

If anyone saw them like this even for a second, they'd definitely get expelled.

"Y-you're the one who can't hold back!"

Karuizawa face burned.

If they got expelled, it seemed she'd have no choice but to follow him for the rest of her life.

Even so, the girl's delicate hands were soft as silk, warm as sunlight in the winter wind, their faint heat enough to melt the day's frost.

Kaoru noticed a thin icicle hanging from the eaves nearby, refracting clear light.

The soft, weightless air wrapped tightly around it, slowly evaporating into the boundless blue sky, leaving only faint traces of moisture like dewdrops.

Paired with the girls' smiles, it was utterly hopeless.

Kaoru closed his eyes in Kushida's embrace, quietly savoring their tenderness.

"I'll give you a massage."

Kushida whispered in his ear, "Also... I actually brought some too."

Kaoru knew there was no way he could stay calm.

With her around, he figured they'd all end up corrupted by her sooner or later.

Chapter 449: The Worst Outcome Is a Draw

After the lunch break, the homeroom teacher led the class to the next task.

On the open field next to the track, Kaoru and the others began their training.

According to the school's instructions, they would undergo a final test on the last day, which included a relay race.

Literally speaking, it seemed to be a long-distance run, similar to the relay races during sports festivals.

Kaoru observed his groupmates.

Despite the entire morning's activities, they still had plenty of stamina.

Unsurprisingly, Kouenji, Ayanokoji and Hashimoto were holding up well, but even the students from Class 1-B were keeping pace.

However, after a few rounds of practice, the differences in physical fitness became obvious.

Kouenji and Albert barely broke a sweat, while the others were already panting heavily.

The upperclassmen weren't faring much better either.

Kaoru noticed a few seniors with poor stamina who had already fallen behind.

When the homeroom teacher finally allowed them to stop, many were gasping for air.

Yet, the end of the long-distance run didn't mean the day's training was over.

The teacher led them to the next activity, and after a grueling afternoon, they finally returned to the dojo.

Of course, it wasn't for rest—it was time for the final segment of the day: seated meditation.

After holding out for about half an hour, Kaoru felt his legs going numb.

Under normal circumstances, his body wouldn't have been this weak.

Their lunch break had been far too intense.

"Alright, that's all for today. You're dismissed."

At that moment, the homeroom teacher uttered the words everyone had been waiting for.

"Damn it, my legs are numb. I can't even stand up."

Ishizaki gritted his teeth. "Albert, help me up, quick."

Albert, sitting beside him, casually pulled him to his feet.

"W-Whoa! Be gentler!"

It wasn't just Ishizaki who was struggling—Kaoru also had to brace himself against the floor to slowly rise.

"You okay?"

Hashimoto looked concerned. "Seems like your stamina's worse than it was on the uninhabited island."

That was a difficult question to answer.

"I'm fine. It's just that this posture was really uncomfortable."

Kaoru stretched his numb legs, feeling the blood flow return to his calves.

"Good. You're our leader—can't have you collapsing here."

Hashimoto didn't dwell on it. "Want to grab dinner together tonight?"

Kaoru nodded.

He felt like he was in a slightly dangerous situation and shouldn't get too close to them.

When the two arrived at the cafeteria, many other students who had finished their classes were already there, making the place packed.

"So many people. At least it's just our school here."

Hashimoto glanced toward another area. "Still, I envy the teachers. They get their own seating and a dedicated serving area."

Following his gaze, Kaoru spotted their homeroom teachers gathered together, including Mashima Tomonari.

There was also Chabashira Sae and Chie Hoshinomiya, whom he had met before.

The atmosphere between the two seemed a little tense.

Kaoru and Hashimoto lined up to get their meals before settling in a corner, exchanging a glance.

"Sorry for making you have dinner with just a guy like me tonight." Hashimoto chuckled.

"Don't make it sound like I'm disgusted by you." Kaoru knew it was due to his usual behavior. "I occasionally have meals with Katsuragi and the others too."

"Really?"

Hashimoto looked skeptical.

He usually only saw Kamuro shadowing Kaoru everywhere.

"Should I call Katsuragi over?" Kaoru asked.

"Better not."

Hashimoto grinned, though his expression soon turned serious. "Actually, I wanted to discuss something with you."

It must be a serious topic, given how he had dropped his usual playful demeanor.

"What is it?"

Kaoru had some guesses but kept them to himself.

"You have a deal with the princess, don't you?"

"She even told you about that?"

"Back during summer break, she asked me to find a way to set you up. Of course, I didn't go through with it."

"And now she's having you dig another pit for me?"

"No. She knows my stance—she wouldn't force me. But I can tell she'll stop at nothing to win."

Hashimoto's face was uncharacteristically solemn, a stark contrast to his usual carefree self.

"So even someone like you worries about the class?"

Kaoru was surprised.

"When have I not cared about the class?"

Hashimoto scowled. "In my eyes, the two of you are the biggest threats to our class right now!"

That was quite the compliment.

Kaoru felt a little awkward.

"Setting aside your issues with Nagumo-senpai, given the princess's methods, she might very well treat the entire class as her pawns."

Hashimoto sighed. "And if she loses, I doubt she'll take it lying down."

"Don't worry, I'll stop her."

Kaoru said. "Besides, everyone trusts Katsuragi now. She might not be able to sway them."

"That's the problem! The guys trust you and Katsuragi, but the girls might not!"

Hashimoto rubbed his temples in frustration.

He had a feeling Sakayanagi Arisu's tactics would win over plenty among the female students.

"Even if half the class sides with her, what does it matter?"

Kaoru was puzzled. "Our deal is about who controls Class A—that's the deciding factor."

Hashimoto froze for a moment before hesitantly asking, "Are you... planning to transfer?"

"Did I say anything like that?" Kaoru was exasperated.

Hashimoto was even more confused now.

If Kaoru sabotaged Class A and then quickly transferred to another class, only to rise to the top by trampling over Class A... that kind of roundabout strategy wasn't impossible.

"If she doesn't control Class A, and I don't either, what do you think that means?"

Kaoru spread his hands. "If it's a draw, she'll be furious. What can she do? She'll just have to keep adding more conditions to the competition."

Hashimoto was stunned.

Then Kaoru continued, "I'm not letting her lose, but I'm not letting her win either. That's the most frustrating outcome for her."

For someone as proud as Sakayanagi Arisu, neither defeat nor a draw was acceptable.

To her, they were the same—even a stalemate would drive her mad.

So, for Kaoru, the worst-case scenario was merely a tie.

After a long silence, Hashimoto finally spoke. "You... you're a monster too. Worse than Sakayanagi."

"Don't look at me like that. The difference between me and her is that I know how important all of you are. I won't casually treat any classmate as expendable pawns. You're in Class A now, and you'll remain in Class A."

Kaoru's words struck a chord with Hashimoto, whose expression softened slightly.

As long as he could stay in Class A, he could turn a blind eye to Kaoru's methods.

The reason he felt uneasy about Sakayanagi was because Hashimoto vaguely sensed she truly didn't consider every Class A student as allies—only as chess pieces.

...

After finishing their meal, Kaoru bid farewell to Hashimoto.

As he was heading to last night's location, he noticed Airi Sakura looking utterly dejected.

"Airi, are you alone?"

Hearing his voice suddenly, Airi Sakura jumped in fright and instinctively tried to flee, but he quickly caught her by the shoulder.

When the girl finally recognized Kaoru's face, the panic in her eyes faded considerably, replaced by a flicker of delight.

"M-Mitoma-kun?"

Seeing her somewhat happy expression, Kaoru allowed a faint smile. "Didn't I say you should call me by my name?"

"Guh..."

Airi Sakura immediately flushed red.

What should she do? She still couldn't bring herself to say it, especially now that they were face-to-face.

However, as if remembering something, the light in her eyes soon dimmed.

Chapter 450: Just Fulfill the Wish

For some reason, an overwhelmingly negative aura emanated from Airi Sakura, like a sewer rat practically ready to scuttle away into darkness.

This scene puzzled Kaoru, prompting him to ask, "Airi, did something happen?"

"Guh... n-no, nothing happened! Everything's fine!"

By the end, Airi seemed slightly agitated, her gaze darting around as if searching for an escape route from Kaoru's presence.

"Is your group's atmosphere uncomfortable?"

Kaoru assumed she was being ostracized by her teammates.

In Japanese society, introverted types like Airi existed at the very bottom of the social hierarchy—no one would willingly engage with her.

"N-no..."

Even darker energy seeped from Airi as her eyes wandered.

"Um, can I go back now?"

This situation felt like a return to their early interactions.

Calmly, Kaoru reached out and flicked her forehead.

"Oww... i-it hurts! Don't hit me! I'll do anything!"

"Give me your wallet."

"O-okay."

Airi fumbled through her pockets, then froze.

Where was her wallet?

"You didn't bring it?" Kaoru narrowed his eyes.

Instantly, Airi panicked, waving her hands frantically. "N-no! I just don't have it right now! My phone either! I'll definitely pay you back once I return!"

"Do you think I only care about money?"

Kaoru smiled faintly. "There's still something you can give me, isn't there?"

"Guh..."

Airi gulped.

With her imagination, it wasn't hard to guess what Kaoru meant.

She desperately wanted to agree, but... he already had a girlfriend.

This proved all her previous delusions were wrong—Kaoru had never been interested in her at all.

"Afraid someone might see?"

"Eh? N-no, we can't... if someone sees..."

"What would happen if they did?" "N-no, it's not okay, I-I-I..."

"Me?"

"I-it just won't work, there'll be trouble! Getting involved with someone like me... maybe... maybe your girlfriend will get mad!"

After saying this, Airi didn't wait for Kaoru to react and immediately turned to flee.

Kaoru's eyes were dark and unfathomable—his intuition hadn't been wrong.

People like Tachibana Akane and Airi Sakura remained completely unaware of his true nature.

Should he just lay it all out, the same way he had with Karuizawa and the others?

Just as Kaoru was lost in thought, someone approached him.

"Master, would you like me to handle her for you?"

For tonight's meeting, Shiho Manabe had naturally been keeping a close watch on Kaoru's every move.

The moment he left the cafeteria, the girl had stealthily followed.

She had overheard much of the earlier conversation from the shadows and held nothing but contempt for Airi in her heart.

A gloomy loner like her? Shiho knew exactly how to break her—how to make her submit beneath Kaoru.

"Don't make me sound like some villain. What, are you going to pin her arms down for me?"

Kaoru averted his gaze, catching a glimpse of something in his peripheral vision that left him slightly uneasy.

"Of course! A plain glasses-wearing girl like her? I could handle two at once!"

Shiho Manabe brushed off his words, even seeming eager to prove herself.

Kaoru silently walked toward a secluded corner of the school building.

Thinking he was angry, Shiho shut her mouth and obediently followed.

After a while, Kaoru spoke without turning around. "Did you see anyone pass by just now?"

Shiho's expression sharpened.

Was her master suspecting a tail?

"No one should be following me, but I did see someone pass by earlier."

"What did they look like?"

"Completely average. A guy. Reeked of disgusting energy—the type I hate most. When he noticed me, he panicked, couldn't even meet my eyes, and scurried off like a rat."

"Ran away?"

"He seemed like he was heading this way, almost ran into you, but the moment he saw me, he bolted."

Kaoru stopped walking.

From Shiho's description, the person had likely been targeting him.

Could they be one of Nagumo's men?

Had they been eavesdropping earlier?

"Point this person out to me in the cafeteria tomorrow."

Kaoru arranged a signal with her, intending to uncover the truth.

Shiho felt a pang of regret. If only she'd grabbed the guy earlier—she could've earned her master's praise by now.

"What's Ryuen's plan?"

For now, Kaoru set aside the matter of the stalker, focusing instead on the girls' group.

At the mention of this, Shiho's expression darkened. "That bastard's trying to get Rika expelled. By invoking joint responsibility, he plans to force an A-Class student to drop out alongside her."

Kaoru wasn't surprised.

As expected, to drain his points, Ryuen had no choice but to exploit the rules like this.

"I recall your group has two A-Class students—Yamamura and Yano. Who's the target?"

"Yamamura. She seems easier to push around. Ryuen ordered us to sabotage her exam performance. No matter how we score, as long as Yamamura falls below the average, Rika can name her for expulsion."

Shiho Manabe was furious about Ryuen's orders.

Rika was under her protection—forcing her out would be a blow to Shiho's pride.

"Did Rika agree?"

Kaoru already knew the answer. "Rika is too timid. If she doesn't agree, Ryuen won't let her off."

Shiho Manabe was currently consumed by a sense of helpless fury.

Seeing her agitated state, Kaoru remained silent for a moment before asking.

"Did Ryuen ever tell you he would save Rika-san?"

"Save Rika?"

Shiho Manabe looked puzzled. "Wouldn't that require a lot of points? Even if we wanted to save Rika, we don't have enough."

Kaoru understood now—Ryuuen had no intention of using any relief measures.

He planned to extort Nagumo's Personal Points under the pretext of demanding resurrection fees or compensation for losses.

He might even squeeze out tens of millions.

Meanwhile, Ryuuen would only lose one student and a hundred Class Points but gain tens of millions in Personal Points.

However, Kaoru couldn't quite grasp Ryuuen's intentions.

The latter had already extorted Ichinose at the start of the term and Class 1-A during the summer break.

In theory, he should already have a considerable amount of Personal Points.

So why was he demanding more from Nagumo? What did he need so many Personal Points for?

Was he planning to rise to Class A alone?

Doing so would breed discontent within his class.

Kaoru couldn't quite pin down Ryuuen's motives—he seemed indifferent to his class, yet it didn't align with his personality to aim for Class A alone.

Was he trying to replicate Nagumo's success model?

By using Personal Points as rewards, Kaoru thought Ryuen might attract many followers, especially ambitious students from Class 1-D.

But that reasoning didn't feel sufficient.

Perhaps he wanted to use the Personal Points for something else—like employing unconventional methods during exams.

"Master?"

Shiho Manabe called out.

Kaoru snapped out of his thoughts and patted her head. "Don't worry, your friend won't be expelled."

"Mhm, thank you, Master."

Shiho Manabe smiled faintly and licked her lips. "Honestly, whether Rika gets expelled or not doesn't matter. Now, can you reward me?"

Kaoru instinctively averted his gaze, mentally calling out to the Wish Machine.

Could he change his wish now?

He felt like he was the one with wishes—otherwise, why were they eyeing him so hungrily?

[No, she has more wishes than you. Hurry up and fulfill them. She still has twenty-one left. Grab her hair, pin her against the wall, then make her curse at you while lifting her leg...]

Kaoru stopped listening.

This Wish Machine was obsessed with desires.