

Cote 451

Chapter 451: Bait Tactics.

On the third day of the forest school, a Saturday that should have been a day off but the school still didn't let up.

Classes continued, though only for the morning.

Complaints aside, Kaoru led his entire group to the open-air kitchen from the previous day, where the school had already prepared today's ingredients.

"Damn it, I don't recognize any of this. What even is this?"

Ishizaki scowled at the cooking utensils before giving up. "Whatever, you guys handle it. I'm exhausted—I wanna go back to sleep."

As he spoke, he glanced at the others, sneaking a look at Kaoru's reaction.

Hashimoto subtly nudged Kaoru's arm and whispered, "He's always trying to mess with us. Shouldn't we teach him a lesson?"

"He's Ryuen's lackey. Even without orders, he'd instinctively try to cause trouble for us," said Kaoru.

"Let him be. This level of mischief is nothing. Without anyone backing him up, he'll quiet down soon enough."

Hashimoto thought it made sense.

Most of their group members had been personally selected by Kaoru.

Kaoru didn't have time to deal with Ishizaki.

Following the ingredients and recipes provided by the school, he began assigning tasks to each member of the group, taking on the role of head chef himself.

Since Hashimoto claimed he could cook as well, Kaoru appointed him as the assistant chef.

As for someone like Kouenji, expecting him to help diligently was unrealistic.

Kaoru simply assigned him to prepare utensils and taste-test the food.

Even Moriyama and the other Class B students had their tasks.

Even Albert quietly accepted Kaoru's arrangements.

Seeing that his complaints weren't getting any attention, Ishizaki reluctantly helped with making the miso soup.

Under Kaoru's organized division of labor, coupled with his occasional guidance, breakfast—which was expected to take much longer—was completed quickly.

This left Hashimoto amazed.

With a look of admiration, he remarked, "As expected of the vice president of the student council. Everything went so smoothly. I didn't even expect we'd get a decent meal today."

"Though he's no professional chef, as a student, I can acknowledge Mitoma Boy's cooking skills."

Kouenji took a few bites of his food, then glanced disdainfully at the miso soup beside him.

"This can be thrown away."

Ishizaki's face flushed red. "What did you say?! You were only supposed to taste it, not steal bites! If you're so great, why don't you make your own?!"

"I don't need to prove anything to you."

Kouenji chuckled, then picked up his tray and claimed the best seat for himself, leisurely enjoying his breakfast.

"Damn it!"

Kaoru watched the fuming Ishizaki and couldn't help but think he resembled Totsuka Yahiko from his own class.

First-year Class D's Sudou Ken seemed to have a similar personality too.

After a while, Sato Keisaku and others arrived.

"Thanks for your hard work today."

As an upperclassman, Sato was the polite type.

Others might have taken their juniors' service for granted.

"It's no trouble. We should all help each other."

Kaoru served him food, then naturally followed him to the third-years' seating area and sat down.

"Senpai, how many points are you behind Horikita-senpai?"

Sato was taken aback but hesitated before answering, "About six hundred points. Only Class B stands a chance of catching up to Horikita."

The gap between their class and Class 3-A was nearly six hundred points, while Class 3-B was only three hundred points behind.

They'd have to surpass Class 3-B first before even thinking about chasing Horikita Manabu.

With only one semester left, Sato had already given up on the idea—otherwise, they wouldn't have made that deal with Mitoma in the first place.

"Did the Class B senpais not approach you?" Kaoru pressed.

If it were anyone else, Sato might have found the underclassman's questioning rude.

But given their decent relationship—and considering Kaoru was his benefactor—he answered anyway.

"There is something. Ishikura approached members of other groups yesterday, and a classmate informed me about it. It seems they're planning to take action against Horikita."

"Take action?"

"I suspect they want to force someone from Class A to drop out through joint responsibility. Horikita will definitely use relief measures."

"Is Class B not planning to save their own people?"

"They intend to pay someone from our class or Class D to take the fall, but so far, no one seems willing."

"Why?"

"Because Horikita will surely be prepared. Even I know about it, so Horikita might be aware too."

Though they were from different classes, Sato Keisaku spoke with complete trust in Horikita Manabu, as if he was certain Horikita would devise a countermeasure.

"Is it the same for the girls' group?" Kaoru suddenly interjected.

Sato frowned, hesitating before replying, "The girls' group... should be fine too. Besides, trying to force someone's expulsion through joint responsibility is too obvious."

As he spoke, Sato chuckled, thinking Kaoru was overanalyzing things.

"Think about it—only the last-place group can be expelled. If you target my people, I can just lower my own score and drag my large group to last place. Who would you expel then?"

Exactly.

Once Horikita caught wind of such a scheme, he could deliberately lower his group's score to see who truly ended up in last place.

Finishing last would only cost some points—a negligible loss compared to expulsion.

"Why are you concerned about this?"

Sato suddenly realized something. "Are you worried about Horikita?"

Kaoru glanced around.

As a first-year in the senior hallway, he stood out, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"A little. Do you have any plans this afternoon, senpai?" Kaoru remained calm.

He wondered what Class 3-B's real plan was.

If it were him, he'd mislead Horikita into thinking he intended to expel a Class A student.

Horikita would likely prioritize lowering his own score to protect his people—an irresistible bait.

This way, Horikita would lose a significant number of points.

Hmm.

By mobilizing his smallest group, Kaoru could trick Horikita's core group into willingly dropping to last place.

The penalty for last place was a deduction of Class Points per person—five points each, fifty for ten people.

If he pulled the same trick with the girls' group, he might swindle another hundred points from Horikita.

Meanwhile, Kaoru could keep his own group in fourth place, avoiding any deductions.

Then, by pushing his core group to first place, he could close the gap by a hundred or two hundred points in one go.

If Horikita refused to play along, Kaoru could simply trade one of his own for a Class D student, compensating Class D with a hundred Class Points—just a bit of Personal Points spent.

But these were just Kaoru's thoughts.

"This afternoon?"

Sato blinked before realizing Kaoru wanted to discuss something. "If you're looking for me, I'm free anytime. But when are you available?"

Asking the inviter about their availability sounded odd, but Kaoru understood the underlying meaning.

This meant he would take the initiative to seek out Kaoru.

Kaoru told him the time before returning to his own territory.

No doubt many had witnessed the scene just now.

Chapter 452: The One Who Doesn't Read the Room

The meditation session the next day went smoothly.

Aside from a few individuals, everyone managed to assume the full lotus position, sitting with their eyes closed as they began to meditate.

Kaoru slept soundly until the homeroom teacher suddenly spoke up, instructing them to head to the classroom for lessons.

Although each large group attended classes separately, their schedules differed—just like during regular school days.

By noon, Kaoru had somewhat regained his energy and quickly made his way to the cafeteria, where he soon spotted Shiho Manabe.

At the same time, Manabe Shiho also noticed his presence.

Pretending to continue chatting with Nanae Yabuuchi and Saki Yamashita, she gradually edged closer to a certain boy standing in line.

Seeing who it was, Kaoru's expression shifted to one of surprise.

He had initially assumed it would be an upperclassman, but it turned out to be someone familiar—Haruki Yamauchi from Class 1-D.

Upon hearing Shiho's voice, a flicker of panic crossed Yamauchi's face, though he quickly feigned composure and kept talking to Kanji Ike.

Judging by appearances alone, Kaoru would never have guessed that this guy had been tailing him.

Had he been bought off?

The thought came naturally to Kaoru, though he had no way to confirm it—Class D wasn't his domain.

It seemed he'd have to enlist Kushida.

As Class D's "little angel," handling Yamauchi should be a piece of cake.

Still, Kaoru was puzzled.

Even if Nagumo or Ryuen had bribed Yamauchi, what exactly could he do?

An inexplicable sense of unease crept over Kaoru.

He must have overlooked something.

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Miki Yamamura sat gloomily in a corner.

Though she knew no one would pay her any attention, she still flinched whenever passersby came too close. Instinctively, she reached for her phone—only to remember she didn't have one now.

In that instant, the girl's heart grew even heavier.

Due to the group assignments, she had been sent to a different team by Sakayanagi.

Though she had a fellow Class A student with her, they weren't close.

Not only were they not close, but Yamamura Miki also had no idea how to build a rapport with them.

Every encounter was awkward, making her instinctively avoid conversation.

Perhaps finding interactions with her troublesome, the other person simply blended into circles from other classes, leaving Yamamura Miki feeling somewhat disheartened.

Feeling downcast, she could only continue living as she always had—existing almost invisibly within her group, following along with everyone else's movements.

Perhaps because of this, the girl gradually let her guard down—until today, when something unexpected happened.

While preparing breakfast, someone deliberately tripped her.

Thankfully, she wasn't hurt, though her pants got dirty.

Then, when she went to the restroom, someone—she didn't know who—locked the door from the outside, causing her to miss attendance.

These bullying-like pranks filled Yamamura Miki with an inexplicable fear.

She couldn't recall doing anything to deserve this.

Confused, she still couldn't muster the courage to bring it up with the others, afraid the real culprit might retaliate with even worse actions.

Moreover, today's events reminded her of past experiences—times when her belongings, though perfectly clean, were met with overt disgust, as if associating with her would somehow lower their own standing.

At that time, Miki couldn't understand what this meant, but now she had come to realize certain truths—in some people's hierarchies, she existed at the very bottom, something even more insignificant than dispensable.

Fortunately, she had always been inconspicuous, so no one had ever done anything extreme to her.

But now, things were different.

Miki could sense a subtle shift in the group's atmosphere, especially among the students from Class C.

The way they looked at her was as if she were prey.

Having never experienced anything like this before, Miki's first instinct was to shrink into herself, behaving even more cautiously than usual.

During meals, she didn't dare approach her groupmates, even unconsciously distancing herself from her fellow Class A students.

Even now, she still felt lingering fear, unsure whether she should reach out to Sakayanagi for help.

But even if she did, what could be done?

There was no concrete evidence that anyone harbored ill will toward her.

Maybe it was just a coincidence, one or two isolated incidents.

Miki was torn—she didn't want to assume the worst, or else the days ahead would become unbearable.

"Can I sit here?"

Suddenly, Miki flinched.

She quickly lowered her head, her side ponytail swaying slightly, as if she were completely absorbed in her meal and hadn't heard the voice.

She had hoped the other person would take the hint and leave her alone—this jumpy, nervous wreck of a girl.

Yet, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the person casually sit down beside her, acting as if there was no distance between them at all.

Startled, she instinctively scooted inward, her heart pounding.

Was this person here to cause trouble?

"This spot of yours is really out of the way. Took me forever to find it."

Hmm, his voice sounded somewhat familiar?

Cautiously, Miki raised her head and saw Kaoru's face.

His calm gaze was oddly reassuring.

"Eh?"

She hadn't realized she'd let out such a foolish sound.

"The food here feels about the same as the school cafeteria. I suspect they brought the cooks along too."

Kaoru took a bite of his chicken cutlet as he spoke. "Not hungry, Miki?"

Perhaps snapping back to reality, Miki's face flushed red.

She stammered, "Y-you're here... I don't know how to eat."

"Don't know how to eat?"

Kaoru chuckled. "Want me to feed you, Miki?"

Miki startled, hurriedly shoveling a few mouthfuls until her cheeks were stuffed full—now there was no way he could feed her, because there was no room left.

Kaoru gave her a strange look.

This girl was kind of amusing.

He really didn't get why people around her acted the way they did.

Noticing his lingering gaze, Miki grew embarrassed, then suddenly remembered he had been calling her by her first name this whole time.

Sure, during their Study Group sessions before, she had allowed him to do so, but that didn't mean he could just casually use it every day, right?

Showing up out of nowhere, calling her name so casually, sitting beside her like it was the most natural thing—didn't this guy feel any shame?

"Don't see Masumi with you. Are you two in different groups?"

Kaoru's eyes flickered to the faint stains on her pants, his question deliberately offhand.

"Kamuro-san is with Sakayanagi-san, so she's not with me." Miki was a bit hesitant, swallowing the food in her mouth before answering nervously.

"Are you looking for her?"

From her perspective, Kaoru should prefer spending time with Kamuro Masumi, given how often the two bantered with each other in class.

Moreover, whenever she recalled the time she followed Kamuro Masumi to secretly observe Kaoru, Miki felt her face burn with embarrassment.

She never imagined she would witness that kind of scene.

It was practically like being a peeping tom—and Masumi hadn't even let her leave!

How outrageous.

Right now, Miki was terrified of accidentally exposing herself and letting Kaoru find out that she and Masumi had spied on him kissing Asahina.

Chapter 453: A Master at Taking Advantage

Kaoru took a sip of his drink, watching the visibly restless Miki Yamamura.

Her plate was barely touched, and she had been spacing out earlier.

"Can't I be looking for you?"

Perhaps because he was staring at her so intently, Miki fidgeted uncomfortably before whispering.

"Why me?"

Compared to Kamuro Masumi or Arisu Sakayanagi, Miki couldn't think of any reason Kaoru would seek her out.

She wasn't fun at all.

"Because we're friends. Or do you not consider me a friend anymore, Miki?"

Kaoru studied the girl beside him.

His proximity seemed to make her shrink into the corner, as if he were some kind of dangerous figure.

"N-No! I've never thought that!"

Miki waved her hands frantically before hesitating, cautiously gauging his reaction.

"But... don't you have a girlfriend?"

Kaoru tilted his head. "I do. What does that have to do with us hanging out?"

'Oh no. This guy is a blatant scumbag.' Miki's expression turned despairing in her mind.

Who in their right mind would ignore their girlfriend to chat up another girl?

Especially since Miki had seen Kaoru kiss Asahina with her own eyes.

He was definitely cheating.

"If having a girlfriend means I have to distance myself from my friends, that'd be pretty tragic, don't you think?"

Miki had to admit that sounded unrealistic.

She pouted slightly—it wasn't that she disliked Kaoru, but she had no idea what he was planning, and that made her uneasy.

"Has Sakayanagi given you any instructions?"

Kaoru was curious about Arisu Sakayanagi's stance.

Did she realize that the girls' group was also one of their opponent's targets?

Miki shook her head.

After assigning her to this group, Sakayanagi had left her alone.

Miki wasn't sure whether she should seek her out—usually, Arisu was the one giving orders.

"No wonder you're here by yourself."

Kaoru rummaged in his pocket and pulled out two cookies.

"Here, take one. Don't be shy—they're freebies from the school. If you don't take it, you're missing out."

Aside from the main meal, the school also provided drinks and snacks as dessert.

Kaoru could spot bananas, apples, grapes, and other fruits—but the lines were long, so he decided not to bother.

Miki was about to refuse, but seeing Kaoru's unyielding expression, she reluctantly accepted the cookie.

Miki Yamamura quickly pulled her hand back, her cheeks flushing red.

She had let her guard down.

She really shouldn't have accepted his kindness—this guy was way too good at taking advantage.

She was a little angry, but she didn't dare show it.

What if Kaoru got angry? He might grab her chin and steal her first kiss, just like he had done with Asahina.

That kind of thing was terrifying.

Miki Yamamura wasn't ready for it at all!

"Don't be so nervous. We're friends."

Kaoru bit into a biscuit. "By the way, have you seen Airi and Haruka? Aren't you teaming up with them?"

Of course, Miki still remembered the two he mentioned—they had been teammates in the same Study Group back then, and neither of them had particularly bad grades.

However, though both were the type who didn't have many friends, Hasebe Haruka and Sakura Airi left different impressions on her.

The former was clearly the type who did as she pleased, simply not wanting to make friends.

As for Sakura Airi, she gave Miki an eerily familiar feeling—exuding an extremely gloomy aura, as if she were another version of Miki herself!

"N-No... We were all directly assigned by Sakayanagi-san. She said she'd lead us to first place."

Speaking of this, Miki's voice was filled with trust in Sakayanagi Arisu.

Though Sakayanagi was a bit arrogant—deep down, she didn't see ordinary people as equals worth conversing with—her intelligence and emotional intelligence were both formidable enough to make the girls in the group follow her arrangements on the surface.

On top of that, Sakayanagi was one of the few girls who could stand against Kaoru, Katsuragi and Ryuen, which earned her quite a bit of popularity.

Actually, Suzune Horikita was gaining popularity too.

The girls in Class 1-D seemed to recognize her efforts to contribute to the class.

"I thought you'd all hate her. Was I wrong?"

Kaoru was surprised, but this really was just his misconception.

In his eyes, Sakayanagi was cunning and deceitful, usually acting like a brat.

Yet, in front of most people, Sakayanagi could maintain the dignified aura befitting a young lady.

Not to mention, her frail persona naturally earned her sympathy points.

Miki stayed silent.

Kaoru could badmouth Sakayanagi behind her back, but she didn't dare.

"We have the rest of today and tomorrow off. Did you bring anything fun, Miki?"

Kaoru was a little frustrated.

He had only brought a few novels to kill time. "It's just exams—why even give us a break? At first, I thought we weren't allowed to bring anything, so I even handed in my phone."

Seeing him make such an expression suddenly, Miki froze for a moment before stifling a laugh.

"What're you laughing at?"

"N-Nothing! I didn't bring anything either, actually."

"So we're the only two idiots here?"

"Ugh..."

Miki realized belatedly—no wonder some people in her group were playing cards.

She had thought the teachers would confiscate them, but there wasn't even any punishment.

"I can just sleep early."

Miki didn't know how to play cards, nor did she plan to join in.

Since there was nothing else to do, she might as well sleep early.

"What about during the day?"

Kaoru asked, "Do you sleep during the day too?"

This question stumped Miki.

She wrinkled her little nose, racking her brain for a solution.

"Since none of us have anything to do, why don't we hang out tomorrow?"

Kaoru remained expressionless.

"Even at the forest school, I think there must be a place where our Study Group can hold a secret meeting."

"Huh?"

Miki let out her signature foolish sound again.

"Secret meeting?"

"Right. You, me, Airi, and Haruka—we haven't seen each other much since winter break, have we?"

Under Kaoru's gentle persuasion, Miki Yamamura nodded subconsciously.

"Even friends will drift apart if they don't meet up for a long time. So, how about this: after breakfast tomorrow, we'll meet up here in the cafeteria."

Kaoru delivered these words in a tone that brooked no refusal, causing Miki's eyes to widen.

"Eh? W-wait, I—"

"I'm done eating, so let's stop here for now. See you later."

"Huh?"

Miki stared at Kaoru's retreating figure, her lips slightly parted as she stood frozen for a long moment before finally snapping out of it.

'This person is really weird.'

It's the first time she's met someone who forces her to attend a gathering.

Still, recalling the Study Group back then, though Miki had been somewhat reluctant, the atmosphere Kaoru and Hasebe created was so comfortable that it made her realize—this was how friends were supposed to talk.

Unconsciously, a faint smile crept onto Miki's face.

But when she spotted a figure not far away, she quickly wiped it away—it was a fellow student from Class C.

She thought they might come over to pick a fight, but their expressions stiffened slightly before they averted their gaze as if they didn't recognize her.

That afternoon, Miki returned to the dormitory without encountering any incidents like the one in the morning.

Chapter 454: Talent Scouting

As for Miki, Kaoru wasn't actually worried—Shiho Manabe was keeping an eye on her.

As a minor ringleader of Class C's delinquents, she could control any incidents targeting Miki.

However, given Shiho Manabe's level of influence, she wasn't capable of rallying the other Class C students in their group to protect Miki while feeding false information to Ryuen.

Kaoru could, of course, simply order Shiho Manabe to protect Miki Yamamura at all costs.

But that would expose Shiho Manabe and the others' identities, rendering their role as spies meaningless.

Worse, it would make them targets of ostracization by Ryuen and his followers in their class.

There was even a risk that Class 1-C would designate them as cannon fodder in the next exam, forcing them to drop out in one fell swoop.

This outcome was obvious.

To avoid exposing Shiho Manabe's identity while still protecting Miki Yamamura, Kaoru had to resort to another method.

Truthfully, he shouldn't have met with Miki today—Ryuuen would likely find out soon, and his reaction would probably be sheer delight.

Yes, even knowing that Kaoru was aware of his scheme, Ryuuen wouldn't stop.

Because this was an overt stratagem, one that forced Kaoru to pay a price no matter what.

Saving Miki Yamamura would cost 400 points, while not saving her would still cost 100.

No matter what decision Kaoru made, Ryuuen stood to gain.

And besides—there were no surveillance cameras in the school building.

This place was practically made for him!

Kaoru could perfectly imagine Ryuuen's reaction—he would seize this opportunity to push him into an even more difficult dilemma.

As mentioned earlier, Kaoru could also have Sakayanagi sacrifice another group to protect Miki Yamamura.

However, this approach wasn't guaranteed to succeed and might simply result in someone else being expelled instead.

Unless the other two subgroups within the larger group were willing to cooperate, but even then, they would still lose points, and the outcome would remain unchanged.

Because of this, Kaoru had never seriously considered that option.

Instead, he had prepared another "gift" for Ryuen and Nagumo.

...

Around 1 PM, while most of the dormitory residents were napping, Kaoru stepped outside and spotted Sato Keisaku not far down the hallway.

"Meeting at night would've been better. Someone might see us during the day," Sato remarked, offering some advice as the senior.

"Even if someone sees us, it doesn't matter. If anyone can report to Nagumo, then I'll have to take him seriously from now on."

Honestly, Kaoru was curious whether Nagumo had infiltrated the third-year students.

Sato suddenly remembered that the person before him was the student council vice president—someone who had driven Nagumo to the point of angrily offering a bounty.

This wasn't just any ordinary first-year.

In fact, he was more capable and cunning than most seniors.

Back when Sato was a first-year, he had never dared to act like this toward his upperclassmen.

"So, Mitoma-kun, what do you need me to do?" Sato asked.

"Talking here might disturb others. Let's move to the outer corridor."

The two descended the stairs and arrived at the school building's cloister.

A gray haze hung over the sky, and the treetops bore traces of snow.

A faint shadow of clouds drifted over the distant track field.

"I'd like to ask for your help," Kaoru said. "But don't worry—I'll compensate you for it."

Sato thought for a moment. "Do you want me to help raise your score or lower someone else's?"

"Can you do both?" Kaoru asked, surprised.

Sato shook his head. "No, I don't have that kind of ability. Even if you asked me to raise your score, I couldn't guarantee it."

He wasn't joking.

For Class 3-C, avoiding point deductions was already an achievement—winning first place in exams was practically out of the question.

"I had considered it, but I know that's asking too much. So just help me lower the scores a little."

"Is someone trying to get one of your people expelled?"

"No. I just need to make sure the other side understands the heavy consequences they'll face."

"I don't really know the details of your situation."

"Actually, you could strike a deal with Horikita."

Sato was taken aback.

He hadn't expected Horikita Manabu to be involved—or why Kaoru would suddenly bring him up.

"If Class 3-B plans to expel one of his people to close the gap, he'll have no choice but to consider protecting his own," Kaoru explained.

"But we both know only one large group can be last, and the expulsion penalty only applies if their score falls below the average." Sato Keisaku suddenly understood, as if a veil had been lifted.

"You're suggesting I sell the last-place position to Horikita... no no, have Horikita force the last-place rank onto me, so I can exchange it for his reward, is that it?"

"It's close to what you said. Horikita-senpai likely doesn't lack Personal Points—it just depends on how much you need."

Kaoru smiled faintly.

Whether this deal would succeed ultimately depended on whether Sato Keisaku was willing to consider it.

If this were first-year students, probably no one would agree to such a transaction, because while Personal Points could be exchanged, Class Points were much harder to obtain.

Sato Keisaku had also realized this and let out a bitter laugh.

"No wonder you asked me about the points this morning—you were already setting this up."

"Senpai, do you still intend to chase after Class A?" Kaoru asked.

Sato Keisaku fell silent for a moment.

"What if I still want to try?"

"You won't catch up. If you couldn't surpass Horikita-senpai in the past two and a half years, I don't think you can now." Kaoru paused, then added.

"Sorry, I might be speaking too bluntly."

Sato Keisaku waved his hand. "It's fine. Honestly, those of us in the lower classes know the truth. At first, we dreamed of defeating Class A, but eventually, we gave up."

Kaoru recalled the rumors about this school—most classes had their fates practically decided from the very beginning.

"To be honest, my greatest achievement here was defeating the original Class C, once coming within just over two hundred points of Ishikura and the others." Sato Keisaku suddenly chuckled.

"Heh, that was already a year and a half ago. Now I'm in Class C, and they're still in Classes A and B."

Kaoru understood their mindset.

Students who were just slightly behind would stubbornly push forward, clinging to hope, while students like Sato Keisaku, who saw no chance of success, tended to give up entirely at the last moment.

"Sorry, I got a little sentimental. You've given me a good idea."

Since he couldn't rise to Class A, he might as well make as much money as possible—after all, it could still be converted to cash later.

Sato Keisaku decided he would ensure his entire class left the school with money in hand.

Chapter 455: Identical

"It's fine. Even if I hadn't mentioned it, you would have figured it out eventually," Kaoru said. "Aside from Horikita's reward, I'll also provide compensation to your class to help offset your losses."

His sincerity caught Sato Keisaku off guard. "We can discuss the reward later. For now, you just want me to help lower the scores, right?"

"Yes, that's all." Kaoru nodded.

Sato Keisaku thought it over. Doing one job and getting two rewards—it seemed like he was getting the better deal.

"Are you planning to attack the second-years?" Kaoru suddenly found Sato Keisaku intriguing.

An ordinary person might assume he was defending against Nagumo Miyabi, but Sato Keisaku was convinced he intended to strike against Nagumo.

"Senpai, do you really think I could manipulate the second-years to that extent?" Kaoru chuckled.

"Muto-senpai and the others are still under Nagumo's control. Even if we succeeded, given Nagumo's personality, he probably wouldn't lift a finger to help his own people."

Sato Keisaku mused, "I don't know much about the second-years, but Nagumo-kun has been going too far lately. If you're planning to take him down, I think at least a few people would be willing to help you."

"Why?" Kaoru asked.

Sato Keisaku answered bluntly, "Because I don't like this kind of person. Even if he seems impressive now, I think he'll eventually fall into someone's hands sooner or later."

Dislike is dislike.

Even if one shows surface-level respect, they'd still gossip about him in their heart, eagerly waiting for his downfall.

"From what I know, Class 2-C and Class 2-D have already given up competing for Class A's position. Moreover, they've been heavily exploited by Nagumo-kun. Their daily lives sometimes involve eating Vegetable Set Meals. If you can offer enough Personal Points, I think some of them would help you."

Actually, Sato Keisaku left one thing unsaid.

Kaoru's current status was different now.

The reputation of a super conglomerate could already attract people to follow him.

After all, they'd only spend three years in school but a lifetime in society!

"How many Personal Points do you think would be appropriate, senpai?"

Faced with Kaoru's question, Sato Keisaku was momentarily stunned.

Was it necessary to ask to this extent?

This question was practically laying all his cards on the table—wasn't he afraid it might get leaked?

Fortunately, Kaoru noticed his expression and smiled apologetically, "My apologies, that was careless of me. But rest assured, your compensation won't be reduced."

Sato Keisaku didn't dwell on it, though he was now conflicted about how much to ask from Kaoru.

"How many people are in your class right now, senpai?"

"Including me, thirty-five in total. Why?"

"Your group has nine members, and the last-place finisher gets five points deducted—that's forty-five points. This semester lasts three months, plus the Personal Points that'll be deducted. How about I give you two million Personal Points?"

Sato Keisaku froze for a moment.

In reality, forty-five Class Points couldn't be exchanged for this many Personal Points.

"Not enough?" Kaoru asked. "How about four million?"

"No, no, no—wait a minute! Who raises the price like that?" Sato Keisaku couldn't hold back.

"I think it's reasonable. If converted to cash after graduation, it'd only be a few tens of thousands of yen per person," Mitoma Kaoru replied.

"..."

Sato Keisaku fell silent.

Looking at it this way, it really did seem too little.

"Too low?"

"No, it's too much."

With that, Sato Keisaku sighed.

"Actually, the points for lower-ranked classes like ours aren't that important. They aren't worth this much—one or two million would be enough."

Everyone knew they couldn't catch up to Horikita Manabu.

With each passing day, the value of their Class Points would only decrease further.

"I have a question—could you answer it for me, senpai?"

"What is it?"

"If you graduate from Class A, will you pursue higher education or seek employment?"

"I'm not sure. Everyone in the class has different plans."

"Alright, let me rephrase—between cash and employment, which would you choose?"

"Most would probably go for employment."

Hearing this, Kaoru gradually smiled, while Sato Keisaku looked puzzled.

"Are you proposing another deal with me, senpai?"

Having spent nearly a year here, Kaoru felt this school truly nurtured talent, whether among the lower or upperclassmen.

'Good.'

'He'd take them.'

Whether to continue his previous career in the entertainment industry or expand his own influence, Kaoru needed a group of capable individuals in all fields.

"What kind of deal?"

Sato Keisaku didn't quite follow Kaoru's train of thought.

"I can't offer much in Personal Points right now, and if you plan to convert them to cash later, you'll inevitably lose some value."

Kaoru said, "I can give you cash directly. And if any of you want to stay in my company, I'll provide suitable positions."

Sato Keisaku was stunned, suddenly recalling Kaoru's identity.

Theoretically, aside from higher education, Kaoru's offer wasn't worse than the school's conditions.

In that instant, he finally understood why the school had deleted Kaoru's posts without any punishment.

Because in the face of a super financial group's influence, the school's rules held no power.

"Seriously?"

Sato Keisaku still couldn't believe it.

"Do you want a contract?"

Kaoru raised an eyebrow. "Or should I show you my stock transfer documents?"

Sato Keisaku quickly waved his hands. "No, no, that's not what I meant. It's just that we're about to graduate soon..."

He trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid.

Kaoru understood his implication—graduates wouldn't wait around for him for two years.

"I can leave the school anytime now."

Kaoru explained briefly

"That's Chairman Sakayanagi's decision. After this year's graduation, I'll leave with you. We'll handle the formalities together."

Sato Keisaku grew nervous while rubbing his hands. "Uh, honestly, I don't know how I can be of help to you."

"It's fine. I'll assign someone to guide you. But positions here are limited—those who stay can keep their jobs, and those who don't can take a million yen."

Kaoru had already decided to liquidate his shares in the Shinomiya Financial Group.

Waiting for dividends was too slow.

At this point, Sato Keisaku was at a loss for words.

Should he respond with "Yes, boss" to his future employer?

...

After Sato Keisaku left, Kaoru sat quietly on the corridor steps, watching the overcast sky gradually clear.

A ray of sunlight broke through the clouds, landing on his hair.

Even if Takeuchi Hiromichi's group's scores were lowered, they might not fall below the average.

Even if they did, Takeuchi might not specifically target Class 2-A.

And even if he did, Nagumo Miyabi might not intervene.

"If I step in, Tonokawa will assume it was my doing. I'll have to let Horikita handle it."

Kaoru pondered his next move.

"There must be Tonokawa's people in Takeuchi's group."

Chapter 456: The Tyrant's Temper

In the evening, Kaoru grabbed a change of clothes and headed to the bathhouse with Hashimoto and the others.

The two bathhouses were close to each other.

At the entrance, they could see female students passing by.

Though nothing was exposed, their presence was enough to draw attention, making it hard not to want to follow them inside.

Kaoru undressed in the changing room, only to notice Hashimoto staring intently at his lower half.

"Are you gay?"

"No."

"Am I gay?"

"Dunno. Probably not."

"Then why the hell are you staring at my dick?"

"Even after seeing it two or three times, the sheer size of it is still kinda demoralizing."

Hashimoto wore a wounded expression.

Kaoru glanced at his equipment and thought it wasn't exactly small either.

"You two comparing sizes or something?"

Ishizaki butted in, lowering his voice.

"Listen up, especially you, Mitoma. Don't get cocky—Ryuen's packing way more!"

"Wait, how do you even know that?"

Hashimoto looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"Are you stupid? We've all been bathing together these past few days!"

Ishizaki rolled his eyes. "Weren't you just ogling Mitoma too?"

Hashimoto insisted, "I'm not gay! Can't you tell Mitoma-kun's physique is way better than ours?"

At this, Ishizaki gave Kaoru a once-over and fell silent for a moment.

"Nah, this guy's gonna die on some woman's stomach one day. Ryuen would never."

Kaoru kept a straight face.

These two were definitely gay!

"Huh?! Why's there a girl in here?!"

For some reason, a startled shout came from inside the bathing area.

"Idiot, that's Class D's Okiya! He's a guy!"

"Wait, he's a guy?!"

"Cut it out! Stop calling him 'she'! Okiya, ignore them—come over here."

"Whoa, Okiya, your hands are so pale and tiny..."

'Great. More gay guys inside.'

Kaoru wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped into the bathhouse with a heavy heart, where he ran into Kanzaki Ryuji and Katsuragi—both surrounded by a crowd of boys.

"Go for it, Katsuragi! Fight for Class A's pride!"

"You Class-A punks think you can handle my Holy Sword?!"

"Kanzaki, you're our last hope! Shibata already lost—it's all up to you now!"

"Holy shit, that thing's gonna kill someone!"

The commotion drew Hashimoto and Ishizaki, who rushed over in excitement.

Kaoru didn't need to guess—there was only one thing guys would compete over in a place like this.

After washing up, Kaoru soaked in the bath.

A few others, like from Class D nearby, had no interest in the spectacle.

Admittedly, this delicate boy from Class D had a certain charm.

Through the steamy haze, his face was indistinct, but his petite, snow-white figure was unmistakable—enough to spark some very wrong assumptions.

"Go, Albert! The Black Eagle is invincible!"

"Not fair! This is a battle for Japanese pride!"

"Damn, Ayanokoji, are you on something?!"

"Hey, hey, hey! Don't go poking people with your stuff!"

Kaoru was about to leave the bathhouse when someone nearby chuckled.

"Sounds fun. Mitoma, wanna have a go too?"

Before he knew it, Ryuuen appeared beside him, his red hair dripping wet, smiling as he looked at him.

"You wanna see mine too?" Kaoru asked.

Ryuuen's smile froze.

Why was he looking at him like that, as if he was some kind of gay guy?

"Can't I?"

"Sure, but can I see yours too?"

"Mitoma."

"What?"

"I'm not gay."

"You don't wanna see anymore?"

"..."

Originally planning to embarrass Kaoru, Ryuuen now found himself in an awkward spot.

"Tyrannosaurus! That's a fucking Tyrannosaurus! Ayanokoji wins!"

Amid their cheers, Kaoru took a step forward, only for Ryuen and Hashimoto to call out almost simultaneously.

"There's another tyrannosaurus here!"

...

Stepping out of the bathhouse and breathing in the fresh air, Kaoru decided to forget the earlier experience.

Who would've thought Ayanokoji was hiding such a legendary tool?

Luckily, he wasn't too shabby either, though he seemed to have startled the guy opposite him—his pale face had turned bright red.

"Kaoru, did something happen in there?"

Ichinose Honami and Amikura Mako were standing at the entrance to the women's bath.

The boys' voices had carried through the walls, though not clearly.

"Nothing much, just some boys' games."

Maybe he'd been around guys too long.

Staring at the two girls now, Kaoru found it hard to control the heat rising in him.

Despite having just come from the bath, Ichinose Honami and Amikura Mako weren't showing any skin—they were still in their gym clothes.

But their long hair was tied up, revealing their fair necks slightly from their collars, their delicate earlobes glistening with droplets, looking irresistibly tender and tempting.

Yet, Kaoru couldn't tear his eyes away.

[The one on the right has more wishes. Later, have her ride on top...]

The Wish Machine started rambling again, while Ichinose Honami tilted her head slightly, her puzzled expression somehow alluring to Kaoru.

"Boys' games... is it a secret?"

"Secret."

Ichinose Honami didn't question it.

Even if Kaoru's gaze was a little odd, she didn't mind—if anything, she was used to him staring at her with those lecherous eyes.

Amikura Mako, however, crossed her arms suspiciously, eyeing Kaoru with clear wariness.

"Hmm? What are you all doing here?"

Kushida appeared, having just come out of the women's bath.

Spotting Kaoru, her eyes lit up. "Oh? Mitoma-kun, good evening!"

"Good evening."

Kaoru suddenly recalled Ichinose Honami's earlier words.

Had they been gossiping about him behind his back?

"What were you all talking about?" Kushida Kikyo asked. "A lovers' secret?"

A faint blush spread across Ichinose Honami's cheeks.

Though she'd accepted reality, being teased like this still made her shy.

"Honami, I'm heading back first." Amikura Mako knew her place and had no intention of interrupting their meeting.

"W-wait, Mako!"

Ichinose Honami grabbed her wrist, her face flushing red. "Stay here for a moment."

As Amikura looked at her in confusion, Ichinose nervously glanced around.

Seeing no one nearby, she quickly trotted up to Kaoru.

Kaoru froze for a moment.

Ichinose Honami bit her lip, her face flushed as she looked at him and whispered, "This is a goodnight kiss. Go rest early too, Kaoru. See you tomorrow!"

Before he could react, the girl had already scampered back, taking Amikura Mako's hand.

Amikura Mako glanced at Kaoru, barely suppressing a laugh—who knew this guy could look so dumbstruck?

"A goodnight kiss from your girlfriend, huh? Not bad," Kushida Kikyo remarked with a teasing smirk.

Kaoru touched his lips.

This girl had stirred him up and just left like that?

"Kikyo."

"I wouldn't do something like that. You can get her back tomorrow."

"Come here for a second."

Kushida blinked.

'Was he planning to vent the frustration his girlfriend had stirred up on her?'

Well... that didn't sound too bad.

Chapter 457: Strict House Rules

The bathhouse area was crowded, making it inconvenient to talk.

Similarly, Kaoru couldn't take Kushida back to his dorm, so the two moved to a secluded corner.

"Hmm, wanna do it?"

Kushida pulled out a familiar item from her pocket. "I'm ready anytime. Honestly, I kinda want to try it outdoors."

Kaoru expressionlessly flicked her forehead.

If it weren't for their nightly escapades, he wouldn't be suffering from withdrawal now.

"Why'd you hit me?" Kushida scowled.

Did he think Ichinose was better than her?

"I need your help with something serious."

Kaoru snatched the item from her hand. "There's a student named Yamauchi in your class, right?"

"Yeah, but why are you taking my stuff?"

Kushida glared at him.

She had bought that box—it was meant for her use only.

"You know exactly why I'm taking it."

Kaoru took a deep breath. "I can't handle too much temptation. Keep this up, and I'll really take you right here."

So he was surrendering to her.

Kushida's mood improved instantly.

As for his threat, she didn't mind—if he wanted her, she'd gladly oblige.

"Hmph, aren't you supposed to be experienced?"

She crossed her arms smugly. "Weren't you the one insisting on holding my hand outside earlier? Now you wanna make up? Or are you just not up for it?"

Kaoru stared at her until she grew uneasy.

Just as she tried to step back, he grabbed her.

Smack! Smack!

Before she could even protest, a stinging, tingling heat spread across her backside.

Kushida's face flushed crimson as she instinctively covered her rear.

"You pervert!"

Kaoru let her curse him, raising his hand again, which promptly silenced her.

"Disobedient pets get spanked. From now on, that's the first rule of this household."

Kushida's face burned. Forget the spanking—what did he mean by household?

While other girls got to be mistresses, she was relegated to pet status?

"Did it hurt?"

Kaoru lowered his hand and reached out to her.

"You dare hit me and then ask if it hurt?"

Kushida was fuming, tempted to bite him—but the sensation hadn't been entirely unpleasant.

Kaoru saw that she refused to come over, so he simply pulled her into his embrace.

The girl's shoulders were slightly slender, her delicate frame appearing exceptionally fragile.

Yet the fullness at her chest gave her a soft, plush look, while the waist hidden beneath her tracksuit felt as if it could be encircled with a single hand.

The alluring curve of her hips was irresistibly plump and rounded, perfectly filling his palms.

Kushida's breathing grew rapid.

Having just been spanked, she now found herself in his arms, being gently soothed as if she were a child.

It was inevitable that strange, inexplicable sensations would arise.

"I suspect Yamauchi might have sided with Ryuen or Nagumo. Kikyo, could you help me test him?"

Kaoru whispered softly, the girl pressed tightly against him, her figure subtly outlined against his body.

With each touch, her taut skin involuntarily revealed its full shape beneath the fabric of her tracksuit, trembling faintly in a way that made her feel an inescapable sense of shyness.

Her heart pounded uncontrollably.

Kushida bit her lip, the remnants of her rationality allowing her to reply, "I understand. Someone like Yamauchi would spill everything if you just asked."

In front of Kaoru, she could abandon all dignity—even actively participate in their intimate games, submitting to his methods like a pet.

Yet, in the eyes of others, especially someone like Yamauchi Haruki, Kushida remained a little angel.

And in her heart, she still maintained her pride toward these people.

Yamauchi was nothing more than the class idiot—someone Kushida didn't even spare a second glance.

"Good, I appreciate it, Kikyo."

Kaoru paused before continuing, "I don't know what you girls are thinking, but could you also keep an eye on Airi and Miki for me?"

Kushida blinked, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. "You want your little puppy to help guard your prey?"

"Given their personalities, they're probably struggling in their group." Kaoru spoke his mind honestly.

"Mmm, I know. How enviable~ When will someone like me ever get my master's concern?"

Kushida feigned regret, her voice tinged with a hint of unwillingness.

"Didn't you say you'd never submit to me?"

Kaoru found it amusing.

"Did I?"

Kushida pretended ignorance. "All I remember is my master desperately trying to peek at my panties. If I hadn't been in a good mood, you'd be in jail by now."

"Right, right. Thanks to your good mood, I'm still alive."

Kaoru couldn't be bothered to correct her.

Girls were experts at twisting facts and crafting narratives that favored them.

Since he admitted it, Kushida decided to let go of the earlier spanking incident.

"If I'm helping you with all this, shouldn't I get something in return?"

The girl lifted her pretty face, her thin lips just inches away.

The sweet scent of her body wash lingered around her, and her smile was sly.

Kaoru kissed her once—her soft lips making him want to tease her even more.

"Do it again."

Kushida pushed her luck, rising on her tiptoes to press her lips against his once more.

Suddenly, she leaned into him with force, making Kaoru take a half-step back.

He caught her soft body in his hands, barely stopping their momentum.

Perhaps the girl's body had matured, or perhaps she had experienced too much, but Kaoru could feel her softening, limp and draped over him, her fervent breath carrying a scorching heat that spread a fine layer of goosebumps across his skin.

The sweatpants still clung tightly to the curves of the girl's figure, accentuating the plump, perky roundness as she squirmed incessantly in Kaoru's embrace.

"Mmm... Hah, I can't... breathe... Just one more... hah..."

Kushida murmured to herself, her slightly trembling voice like a succubus in the night, tempting the primal instincts of a man, compelling him to obey her words and go even further.

Kaoru's rationality struggled in his mind for a moment before he yielded to Kushida's request.

"Wah!"

The girl's body stiffened abruptly, her legs trembling as she glared at Kaoru, her face flushed crimson.

She seemed about to say something, but as he moved, she could only hurriedly clutch his shoulders, biting her lip and desperately stifling her voice.

Above them, the sky was desolate.

The moon hid behind the clouds, and the stars slowly closed their eyes, leaving only the faint afterglow slipping away.

Their shadows merged on the wall like the melting snow of early spring flowing into rivers, the clear springs murmuring softly.

Chapter 458: Cold Reading.

"Who's there?"

The teacher on patrol swept his flashlight over a corner, spotting only damp traces on the floor but no sign of anyone.

Perhaps he had misheard.

Frowning, the teacher didn't linger and soon left the scene.

He still had more areas to patrol—students weren't allowed to visit each other's rooms.

At this point, lights-out was still some time away, and most students had already returned to their dorms.

Elsewhere, Kaoru listened as the footsteps faded and let out a slow breath before turning his gaze to the girl in his arms.

Her unblinking eyes shimmered like fireflies in the dark.

"Are you satisfied now?"

If he hadn't reacted quickly, they might have been caught.

"That was a little thrilling."

Kushida wrapped her arms around Kaoru's neck, her expression brimming with smugness before she wrinkled her nose.

"He came too fast! All that atmosphere was wasted!"

The girl wasn't worried about being discovered at all—after all, he was here!

"You were the one who cried out."

Kaoru was speechless. "Also, normal people would feel shaken afterward. Can you not look so proud?"

Kushida huffed lightly.

It wasn't her fault—his technique was just too good. It was only natural she couldn't hold back.

"What do we do now?"

The girl was a bit embarrassed.

She had just taken a shower and had no spare clothes to change into.

The dampness was unbearable.

Kaoru checked her over.

Fortunately, her outer pants weren't wet, and no traces were visible.

He sighed in relief—who knew she'd be so weak, popping like champagne.

"You can go back like this. No one will notice."

"No way! It's too uncomfortable!"

"Because you brought this on yourself. Teasing your master has consequences."

"I don't care!"

Kushida's face flushed as her mischievous hands wandered. "You should suffer a little too!"

Kaoru grabbed her restless wrists, his expression stern.

"Stop it, or you'll summon the teacher back."

In response, Kushida whispered softly, "I'm already awake."

Kaoru took a deep breath.

He wasn't a saint—having a delicate young girl in his arms naturally elicited certain reactions, especially after he'd just popped open the champagne himself.

"If you perform well tomorrow, I can keep you company tonight."

However, Kushida's expression turned peculiar, as if she was stifling laughter, which left Kaoru somewhat puzzled.

"Haha... okay, yes, Master!"

Kushida was trying her hardest to suppress her amusement.

So there really were people who used that as a reward for girls?

Wasn't she technically the one rewarding Kaoru instead?

Did he actually think she was addicted to this?

At first, even Kushida had wondered if she'd developed an obsession, but that wasn't the case. When she saw other guys, she never felt the urge to misbehave.

Only when she saw Kaoru did those kinds of thoughts flood her mind.

Well, she just liked misbehaving with Kaoru—it wasn't that she enjoyed mischief itself, but rather the person she got to share it with.

"Stop laughing and get up already."

Unaware of her thoughts, Kaoru scowled and gave her pert backside a light smack.

Kushida blinked her eyes coquettishly and asked in a sugary tone, "What about my goodnight kiss?"

Kaoru planted a kiss on her lips, wondering if he'd eventually have to kiss everyone goodnight before he could sleep.

A radiant smile spread across Kushida's face.

She gave Kaoru a loud, smacking kiss in return, then leaned against the wall and slowly stood up.

Although she had calmed down for a moment, the lingering sensation from the champagne earlier still clung to her, making Kaoru feel an urge to support her.

Fortunately, Kushida quickly regained her composure and asked Kaoru.

"Is the Miki from your class, Yamamura?"

Kaoru nodded, aware that it was difficult for different groups to greet each other, and said, "It seems she's run into some trouble. Just talk to her a bit over the next few days."

In the social circles of neon-lit high school students, Kushida was a top predator, capable of looking out for a few fragile students.

"I'm good at that; I can just befriend her."

Kushida shrugged it off, "So she's one of your targets too? How many targets are you hiding from me?"

"Do you want me to count them on my fingers for you?"

Kaoru remained expressionless.

Kushida stared at him, clearly willing to listen as he slowly counted.

"..."

Kaoru was forced to count for a while, but before he could finish, she expressionlessly punched him a few times and then snatched something away.

"This is mine; you're not allowed to use it on another girl."

Kushida put away her belongings, which originally contained twelve items, now reduced to four—she remembered that clearly.

Once she left, Kaoru calmed down as well; even though his pants were wet, they had mostly dried by now.

Thanks to the effect of the "Active Point Map," he avoided the teachers on the way and smoothly returned to the boys' main building, only to notice a boy's figure not far away.

Since there was only one route back to the dormitory, he couldn't avoid the other boy and had to meet him head-on.

As soon as they saw each other, both were taken aback.

Kaoru looked puzzled, not expecting to see Ayanokoji there.

Did he have some sort of plan?

"Mitoma-kun, did you just come back from the restroom?"

Ayanokoji seemed to have read his thoughts, "If you hadn't returned soon, Hashimoto-kun from your class might have gone looking for you."

Because there would be a room check later, if one person was missing, the supervising teacher might notice.

"Right, are you going to the restroom too?"

Kaoru guessed that he and Hashimoto were probably speculating that he had gone to meet someone, but only a deity could guess that he was with Kushida.

"At this time, I can only go to the restroom. I'll be back soon."

Ayanokoji put on a guise of being an ordinary student.

Kaoru didn't doubt his words; he would know if he was lying once he pulled out the "Active Point Map."

However, given the earlier T-Rex-like stare, Kaoru felt a bit awkward and was about to head back to the dormitory when Ayanokoji called out to him.

"Do you know me?"

Kaoru stopped in his tracks, seeing Ayanokoji standing still, his gaze fixed on him, his face devoid of any expression.

"Are you asking if I've seen you before?" Kaoru countered.

"Maybe it's just my imagination."

Ayanokoji noticed his expression; human thoughts sometimes lay buried beneath extremely subtle, imperceptible micro-expressions.

"I remember seeing a boy who looked like you back in middle school."

Anyone familiar with the White Room would know that Ayanokoji was lying; the only people one could see in the White Room were instructors and fellow students.

"No, I've never seen you."

Kaoru replied, "A sharp guy like you, if I had seen you once, I could never forget you for the rest of my life."

Ayanokoji couldn't tell; Kaoru's control over micro-expressions was on par with his own.

"Seems like it was just an illusion. I also think the heir of the Shinomiya Financial Group wouldn't know me."

Kaoru chuckled; was he deliberately teasing him?

"Just one percent of the shares; the Shinomiya family wouldn't consider me an heir."

He smiled, "Perhaps one day in the future, I might even return the shares to them."

This matter was beyond Ayanokoji's understanding, as he lacked sufficient information in this area and didn't know how to gauge Kaoru's thoughts.

Only his father might have a grasp of everything in this field.

"Ayanokouji, do you have friends?" Kaoru suddenly asked.

Ayanokoji expression shifted; why was he being asked such a question?

"I have friends, like Sudou, Yamauchi, Ike, and others in the class; we're all good friends."

"They all call each other by name, but you don't."

"..."

Kaoru looked at his silent expression and said, "The fact is, they don't consider you a friend, and you know you don't consider them friends either."

"You seem to know me well?"

Ayanokoji frowned.

"My understanding of you is limited to school; outside of school, there are people who know you better."

Kaoru smiled, "You want to know if I know you're from the White Room, right?"

Ayanokoji's expression stiffened; the tacit probing had suddenly been exposed, and he didn't even have time to be surprised, quickly thinking about Kaoru's intentions.

By bringing up the White Room, it indicated that the game was entering the next stage; what would his role be?

Ayanokoji recalled an incident during winter break when the chairman had helped him withstand his father's pressure while proudly comparing the models of the White Room and ANHS, allowing him to evaluate them in the future.

However, the future was the future; his father might pull him back into the rules that would come next.

Kaoru serving as the group leader indeed made Ayanokoji feel tense because if something happened, Class D wouldn't have enough points to rescue him.

"I don't quite understand what you mean."

Ayanokoji steadied his mindset, his expression calm.

"The White Room's greatest masterpiece; that's how they refer to you."

Kaoru smiled slightly, "From that title, the school should have assigned you to Class A, but you're in Class D, and for the past two semesters, you've lived here like an ordinary student, without any particularly outstanding performance, nor have you embarrassed yourself."

"Well, it seems you know me well."

Ayanokoji was actually thinking about how to escape this situation; he couldn't drop out yet.

"Stop thinking about it; I won't let you drop out just yet."

Kaoru saw through Kiyotaka Ayanokoji's pretense.

"..."

Ayanokoji averted his gaze.

"Leaving the cage you've lived in since childhood and coming to a world you've only heard about but never dreamed of, everything you see must feel so novel to you, right?"

"The love, friendship, familial bonds, hatred, hostility, kindness, happiness, anger, jealousy, and so on that appear in books are now right in front of you. This is a realm you've never entered before. In the narrow room, they only conducted experiments on you like conditioned reflexes, such as using the crying immunity method on you during your first month of life."

"You're very smart, always maintaining the image they have of you, not crying or making a fuss. While others are punished, you receive rewards. The instructors always look at you as if you were a monster, while those around you are eliminated one by one, yet you survive until the end."

"But for you, is that enough?"

Ayanokoji was starting to lose his composure; this guy was using cold reading on him, and the more he spoke, the more accurate he became, making him think Kaoru had witnessed everything he had gone through.

However, he just didn't know that cold reading combined with Emotion Perception could yield astonishing results.

"What do you want to say?"

Ayanokoji steadied his heart; he knew he couldn't let Kaoru's few words affect his mindset.

Perhaps he had become somewhat dull from being used to packaging his identity, Ayanokoji maintained a serious face, and the image of Chabashira flashed through his mind.

Hearing this, Kaoru laughed.

"If you still want to live in the outside world, filled with curiosity about everything, I can help you."

Ayanokoji was slightly taken aback, then heard him raise a finger, the shadow of the moon passing over his profile.

"However, you also need to help me, use your abilities seriously."

Chapter 459: No Friends.

On the fourth day at the forest school, it was the weekend, and there were no classes scheduled for today.

Miki Yamamura woke up early; they still had to prepare breakfast themselves.

Having taken home economics in middle school, she wasn't a complete novice and could manage to whip up this meal.

However, given yesterday's experience, Miki Yamamura was more cautious today, frequently glancing at the students in her group, especially the delinquent Shiho Manabe.

Just from appearances, the difference between bad students and good students was quite obvious in Miki Yamamura's eyes.

Shiho Manabe was the epitome of a natural-born delinquent—rude, outspoken, and with an arrogant attitude, always looking mischievous.

Miki Yamamura worried about what Shiho Manabe might do to her today; although they had gotten along well last night, the students from Class C were looking at her strangely.

As a qualified former delinquent, Shiho Manabe didn't cook; she stood by, arms crossed, directing everyone.

Of course, that was an exaggeration; she could only boss around a portion of the students, while another group completely ignored her commands.

The girls from Class B, for instance, didn't take kindly to Shiho Manabe; the fact that they weren't being openly sarcastic was already quite polite.

Compared to the boys' atmosphere, the girls seemed to be getting along well, but the boundaries of their respective circles were quite clear; it was obvious who would be excluded.

Miki Yamamura was responsible for washing vegetables on the side, but just as she finished washing them, someone accidentally bumped into her, and the vegetables she had just cleaned fell to the ground.

"You scared me! Why are you blocking the way? You should've said something when you saw me coming!"

The Class C girl complained rudely to Miki Yamamura, her expression clearly displeased.

Miki Yamamura opened her mouth slightly, wanting to retort, as she had been washing vegetables right there and hadn't blocked anyone.

However, the words that came out were an apology.

"What good is saying sorry? It's so annoying! You're so clumsy, and now the vegetables are on the ground; it's all your fault!"

"I-I'll clean them up."

"Even if you clean them up, I won't eat food that's been on the ground!"

Faced with the aggressive girl, Miki Yamamura felt at a loss, her hands gripping her clothes tightly.

Although she didn't want to cry, tears were already welling up in her eyes.

"Hey, enough already! It was clearly you who bumped into her."

A girl from Class B couldn't stand it any longer.

"Don't joke around; she was standing here without saying a word. Who knew someone was here?"

The other girl was quite confident, as this was Ryuen's directive, and Shiho Manabe was also present.

"Heh, you upper-class students love to form little cliques, calling it cooperation, right?"

"You're going too far!"

"What have we done that's too much? If someone affects our grades, we'll be the first to be expelled!"

"..."

This left the Class B students speechless; if that was the case, it was understandable for them to be strict with outsiders, but it was still quite unpleasant.

"Stop arguing and finish cooking quickly."

Shiho Manabe looked at Miki Yamamura, "And you, better be careful."

In Miki Yamamura's eyes, this was definitely a warning with ill intentions.

Thus, she felt even more dejected.

...

After breakfast, Miki Yamamura, feeling heavy-hearted, finally made her way to the cafeteria.

At this time, the cafeteria should not have been open, yet a few figures were visible inside.

Although Miki Yamamura was somewhat reluctant about Kaoru's insistence, she thought that if she didn't go, she might be bullied by him, so she decided to show up.

"Good morning, Miki!"

Haruka Hasebe was the first to notice Miki Yamamura, waving at her with a smile.

"Hehe, I never thought our group would gather again like this."

Beside her was Airi Sakura, whom Kaoru had specifically asked her to forcibly bring along.

Across from them, Kaoru also spotted Miki.

Her usual side ponytail, paired with an expression of uncertainty that made her seem cold and unapproachable, gave off an aloof aura.

But with just a little observation, one could quickly detect the fluster and forced composure in her eyes.

She was like a hard candy—wrapped in stiff, icy packaging, still tough and grating when first tasted.

Yet as time passed, the sweet fragrance unique to a girl would gradually emerge, soft and delightful.

"G-Good morning."

Miki walked up to Kaoru, her gaze darting around furtively.

There wasn't a single soul nearby.

"No one will disturb us until lunchtime."

Kaoru motioned for her to sit beside him, but the girl didn't take the hint, instead choosing a seat next to Airi Sakura.

Perhaps the familiar presence of someone similar gave her a fleeting sense of security.

"Don't worry, this guy's loaded. The teacher initially refused him, so he just bought four hours of exclusive use—and there's coffee too!"

Haruka Hasebe's tone was full of envy.

"No wonder the teacher said Personal Points are useful. So this is what they meant."

"It's not that exaggerated. I originally wanted to go to the girls' dorm, but they said they'd have to send someone to supervise me."

Kaoru sounded slightly displeased.

Haruka blinked.

Was this guy serious?

"Ahem. Actually, the reason I called you all here today is to discuss something with you."

Kaoru softened his tone, though his expression remained serious.

"Though I'm sure you've already noticed it yourselves."

Haruka pondered for a moment. "Is it because we never hang out like the popular kids do?"

"H-Hanging out... maybe we shouldn't?"

Miki cautiously voiced her opinion.

"Why not?"

Haruka was puzzled. "Do you have plans, Miki?"

"N-No, it's just... I'm not suited for outings."

Miki stammered, feeling herself sinking into gloom.

An overwhelmingly dark aura radiated from her—even now, she was still disliked by others.

Unaware of the details, Haruka turned to Airi. "Airi, you don't want to go out either?"

"I..."

Airi stole a glance at Kaoru's expression before deflating. "I-I'll go with whatever everyone else decides."

One vote against, one abstention. No doubt about it—their lack of social gatherings had clearly made their relationships this stiff!

Just as Haruka was about to insist on her idea, Kaoru murmured, "What I meant to say was—none of you have any friends, right?"

Thud!

In an instant, all three girls—including Haruka—were utterly devastated.

"A-Ahaha, who said I don't have friends?"

Haruka tried playing dumb. "Kaoru, don't project your own issues onto others. I hang out with Kikyo and the others sometimes."

"The one who told me that intel was Kikyo."

Kaoru delivered the blow mercilessly.

"Guh..." Hasebe Haruka's face flushed red, "It's all because of your stupid hanging stunt! She was depressed for an entire year!"

"How could someone who's depressed possibly make friends?!"

Chapter 460: Shyness.

"I didn't have friends before, but don't I have you all now?"

As if unwilling to admit defeat, Haruka stared at Kaoru with displeasure, her beautiful eyes unblinking, though the corners of her lips curled into a barely noticeable smile.

He must have given the wrong gift that time.

Kaoru felt some regret.

Fortunately, none of them were present—it was extremely dangerous for a producer to get too close with fans.

"M-me too."

Miki wanted to refute Kaoru's words. "Normally, Masumi-san is with me..."

Airi hesitated to speak, because she truly felt she had no friends.

After a brief silence, Kaoru said, "I understand. Each of you has your own exceptional qualities. Haruka is right—no matter what happened before, we're friends now."

Haruka frowned and corrected him, "Don't you think calling me 'Haruka' every day is strange? Can't you give me a nicer nickname, like how I call you?"

Women really focus on the oddest things. Keeping a straight face, Kaoru suggested.

"How about... Haru-haru?"

"Pfft—HAHAHA!"

In an instant, Haruka burst into laughter, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

She was so overcome that Kaoru could see her face turning bright red.

"Is it really that funny?"

"N-no, haha... It's just seeing you so serious, I couldn't help it... haha..."

"As long as you don't dislike it."

After laughing for a while, Haruka barely managed to control herself, though she kept muttering "Haru-haru" under her breath before giggling again.

This reaction probably meant she liked the name.

Kaoru wasn't entirely sure—he'd simply given her a similar nickname to how she addressed him.

Noticing Airi staring at him intently, Kaoru cleared his throat.

"No, Airi. I can't call you that too, or you'll start laughing uncontrollably with her."

Airi's face turned scarlet—whether because he'd caught her staring or because her secret thoughts made her heart race.

"I... I never expected anything like that! And I wouldn't laugh either!"

After speaking, Airi realized her voice might have been too loud and lowered her head.

"Exactly!"

Haruka said sternly, "You should consider yourself lucky that beautiful girls allow you to call them by name. Don't go complaining about it, Mitoma-san."

"I kind of feel like I accidentally stumbled into a girls' tea party."

Kaoru Mitoma sighed.

"Kaoru-kun" and "Haru-haru"—they did sound nice together.

"Um, you're the one who invited us, right?"

Miki Yamamura deadpanned.

With a smile, Haruka raised her fist to Kaoru's face like a reporter's microphone.

"Mitoma-san, may I ask—did you meet with us today just to mock us for having no friends?"

Kaoru pressed down on her "microphone" and answered, "Actually, that's exactly why I came."

The girls were stunned for a moment as he continued asking, "Since we're all friends, why are you all in different groups for this training camp?"

Haruka looked somewhat awkward. "You should know this—the grouping wasn't really up to us. There's a girl named Horikita in our class, and she and Kikyo were in charge of the groupings. Right, Airi?"

Airi quickly nodded.

Horikita Suzune had insisted on preserving the strongest members to form a core group, effectively abandoning the rest.

Of course, Horikita Suzune had also considered the feelings of the weaker students.

She assigned the less capable ones to groups with Class A and Class B, ensuring they wouldn't fall to the point of expulsion.

That was why Airi ended up in Sakayanagi's group, while Haruka remained in Horikita Suzune's.

"No, there's one issue," Kaoru said. "Quite a few girls were grouped based on personal preferences, weren't they?"

He had also asked Karuizawa Kei, Ichinose Honami, Kushida Kikyo, and Manabe Shiho.

Unlike the boys, who were more rational and composed, the girls had their own cliques, making it a headache for the leaders to sort them out.

"Kaoru, do you want us to be together?" Haruka asked.

Kaoru glanced at Airi, then at Miki, sighing helplessly.

"There are two people here who aren't adjusting well to the new environment."

Miki's heart twitched slightly. She hadn't revealed anything—had she?

"I-It's not that bad, is it?"

She didn't know why she said that.

Perhaps she was just used to masking her feelings, burying them beneath the surface where no one could see, struggling to survive in the shadows.

"Not bad?" Kaoru's expression turned stern. "What if you get expelled?"

Miki froze. She—expelled?!

"Huh? What do you mean by expulsion?" Haruka was shocked. "Is Miki in charge of something?"

"In Class C's group, even if there are students from other classes around you, they'll find ways to drag you into the worst situations."

Kaoru didn't trust the students grouped with Yamamura Miki.

Group bullying was the most common issue in Japanese high schools.

Students from Class B and Class D didn't know Yamamura Miki, so they had no reason to clash with Class C—they'd just turn a blind eye.

As for the one student from Class A, she might report the situation to Sakayanagi, but Kaoru knew better than to rely on others for this.

"That can't be right. Aren't there teachers around?"

Haruka also thought of bullying, but she remembered that ANHS prohibited bullying—anyone caught would be expelled.

"There are no cameras here."

Kaoru's tone was calm.

They only came here for one week a year, so the school had no reason to install surveillance.

Besides, with the forest right outside, it'd be easy to pull off something underhanded.

What was worse, some bullies preyed on victims who were too timid to speak up.

If the victim stayed silent, the teachers would have no choice but to ignore it.

"Isn't that just terrible?" Haruka found it hard to believe. "What's their goal in doing this? Or did you do something to them, Miki?"

"I... I don't know."

Yamamura Miki herself was lost.

She hadn't done anything.

"Kaoru, how did you know about this?" Haruka stared at Kaoru.

Even she, who was in the girls' group, hadn't noticed this issue.

How did Kaoru know about it?

Kaoru remained silent for a moment. "First, I want to apologize to Miki. Because this matter is actually aimed at me."

"Huh?"

Miki froze.

Why was he apologizing to her?

Haruka was puzzled for a moment before realizing, "You mean the second-year seniors?"

"Right. If they attacked me directly, I'd easily notice. So they decided to take a detour and target a blind spot—somewhere I wouldn't see—to ensure success."

"And that blind spot is the girls' side?"

"Miki is in the same class as me and is also my friend. If she were to be expelled, I would definitely use my points to save her."

Kaoru lied.

In truth, Nagumo and Ryuen might have simply chosen a target who appeared weak.

However, the girls didn't realize this, especially Yamamura Miki.

"But... what's the point? Whether they attack you or Miki, what's the difference?"

"There's no difference. They want to drain Class A's points. That way, the next attack can be directed at me, and Class A won't have enough points left to save me. They'd take me down in one move."

"That's just too much!"

Haruka's eyebrows furrowed in anger.

She didn't care whether Kaoru had taken Nagumo's childhood friend or not.

Even if he had, Nagumo should just suck it up!

Because Kaoru was her friend now!

"So, I'm really sorry, Miki."

Kaoru looked at Yamamura Miki and said softly, "I should have asked Sakayanagi to keep an eye on things from the start."

He was staring at her like this and Miki Yamamura felt goosebumps all over her body—what was this sensation?

In a place where no one else had noticed, he had spotted her first.

And not only that, he had treated her more gently than she had ever treated herself.

For just a fleeting moment, Miki recalled the scenes of her interactions with Kaoru.

Everything roared past like a train, unstoppable in its speed, breaking through the billowing steam.

Images flashed before her eyes at breakneck pace, and her heart trembled lightly in her chest along with the train's vibrations—like a sprout just breaking through the soil, or rippling water with undercurrents swirling beneath.

She couldn't help but feel shy.

Yes, Miki Yamamura felt intensely shy, so much so that she didn't even dare to look at Kaoru Mitoma for long.