

Cote 491

Chapter 491: Utterly Shocked

Sometimes, Kaoru envied Ichinose's social skills.

For instance—how had she managed to bring Tachibana Akane to his room?

As he stared at the senior before him, countless thoughts flashed through his mind.

He took a deep breath, struggling to figure out what to say for their first meeting since the training camp.

But the strange looks from Karuizawa and Kushida left him unsure of how to react.

"This is Tachibana-senpai from the third year. She used to be the student council secretary. I ran into her on the way and thought I'd bring her along."

Ichinose cheerfully introduced Tachibana while also presenting the room's occupants to her in turn. Even Karuizawa seemed caught off guard, greeting Tachibana in a daze.

Apparently, Tachibana's arrival had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, not something premeditated.

"It's nice to meet you all. I apologize for intruding today."

Despite the odd situation, Tachibana did her best to maintain an elegant senior demeanor in front of her juniors, refusing to show any sign of discomfort.

However, the moment Kaoru stepped out of the bathroom, her expression visibly changed.

"Ahaha, no need to worry about disturbing us. More people would make it livelier today."

Kushida quickly recovered, wearing a bright smile.

The awkward one was Kaoru—what did it have to do with her?

Beside them, Ichinose added, "That's right. Today is Kikyo's birthday. This cake was bought for her. Having seniors here makes it even better."

Akane shifted her gaze away from Kaoru and took out a gift box from her bag.

Handing it to Kushida, she said, "It was prepared in a hurry. I hope you won't mind."

Kushida looked surprised but accepted the senior's gift with a smile. "Thank you for the present, Senpai. This is really unexpected."

The fact that they had time to prepare gifts meant this wasn't entirely a spur-of-the-moment visit.

Kaoru sat next to Karuizawa, who tugged at his sleeve and whispered, "What's going on?"

That was a question better directed at Ichinose Honami—he had just come out of the bath.

After the failed training camp, Kaoru now observed Akane more closely.

He noticed she kept avoiding his gaze.

Whenever their eyes accidentally met, she would immediately look away, only to steal glances at him when she thought he wasn't paying attention.

"Senpai, did anything happen with the class back then?" Kaoru asked.

His attempt at small talk was barely passable.

Akane reluctantly met his eyes and replied, "Horikita settled things with Class C and D by offering ten million points. Though no one said anything about it."

Even though no one spoke up, Tachibana still felt partially responsible for the problem.

Throughout the three-year battle, they had only relied on Horikita Manabu, rarely getting chances to help.

Akane felt deeply guilty, and with Kaoru's involvement, her frustration only grew.

"Don't overthink it. This outcome is the best. Soon, you'll all graduate smoothly."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Kaoru noticed tears glistening in Tachibana's eyes.

Damn it, he'd said the wrong thing again.

"Are you that eager for me to graduate?" Akane clenched her fists, her chest tight with emotion. "To me, dropping out before or graduating now makes no difference. Horikita never paid me any attention anyway, and you—you're just as careless. Maybe it's better to just leave it at that!"

Kaoru's expression turned odd. What kind of image did he have in her eyes?

Karuizawa and Kushida exchanged glances, bewildered.

Neither of them knew Akane well enough to understand what was happening.

"Tachibana-senpai, you shouldn't think that way."

Ichinose spoke earnestly, "Did you forget what I told you on the way here? If Kaoru had no feelings for you, why would he confess to you?"

Akane found it difficult to respond, perhaps due to her instinctive reaction to the word "confession."

She subconsciously glanced at Kaoru.

Then, she saw Karuizawa clinging possessively to Kaoru's arm, their gazes meeting.

"It might sound unbelievable, but I'm Kaoru's girlfriend—and so is Kei, as well as Kikyo and Suzune. So I have no objections to your relationship with him."

Akane wore a bewildered expression. "B-but isn't this cheating?"

"Is it still cheating if it's allowed?"

Ichinose sighed. "We won't interfere with his feelings for you, nor yours for him. In return, we hope you won't interfere with our feelings for him either."

Kaoru was surprised.

The emotions flickering in her eyes, the slight pursing of her lips—it was clear these were the most complex and genuine feelings in the girl's heart at this moment.

If you all like him, then I won't oppose it. I won't stop you, and I hope you won't stop me either.

That was Ichinose Honami's sentiment.

"It's not that complicated. The truth is, I just want a harem, so I won't let any of you go," Kaoru suddenly interjected.

"I'm just a greedy person, that's all."

Ichinose pressed her lips together and smiled faintly, her eyes shimmering with an unusual light as she murmured, "Wanting not just our bodies but our entire lives—that really is greedy."

Kaoru realized he was already outmatched in this debate. In the future, she might even dominate the harem's decision-making.

"I still find it hard to understand. Are you saying you all agree to be with him, never feel jealous, never get possessive, and won't even oppose him fooling around outside?"

Akane couldn't fathom their mindset. Wasn't this too extreme?

"Of course we will! If we like him, we'll definitely get jealous!" Karuizawa blurted out. "But from now on, we're going to tightly control this guy's interactions with other women!"

Kaoru could feel her grip tightening—clinging to his arm like a koala, refusing to let go.

"As for me, I don't care about all that," Kushida said cheerfully. "My relationship with him is a bit complicated. As long as he satisfies me, that's enough." She then gestured toward the kitchen and added, "The one in there cares even less about how many women he has. I doubt the concept of a 'boyfriend' even exists in her mind."

Akane studied their expressions, feeling utterly at a loss for the first time.

She'd never heard of anything like this before.

"B-but bigamy is—"

"Senpai," Kaoru cut her off. "Do you really think I care about that?"

Akane fell silent, then glared at him indignantly. "Of course having so many girlfriends is great for you, but can you really take responsibility for a girl's entire life?"

Who does this junior think he is, acting so arrogant!

Chapter 492: More Troublesome Than Lust.

When Kaoru mentioned the Shinomiya Financial Group, Tachibana Akane remained silent for a long time.

"Even if material needs are guaranteed, so what? Who cares about that? What about family? What about friends?"

"Senpai has already thought this far ahead?"

"Hmph, there's no way you could handle it anyway. My mom would never allow an unreliable man like you to take me away!"

"What are your mother's requirements for a son-in-law?"

"W-well... probably someone handsome, cultured, polite, gentle and considerate... Wait, why should I tell you any of this?!"

"Because senpai told me the only person who would oppose is your mother."

"N-no, that's not it!"

Perhaps being with him made her unable to hide her true self, as Akane had completely forgotten about maintaining her senior's dignity, her face flushed red with anger.

Even at the age of nearing graduation, Akane still radiated the youthful vitality of a girl.

Faced with Kaoru's advances, most so-called mature women probably wouldn't show this kind of distress.

In today's society, Akane's words certainly presented an obstacle, but this obstacle only existed if Kaoru acknowledged it.

Kaoru had countless ways to deal with society's pressures—he simply chose to preserve this small distress of the young girl.

"Senpai, if I didn't have a girlfriend, would you have accepted my confession back then?"

He looked at his senior, who wasn't wearing her warm coat indoors.

The sweater and vest slightly outlined the curves of her youthful body.

Though her slightly protruding chest couldn't compare to Ichinose's beside her, it presented a different kind of charm.

She looked incredibly petite and adorable, especially when staring dumbfounded at Kaoru, her lips slightly parted as if everything about her expressed disbelief.

She wanted to hide her fluster and surprise, but her reddened cheeks betrayed her emotions as her gaze darted between Kaoru and Ichinose.

Soon, Akane realized she needed to respond to Kaoru's confession.

As his senior, she couldn't run away like last time—she had to face it properly.

"No."

The first to react to these words was Karuizawa, who seemed to let out a sigh of relief, her eyes flashing with triumph and delight.

Ichinose took a casual sip of barley tea with a faint smile, while Kushida studied Kaoru's expression, finding not a trace of embarrassment.

Akane noticed this too and couldn't help asking, "Aren't you angry?"

Kaoru sighed softly and said calmly, "I was the one forcing senpai to accept me in the first place. Whether senpai hates me or likes me is her own freedom. What good would my anger do? I probably scared you back then, didn't I?"

Akane felt inexplicably embarrassed, fidgeting uncomfortably as she instinctively tried to avoid these emotions.

But with people on either side of her, she felt too self-conscious and didn't know what to do.

"W-who told you to confess to me so suddenly? I wasn't prepared at all," the girl muttered. "Besides, I'm about to graduate soon. Being with me... you'd be better off staying with Ichinose and the others."

As she spoke, Akane felt a faint melancholy.

The annual graduation season was approaching—last year she bid farewell to her own seniors, and now it was her turn.

"You... you completely don't understand how others feel. When the student council changed over, you didn't show any sadness at all." Akane rambled on, "Actually, this semester will be our last meeting. What's more, Horikita and I also have to deal with upcoming exams. We need to give our absolute best for the final graduation exams, or all our efforts in Class A will go to waste."

The winter snow was nearly gone, and the early spring breeze was gradually approaching.

In another two months, it would be cherry blossom season, and Advanced Nurturing High School would bid farewell to this year's graduating class beneath a flurry of scattered petals.

Thus, the girl had always viewed Kaoru with the mindset of an impending separation.

For her, the youthful days of high school were coming to an end.

She had wanted to confess her feelings to Horikita Manabu but withdrew her steps at the last moment—her courage and hesitation reaching their conclusion simultaneously.

Akane believed she had already moved past her feelings for Horikita.

Even if she never took that final step, it didn't matter. Like the fleeting cherry blossoms, it was enough that they had bloomed for a time in spring.

But then, Kaoru plucked one of those blossoms, saying it smelled lovely and that he would take it home to preserve it.

How could a cherry blossom meant to wither in the soil be kept by him?

Moreover, his home already had plenty of other lovely flowers, which made Akane both irritated and secretly pleased.

Hmph, so this guy had finally noticed her charm!

Yet even though she should have felt triumphant, Akane now felt a pang of sorrow—not just because of their impending separation, but also because he hadn't just noticed her charm.

When she ran into Ichinose on the way, she instinctively tried to avoid her, only to be caught by the underclassman.

To her embarrassment, Ichinose already knew about Kaoru's confession.

At first, Akane thought Ichinose was joking, but it turned out there really were so many girls who liked him.

Compared to them, where did she stand?

Maybe it was better to just let it end here. He could continue living out his youth at school, while she would move forward with her education and her life.

"Senpai."

Kaoru interrupted Akane's thoughts. "Actually, I can leave the school and go with you."

Akane didn't react at first, staring blankly for a long moment before her eyes widened in shock.

"N-no no no, you can't drop out! What about Ichinose and the others?!"

Not just Akane—even Karuizawa looked frantic, shaking Kaoru's arm.

"Don't you dare drop out!" Karuizawa snapped, her voice both fierce and pitiful. "If you drop out, I'll drop out too!"

Their reaction wasn't surprising. Anyone would assume he meant expulsion.

But Kaoru was different—so different that even if Sakayanagi Narumori forbade him from leaving, he had ways to get out.

"Ahaha, not dropping out," Ichinose chimed in, a faint smile playing on her lips as she recalled something from winter break. "The school seems to allow Kaoru to leave. But you'd have to apply for permission, right?"

At the end, she glanced at Kaoru, her eyes seeking confirmation.

Kaoru nodded and then explained the situation, easing the tension on Karuizawa and Akane's faces.

"That's basically it. So if you ever want to see me, senpai, I can meet you anytime."

Akane swallowed hard.

So there was such an option? Had she been overthinking things earlier?

"Senpai, did you reject me because you were worried we wouldn't see each other again?"

Although it was unclear how Ichinose had convinced Akane to bring her here, Kaoru would seize the opportunity in time.

In truth, Tachibana Akane's willingness to come already spoke volumes about her stance.

If she truly intended to reject Kaoru, there was no way she would have shown up.

Chapter 493: Scared

Sure enough, Tachibana Akane began stammering, "H-how could I not refuse? You're rude, inconsiderate, a total womanizer—isn't it only natural that I'd reject you?"

Kushida set down her barley tea, smirking.

'Here we go, another tsundere.'

Just as Kaoru was about to speak, Ichinose cleared her throat. "Senpai, we agreed you'd take this seriously, didn't we?"

Akane's face flushed red, her expression twisting awkwardly as she hesitated for a long moment before mumbling, "I... I don't know. And all of you are just too weird."

To any normal person, everything happening in this room would seem bizarre—just as Kushida had earlier described, there was an undeniable strangeness to it all, especially Ichinose's attitude.

"Mhm, you didn't believe me, Senpai, so I brought you here to see for yourself and understand our situation. That's what you kept asking about on the way, wasn't it?" Ichinose smiled gently.

"And now you think we're too strange?"

Akane hurriedly shook her head. "I-I'm not saying you're weird! It's just... you all like him, and you're okay with so many others liking him too. Doesn't that feel strange to you?"

"It is strange," Ichinose admitted. "We only recently came to this understanding."

"Other than accepting it, I could've forced Kaoru to break up with them—or just broken up with him myself. I know that's my right. But happiness isn't always about possession. It can be a kiss, a date, a gift, or even just a walk together."

As she spoke, the radiance in her smiling face grew even brighter. Even without her saying another word, Akane could read the emotion in her eyes—something unmistakably like happiness.

"I can accept this outcome too," Karuizawa murmured. "Even if it's frustrating, I won't let go. I'll cling shamelessly if I have to."

Kushida's lips parted slightly before she sighed.

'Never mind, I'll stay out of this.'

Her gaze drifted toward Horikita Suzune in the kitchen, only to find the other girl watching them.

"...I get what you're saying, but for me, it's just too hard to imagine," Akane said, her expression complicated as she stared at Kaoru.

"So, you've already won over Asahina, and now you're trying to reel me in too?"

"Are you feeling sad because graduation is coming up, Senpai?" Kaoru neither confirmed nor denied it.

"Honestly, I feel the same. The thought of not seeing you around anymore... it makes me a little panicked."

"You? Scared?" Akane eyed him skeptically.

"How scared does someone have to be before it counts as fear?" he shot back.

She faltered, only for Ichinose to chime in cheerfully, "Senpai, didn't you say it yourself? On Christmas, this guy suddenly showed up looking for you. He might not have said it outright, but he was really worried about your answer."

Kaoru's expression darkened, while Karuizawa subtly glared at him.

Hearing this reminder, Akane suddenly realized something and looked at Kaoru with a strange expression before bursting into laughter—it sounded so hypocritical.

"Is it really that funny?"

"Because you're the most stubborn one here."

The one who answered Kaoru was Kushida. "You're clearly a foot fetishist, yet you refuse to admit it."

Kaoru couldn't save face—how could she say something like that so brazenly?

"O-okay, I won't laugh anymore."

Tachibana Akane suppressed her amusement. "So, not only do you like Ichinose-san, and them, but now you also like me... and you have many other girls you're interested in, right?"

Listening to it all made Kaoru break out in a cold sweat.

He nodded stiffly, deeply concerned about what kind of scene would unfold when they met the idols.

"So, why do you think I agreed to this?"

Tachibana Akane asked matter-of-factly, "Without you, I could just find a boyfriend in college who's better than you. It's not like there aren't men in this world more polite and handsome than you."

"That outcome won't happen. I'll catch you before then and won't let you escape," Kaoru replied.

Akane froze for a moment, incredulous: "Didn't you just say you wouldn't get mad at me?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I'll let you go."

Now it was Kaoru's turn to speak with conviction. "If it's something I like, I'll take it for myself. That's just who I am."

Akane immediately grew angry, then felt a flicker of happiness before glaring at him again.

"So you're just going to be this shameless?"

"Absolutely shameless,"

Kaoru stated firmly. "Even if it means acting first and making amends later, I'll do it."

Akane struggled for words, finally turning to Ichinose Honami for help—'aren't you going to intervene?'

In response, Ichinose simply smiled brightly.

"Senpai, do you like this person?"

"W-what!?"

Akane bristled like a cat whose tail had been stepped on, wearing an expression of utter disbelief.

She absolutely, definitely, and completely could not possibly have such thoughts!

"Because you like Kaoru, Senpai, that's why I brought you here."

"W-wait, hold on! Why are you suddenly so sure I like this guy?"

"If you didn't like him, why would you come?"

"Huh? N-no, didn't you bring me here?"

"You came willingly, Senpai. Because you also wanted to know the truth—whether his confession was serious or not."

Akane averted her gaze, a telltale sign that Ichinose had seen right through her.

"I won't stand in the way of girls who like him. Besides, I really admire you, Senpai. So whether to accept him or not is entirely your decision."

Ichinose paused before adding, "After all, loving someone is a personal matter. Whether you continue to love him or stop now—we can't make that choice for you."

After a brief silence, Akane asked, "Do I have to decide right now?"

"Of course not. You have until graduation."

Ichinose laughed softly. "Today was just about helping you understand our situation, not forcing you into anything. My role ends here—now it's Kaoru's turn to worry."

Kaoru glanced at her, and as if reading his mind, she turned to meet his gaze.

"Alright, enough chitchat. Time to eat—Horikita's been waiting forever."

Kushida stood up and stretched. "Our only job is to enjoy ourselves. How to make that happen is someone else's problem, not ours."

"Suddenly, I really want to just be a simple-minded playboy," Kaoru sighed.

Kushida shot him a knowing sidelong glance—finally admitting you're not just a simple womanizer, huh?

Chapter 494: Do You Think I Like You?

As she made a wish over the candlelit birthday cake, Kushida kept it to herself—afraid it might not come true if she told Kaoru.

However, judging by her slightly smug smile, Kaoru guessed it probably wasn't a wish full of goodwill toward him.

After blowing out the candles, several girls personally handed their gifts to Kushida before slowly savoring the delicious cake.

Of course, just eating cake wasn't enough. Noticing everyone's expectant gazes, Kaoru tactfully started singing "Happy Birthday," followed by a few other classic songs.

They seemed completely unprepared for Kaoru's singing, as expressions of utter astonishment appeared on each of their faces.

Karuizawa reacted the fastest, immediately clinging to Kaoru and demanding that he accompany her to karaoke in the future—and teach her how to sing.

Given that he had neglected her several times before, Kaoru had no choice but to agree to her request.

Perhaps because Akane was present, today's birthday gathering didn't drag on too late.

Around nine in the evening, Ichinose asked Kaoru to escort Akane back.

The students' dormitories were all in the same area, though it took a few extra minutes to reach the third-years' dorm building.

Such a short distance obviously couldn't be justified by concerns about safety.

As soon as they stepped outside, a desolate wind carried the night's unique chill.

Kaoru instinctively tightened his coat, his neck wrapped in a scarf, while Akane beside him was fully bundled up, even wearing knitted gloves.

"You can just walk me to the elevator. I can go back by myself," Akane said softly. "It's not far, and they're still waiting for you in the room."

"Even if it's not far, someone might see us together and wonder if there's something between us," Kaoru replied. "If that happens, my goal will be accomplished."

Akane stared at him in disbelief—this was the first time she'd heard someone be so shameless.

"You're such a scoundrel!"

Listening to her indignant voice, Kaoru inexplicably laughed.

The wait for the elevator no longer felt the slightest bit tedious.

"What did Honami tell you?"

Kaoru was curious about what the two of them had discussed on the way here that could convince Akane to come to his room.

It definitely wasn't just because Ichinose was cute.

"Uh... She just mentioned a few things about you. She said if I wanted to know why you confessed to me, I should come with her, and then I'd get the answer. So I came."

Akane sounded a little embarrassed.

At first, she had thought Ichinose was trying to catch her as the "other woman" and had nearly bolted.

The answer was as good as saying nothing.

Kaoru followed her into the elevator, pondering for a moment before speaking again.

"Senpai, what do you think love is?"

Akane didn't hesitate before answering, "Love is just love!"

"How do you know when you've fallen for someone?" Kaoru pressed.

Akane instinctively thought of Horikita Manabu.

In the past, every time she saw his back, she would feel heartache and guilt, blaming herself for not being strong enough to share his burdens. Her mind was always filled with thoughts of how to stand by his side.

"Some people don't know why they love her, but she becomes the reason they can't love anyone else." Kaoru said, "I also believe that liking someone doesn't need a reason. If you like someone, you'll find a thousand reasons to justify it. Whatever feelings you have for Horikita-senpai, or whatever feelings you have for me—whether it's liking or disliking—I'll cherish this time together."

As his words trailed off, the elevator doors opened, and the two arrived at the first-floor lobby.

The sight of scattered students and the clamor of voices made Tachibana Akane's thoughts feel like a slow-motion film.

The air felt suffocating, and she couldn't discern who the central protagonist was in this scene.

Dazedly, she followed Kaoru.

His back wasn't as towering as Horikita Manabu's—it felt approachable, as if she could reach out and touch it, or even overtake him with just a little more effort.

"But I'm also despicable. If you dislike me now, I'll spend the coming days slowly turning that dislike into affection."

Akane snapped out of her thoughts.

This guy was still as punchable as ever—an arrogant, disrespectful brat rotten to the core, making her grit her teeth in frustration.

Then, Kaoru suddenly felt someone kick him.

A figure dashed ahead, grabbed his scarf, and yanked it downward, forcing their eyes to meet in an instant.

"Listen, can't you show a little more respect to your senpai?"

The girl's breath was scorching hot, her face flushed crimson, her gaze fierce.

"What's with all this talk about forcing feelings or disliking? Acting like some high-and-mighty lord—who gave you the right to decide how I feel?!"

Kaoru froze for a long moment before hesitantly replying, "Isn't that the case?"

"Of course it is! You've always been this arrogant—who could ever like someone like you?!"

Unaware that her actions and voice had drawn the attention of nearby students, Akane continued, "But even I don't know what I'm thinking! How can you be so sure I won't end up liking you?!"

Kaoru's lips twitched. Was this... a confession?

"You're just a junior! Stop acting so full of yourself!"

Akane slammed her forehead against his, and both winced in pain—neither had expected it to hurt so much.

"Ow, ow, ow... Why's your head so hard?! You hurt me!"

"You're the one who did it. How is that my fault?"

"Ugh, whatever!"

Taking a deep breath, Akane declared, "As your senpai, I'll tell you this: liking or disliking someone isn't so simple. It's not something you can just say lightly. You can play house today, but life isn't a game. I don't know what you're thinking, but this whole thing is absurd!"

Akane didn't understand them.

Yet, judging by Karuizawa's attitude, it seemed the girl was already committed to a lifelong devotion.

Kushida and Horikita Suzune also appeared indifferent, as if they wouldn't mind more people joining their circle in the future.

"Making a whole group of people happy is ridiculous in itself. Can you really accept spending your whole life running around for them? What attitude will you take when facing their families? And if they disagree, what will you do?"

"Putting marriage aside, how am I supposed to believe you'll make me happy? Even if you can leave school, we won't see each other every day. Am I supposed to wait two years for you?"

Chapter 495: They All Want to Know

"What if one of them doesn't like me? Or if someone feels it's unfair—what will you do then?"

Kaoru listened quietly as she spoke in one breath.

When she paused to catch hers, he responded gently, "Thank you, senpai, for being willing to share this with me."

Tachibana Akane gave him a long, pensive look before releasing her grip on his scarf.

"I am your senior, after all. I've had to face reality sooner than you."

As if the person wallowing in self-pity during the training camp hadn't been her, Kaoru chuckled inexplicably.

"You don't believe me?" Akane raised an eyebrow.

She felt she had experienced far more than Kaoru—some people even fought over petty jealousy and stopped being friends altogether.

"I do."

Kaoru thought of Asahina Nazuna.

This senpai likely harbored similar feelings.

"I know saying I'll solve everything now—or even promising you all a lifetime of happiness—would just be sweet talk. I could come up with a hundred ways to make you happy."

"But I also know reality won't allow it."

Just considering the current situation, Kaoru was already aware of numerous problems. Yet, he couldn't stop.

"Maybe I can't promise forever, but a year or two? I think I can manage that." He held up a finger.

"Starting today, my goal is to work hard every day to make you like me. If I fail along the way, I'd probably have failed with everyone else too."

Akane turned her face away, muttering, "Can you stop saying the word 'like' so much?"

Kaoru softened his voice. "You can keep worrying, senpai. Keep asking me these questions. I'll answer every time—and I'll work even harder to find solutions."

In other words, he was taking everything upon himself.

Akane felt awkward.

Now that she'd calmed down, she realized her earlier questions had no real answers.

Yes, these things took time. Until they experienced it, no one could know for sure.

But Akane knew there was one question she could answer right now.

"Do you think I like you?" the girl suddenly asked.

Kaoru froze for a moment before she answered her own question.

"...I do."

The reason she hadn't confessed to Horikita Manabu wasn't just because her crush had ended—it was also because, deep down, someone else had taken his place.

Just as Kaoru had said earlier, that someone was the reason she couldn't confess.

Ahem. "I think it's about time you explained, my dear Honami?"

With Kaoru and Akane gone, the room tensed.

Kushida stared sternly at Ichinose, flanked by Karuizawa and Horikita Suzune.

Oddly, Suzune seemed ready to leave.

"It's about time I headed out."

Kushida grabbed Suzune's wrist.

The latter turned back in confusion, only to find even Kei looking displeased.

"No one leaves during a meeting!" Karuizawa's stance was clear—now was the time for solidarity.

Horikita Suzune had no choice but to sit back down, sitting upright as she looked across at Ichinose Honami.

"Ahaha, well, here's the thing—Kaoru confessed to Tachibana-senpai, so I thought I'd bring her over to meet everyone."

Ichinose felt rather guilty.

Fortunately, she had considered that the relationship between Amikura and Kaoru hadn't progressed yet, so she hadn't brought Amikura Mako along.

Otherwise, she probably wouldn't have made it back tonight.

"Is that all?"

Kushida snorted coldly. "Tonight's birthday celebration was your idea too, wasn't it?"

Ichinose froze, then muttered softly, "Did I make things difficult for you, Kikyo?"

She thought that bringing Tachibana Akane over had made Kushida feel slighted, and her heart was uneasy.

"Even though Kaoru confessed to her, this situation is way too awkward. I didn't even know what to say earlier."

Karuizawa expressed her thoughts strongly. "Besides, didn't we agree we'd assess the newcomers together?"

"Alright, alright, I was wrong. I acted on my own. I just thought this was a good chance for everyone to get to know Tachibana-senpai."

Ichinose pouted, sidling up to Karuizawa Kei and shamelessly clinging to her arm. "Kei, don't be mad~"

Karuizawa hadn't expected her to pull such a move.

Huffing, she pinched Ichinose's cheek. "No acting cute. Are you a child?"

"Wuuu—"

As the two of them tussled, Kushida kept a stern face and spoke up. "Excuse me, little Honami, but do you think this senpai will say yes?"

"Absolutewy!"

Ichinose's words were muffled. "If she likes him, she'll say yes! That's how it is for everyone!"

By the time she finished, Karuizawa had already let go of her.

Ichinose lay sprawled in Karuizawa's lap, but ignoring that, the confident look on her face was quite convincing.

Kushida wondered what kind of logic that was.

No normal person would get involved in their mess—who would share their boyfriend? Wasn't that just asking to be cheated on?

"...That kinda makes sense."

Karuizawa looked grave. "For all we know, she might already be sneaking around with him."

Kushida stared at them in shock.

Oh no, she'd almost forgotten—these two weren't normal to begin with. Of course they'd think like this.

"So... will Mitoma-kun give her a ring too?" Horikita Suzune asked.

"He's already given so many, what's one more to a graduating senpai?"

Ichinose clung to Karuizawa, swaying back and forth.

"The problem is, we have no idea why he even took a liking to Tachibana-senpai. Same with Asahina-senpai. His ambitions are too big—I can't see an end to them. It's kinda scary."

Karuizawa felt the same way and muttered, "We should warn him. This room isn't big enough anymore."

The moment she said it, the other girls couldn't help but laugh, leaving Karuizawa baffled.

"Mhm, just like Kei said, the room really can't fit any more!"

Ichinose giggled along. "I really don't know what he's thinking."

"Horikita and I don't really care. Worst case, we'll just knock him out on the street and drag him back to our rooms."

Kushida had already prepared her own plan in advance.

Once she knocked Kaoru out cold, who would end up as the Stellar Wrath was anyone's guess.

"Don't drag me into this. Do what you want. Right now, I just want to reach Class A." Horikita Suzune's expression remained impassive, but she knew her time was running out.

Horikita Manabu was about to graduate—would he be satisfied with who she was now?

"Suzune is really fixated on Class A, isn't she?"

Ichinose chuckled softly, her tone tinged with faint envy.

"Is now really the time to be talking about this?"

Karuizawa grumbled unhappily. "What are we supposed to do if more and more girls keep showing up?"

Ichinose and Kushida exchanged glances before both broke into helpless smiles.

"Kei could monopolize more of his time—that way, he won't have the chance to go after other girls."

"Eh, is that really okay?"

"What else can we do?"

Ichinose pressed against her, murmuring in a low voice, "Unless we can figure out why he likes us in the first place."

"Why?"

Karuizawa was baffled. In her mind, wasn't liking someone just... liking them?

"Let me put it this way—when a guy sees a pretty girl, he might approach her out of lust," Ichinose explained. "That lust can be divided into simple desire or love at first sight. But aside from love at first sight, most lust-driven actions are just about satisfying his own urges."

Kushida added, "If he fell in love with all of us at first sight, that'd be way too fake. But the things he did to us at the beginning were definitely driven by lust."

"In other words, his initial interest in us was purely instinctual desire," Ichinose continued. "Even if it was just lust, a normal person wouldn't pursue this many girls. And even now, when he can openly do whatever he wants with us, he still goes out and flirts with others."

Karuizawa felt dizzy trying to follow.

She wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed and only grasped bits of it.

"So... Kaoru's just a natural-born playboy?"

Kushida facepalmed. Whatever—she couldn't explain it.

She motioned for Ichinose to take over.

"Yes, but also no." Ichinose's voice softened. "He had a purpose when he first approached us. That purpose might've been tied to lust, or maybe he had some other scheme in mind."

Karuizawa recalled her time with Kaoru on the cruise ship, and her mood instantly soured.

"Don't worry, Kei. No matter what, the feelings between us are real."

Ichinose's expression was resolute. Even if they weren't real, she'd make sure they became real.

"Our next task is to figure out why he approached—or rather, why he likes all of us."

Simple possessiveness and lust couldn't explain it anymore.

They needed the real answer.

...

And so, when Kaoru returned to his room, he was greeted by two catgirls standing perfectly in sync at the entrance, flashing him radiant smiles.

"Welcome home, Master!"

For a moment, Kaoru thought he'd opened the wrong door.

Chapter 496: You're Actually Doing This?

One had white cat ears, the other black—both exquisitely crafted, with just a hint of soft pink peeking through.

The room was filled with a warm atmosphere as the girls changed into maid outfits—the style Kaoru had purchased earlier.

These weren't the traditional long skirts but rather slightly provocative miniskirts that revealed their slender legs beneath.

White stockings hugged their delicate calves, drawing the eye upward to the plump thighs hidden beneath the skirts.

The contrast of black hems and white aprons was mesmerizing, making the outfits resemble princess dresses more than maid uniforms—especially when worn by two beautiful girls.

"What are you two up to?"

Kaoru felt a tinge of excitement as he noticed long tails swaying beneath their skirts, adding an extra layer of cuteness.

Kushida blinked playfully and handed him the silver chain attached to her collar, grinning.

"Of course, we're trying to seduce you, my dear master~"

There was no pretense here.

They had deliberately put on these outfits, complete with cat ears and tails—their intentions couldn't be clearer.

"Wait, isn't today your birthday?"

Kaoru couldn't help but glance at Karuizawa beside her, surprised by how she looked with cat ears.

"Kei, are you really going along with this nonsense?"

Karuizawa's face flushed red.

The catgirl maid outfit was unbearably embarrassing, but under Kaoru's gaze, she nodded fiercely.

"Who said this is nonsense? You're the one who admitted to being a pervert. Consider this us indulging you a little. Besides..." She hesitated before continuing, "You hid those things in the room, so you must've planned to use them on us anyway, right?"

Kaoru had indeed stashed the box away, but since Kushida was involved, finding it was child's play.

And so, Karuizawa discovered an entirely new world inside that box—one that left her utterly shocked.

Kaoru shot Kushida a dark look.

What kind of scheme was she plotting now?

"Ahem, don't look at me like that. Isn't this a reward for you?"

Then, as if struck by sudden realization, Kushida gasped. "Oh! Is two not enough for you?"

Before Kaoru could respond, she put on an apologetic expression.

"Sorry, Master. Horikita and Ichinose thought this would be enough, so they left. Should I call them back?"

"Whose idea was this?"

Kaoru knocked lightly on her head. This girl truly thrived on chaos.

Just then, Karuizawa tugged at his sleeve and spun in front of him.

Her skirt fluttered, and the white thigh-high socks squeezed slightly against her plush thighs, revealing glimpses of snow-white skin.

Her tail brushed against his leg, sending a ticklish shiver through him.

"Do you... think it looks good, Kaoru?"

He couldn't lie—not when she was blushing so adorably in that miniskirt maid outfit, her shyness only making her more irresistible.

"You look really cute, Kei. This style suits you."

Karuizawa smiled bashfully before whispering, "If you like it... I can wear it anytime for you."

Damn it. Seeing her act so coyly, Kaoru knew there was no escaping tonight.

"Ahaha~ Even if it was my idea, don't you share some of the blame?"

Kushida giggled as she tugged the silver chain in his hand, making the bell on her collar jingle.

"After all, Kei stayed behind willingly—because of you." Karuizawa Kei's face turned even redder, but she continued gazing at Kaoru Mitoma's face.

"Shall we do it?"

Kaoru fell silent for a moment.

Is this what a gyaru is like?

"You should accept a beautiful girl's reward with gratitude and remember her kindness for the rest of your life."

Kushida shoved the item in her hand back into Kaoru's grasp. "Or are you actually not interested in these things at all?"

Kaoru looked down—sure enough, it was the last one.

His expression turned odd. "You two being so enthusiastic really makes me wonder if something's gone wrong somewhere."

"Won't Kaoru take responsibility?"

Karuizawa proactively wrapped her arms around his, not minding at all that her chest was pressed against him.

"I like Kaoru. I like you. Do you like me, Kaoru?"

Her words made Kaoru's heart skip a beat.

Her flushed, pretty face, slightly dazed eyes, and softly murmuring lips—the moment their gazes met, Kaoru looked tenderly at the girl before him.

"I like you too, Kei."

Kaoru embraced the girl, lowering his head to gently kiss her lips. "Thank you for choosing to stay by my side," he whispered.

Kushida watched this scene without blinking.

Just as expected—this guy responds better to soft approaches than forceful ones.

Yet, her feelings were somewhat complicated. She knew this expression and gaze couldn't be faked.

To maintain the act so flawlessly and deceive all of them—Kaoru was simply on another level.

The more she thought about it, the more complex her emotions became.

A burning sensation rose in her stomach, her heart feeling slightly constricted, yet there was also a hint of sweetness.

The next moment, she suddenly felt a tug.

Kaoru pulled Kushida to his side, embracing both girls at once.

"The reason I treated you poorly before was because I didn't care. But now, things have changed. You're both my treasures, and treasures should be cherished. I'm afraid you'll disappear, afraid I'll repeat my mistakes."

Kushida leaned against his chest, the scorching warmth pressed against her cheek.

His fiercely pounding heart felt so intense, his breath brushing against her skin, sending shivers down her spine.

"We won't disappear!"

Karuizawa clung tightly to Kaoru. "Not now, not ever, not in this lifetime!"

She had already resolved to cling to this guy for dear life.

Before, it might have been instinctual—seeking shelter without caring who provided it.

But now, she genuinely believed no one could compare to him.

Kushida didn't share Karuizawa's intensity, but she found his embrace warm and comforting.

And apparently, it was possible to hold two people at once.

"Yeah, I get it."

Kaoru smiled gently. "So, you don't need to tempt me like this. It's starting to feel like our relationship is nothing but an orgy."

Kushida and Karuizawa exchanged a glance, then moved in perfect sync—one covering Kaoru's mouth, the other seizing his weak point.

"Mmph—... Wait, so you weren't actually testing me?"

Kaoru was stunned.

He had assumed the girls felt insecure because of Tachibana Akane's appearance and were trying to please him, seeking reassurance from him.

Turns out, they actually wanted to have an orgy?

Chapter 497: Not a Rumor, But a Fact

Having stayed up too late chatting the night before, Kaoru found himself sleeping in with the girls—a rare occurrence.

Sunlight gradually seeped through the curtains, spreading across the ceiling.

Kushida, assuming he was still asleep, amused herself by toying with the "dragon" in her hand, occasionally giggling softly and muttering under her breath.

Karuizawa clung to his arm like an octopus, her slender leg draped over his thigh.

The slight weight and suffocating pressure made him recall how people with insecurities often slept in such a posture.

Kaoru lowered his gaze to Kushida's delicate face, feeling a stir of excitement.

Her slightly short hair didn't lend her a tomboyish look but instead accentuated her cute, clingy charm.

Loose strands cascaded over her bare shoulders, and her skin glowed under the sunlight, so translucent that the faint red veins beneath were visible.

It looked delicious—tempting enough to take a bite, as if it might taste sweet and soft.

Since it was a single room, she had squeezed in beside him.

The blanket draped over her waist, barely concealing the high, perky curve of her hips, while the plump, tender areas remained exposed to his gaze, still bearing traces of their earlier intimacy.

Unbothered by their proximity, she leaned in close, eyes sparkling with mischief, lips curled in a smug smile as she studied the inhuman part of him with intense focus.

Sharing a bed with multiple women—how many men dreamed of such a scenario? Yet here he was, living it repeatedly.

The serenity and contentment of this moment were something few could achieve, let alone imagine.

"Having fun?" Kaoru asked calmly, watching the girl who was thoroughly enjoying herself.

He suspected this wasn't just a way for her to vent after maintaining a facade for so long—no, she had an insatiable curiosity.

Or perhaps not just curiosity, but desire.

At the sound of his voice, Kushida startled, pausing her movements before slowly lifting her face to meet his gaze.

"Don't blame me! You're the one who kept poking me with this thing—it deserves to be punished!" She spoke with righteous indignation.

She had been sleeping peacefully until something kept prodding her. "You play with me all the time—what's wrong with me playing back?"

"You were begging for mercy last night, and now you're acting all high and mighty. Should we go again?" Kaoru pinched her cheek.

His already vigorous vitality naturally came with certain reactions, and after her teasing, he was more than a little tempted.

"Who wants to keep indulging in this nonsense with you?" Kushida immediately released her grip.

"I'm getting up. Being with you is just annoying."

As she rose, the unrestrained curves of her youthful body came into full view—far more tantalizing than before, the slight sway of her movements surpassing even Karuizawa and Sakayanagi.

Thanks to last night's "battle," she was still wearing her maid outfit.

Frowning slightly, she stripped it off right in front of him.

"I'll draw you a bath," Kaoru said, rising from the bed with practiced nonchalance.

Kushida immediately hooked her arms around his neck from behind, her ample chest pressing against his back.

"Ara~? Master, are you planning to bathe with me?"

"I'll test the water temperature for you." Kaoru said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Hehe, after testing the water, are you going to test my body temperature too?"

Kushida nibbled on his ear, whispering, "You're usually so serious, but at times like this, I know you better than you know yourself."

It wasn't that she was particularly clever—she had simply noticed the dragon standing at full attention, leaving no doubt about its master's current thoughts.

Kaoru didn't seem embarrassed at all, casually covering himself with the blanket.

"It's just a normal morning reaction for men."

"Stop making excuses. It's not like I mind."

Kushida grinned mischievously. "There's something we haven't tried yet. I'll show you later."

Kaoru felt a stir of excitement, but just as the two were discussing what to do, someone grabbed his arm from the side.

"M-me too!" Karuizawa had woken up at some point. "Don't leave me out! That's so mean!"

Still groggy from sleep, the girl's thoughts weren't fully clear, but seeing Kaoru and Kushida whispering to each other made her jealousy flare up instantly.

"Of course we'll bring you along, Kei. Don't worry."

Kaoru patted her head, wondering if he should request a larger dorm room from the school.

Karuizawa whined for a bit before nuzzling against him—his scent was just too comforting.

Meanwhile, Kushida's eyes sparkled with mischief as a wicked idea formed in her mind, her smile widening.

...

After their bath, both Karuizawa and Kushida were blushing furiously, too embarrassed to look at each other.

Kaoru decided against cooking in the dorm—it would take too long—so he took them out for a meal instead, followed by an entire afternoon of fun at the Keyaki Mall.

Though he didn't say it outright, both Kushida and Karuizawa understood what was going on.

Especially when, on their way back, Kushida excused herself to meet a friend, leaving Kaoru and Karuizawa to return alone.

That night, Kaoru didn't do anything to Karuizawa.

He simply held the soft-spoken girl in his arms, listening to her chatter about all sorts of things until she slowly drifted off to sleep.

...

The leisurely weekend passed quickly, and before they knew it, Monday arrived.

Kaoru entered the classroom as usual and took his seat, but something felt off.

The stares from his classmates were more intense and stranger than ever.

Was there something on his face?

"Masumi—"

The moment he spoke, Kamuro shot him a glare so sharp it could cut steel, cutting him off before he could continue.

"Don't ask me. You know exactly what's going on."

Kaoru frowned in thought.

Even when he had clashed with Nagumo and rumors spread about him stealing Nagumo's childhood friend, the atmosphere in class hadn't been this weird.

And now, whispers surrounded him—girls looking at him like he was unrecyclable trash, while the boys gazed at him with a mix of envy and respect, as if he were some kind of god.

"Is this about Kikyo?"

The only thing Kaoru could think of was his date with Kushida.

Kamuro's eyebrow twitched before she let out a deep sigh.

"You really don't bother hiding anything, do you? People have already tracked down everything you've done."

Kaoru was puzzled for a moment before realization struck.

He pulled out his phone and opened the school's anonymous forum—sure enough, a highly discussed thread was at the top.

[First-Year Demon King]

[The Only One in School Playing Gal Games]

[Not Just Targeting Girls in His Grade, Even Seniors Aren't Spared]

[How Far Has School Discipline Fallen? The Culprit Is the Student Council Vice President]

[Juicy Gossip—Love and Cheating]

[First-Years Are Wild]

...

Reading these posts, Kaoru realized he had been too conspicuous lately.

Ichinose, Asahina, Sakayanagi, Tachibana and Kushida—even Karuizawa had made an appearance.

Of course, mere hearsay alone couldn't have sparked such heated discussions.

Someone had compiled the entire saga, listing the girls' names, and only then did everyone learn the full story—how Kaoru was allegedly involved with several girls.

Ichinose was the official girlfriend, Asahina the suspected mistress, Sakayanagi claimed to be his fiancée with an extremely ambiguous relationship, Tachibana was seen confessing to him outside the first-year building, and Kushida was secretly dating him behind Ichinose's back, among other things.

After reading it all, even Kaoru himself thought this guy had way too much luck with women—and an impressively diverse playbook.

Though nothing explicit was written, just imagining it could conjure up an incredibly dramatic romantic comedy.

Some commenters were already gleefully predicting that Kaoru would soon face a "White Album" scenario.

"Heh, how do you feel reading all this?"

Kamuro hoped to see him panicked, regretful, and furious.

"Not bad. But I should add something for them."

Kaoru pondered for a moment before typing on his phone.

"Add what?" Kamuro was puzzled.

Shouldn't he be angry right now?

Kaoru didn't answer. Instead, he kept typing.

Kamuro, as if realizing something, casually pulled out her phone and checked the anonymous forum—only to see what appeared to be Kaoru's reply:

[Oh, it's not just them. From what I know, he has an old flame in his class—Kamuro Masumi. Their relationship is extremely intimate. Masumi once told him, 'Let's get married after graduation!']

Instantly, Kamuro's face flushed red.

When had she ever confessed that to him?!

This bastard was twisting the truth! If anything, he was the one who had confessed to her! What nonsense about getting married after graduation!

"Go die!"

Without hesitation, Kamuro kicked this shameless jerk.

Kaoru, anticipating it, dodged easily—but just as he was about to speak, she predicted his evasion and landed a second kick.

Thud!

The next moment, Kaoru clutched his shin in pain.

This woman had no mercy—she'd really gone all out.

"Did you secretly train for this?"

Gritting his teeth, he glared at her.

Kamuro felt a twinge of guilt—normally, he'd dodge everything, so she'd instinctively upped her guard and taken the chance to strike again.

Who knew he wouldn't evade this time?

"Y-You'd better remember this. Someone like you needs to be taught a lesson."

Of course, Kamuro wouldn't admit the truth.

Instead, she seized the moment to assert dominance. "Who told you to spout nonsense on the forum?"

These posts weren't jokes—they could easily make people look at her differently.

Kamuro felt he should take this more seriously.

Would he really want to see someone flaunting the title of official girlfriend while another is labeled as the other woman?

"I've already contacted the moderators to delete the more disgusting posts." Kaoru grimaced.

Simply deleting all the posts and forbidding everyone from discussing it was impossible.

Even if the forum silenced student discussions, they could still talk about it on other messaging apps.

From a crisis management perspective, the right approach now would be to guide public opinion—such as stopping students from steering the conversation toward malicious speculation, issuing a statement, using paid commentators to muddy the waters, or setting up another more buzzworthy topic.

But these methods weren't necessary here because ANHS was a closed-off school, too small a place to avoid running into people again.

Was he supposed to avoid everyone entirely?

Kaoru had another solution, one that could make full use of his miraculous tool—exceptionally skilled at spreading rumors—[The Midas Touch].

Chapter 498: Nagumo Doesn't Attend Court

His approach wasn't particularly sophisticated.

Blending in, he continued feeding the crowd rumors in a casual tone—names like Kamuro Masumi, Ai Morishita, Miki Yamamura—just from Class A alone, there were enough to start a mahjong game.

After Kaoru enthusiastically listed over a dozen names, some even began urging him to stop spreading rumors, insisting reality couldn't possibly be that exaggerated.

To this, Kaoru refuted them point by point, claiming that even next year's juniors wouldn't escape the clutches of this playboy, because once he became student council president, he'd establish a massive harem.

Some said it was impossible, but Kaoru shot back that just because they couldn't do it didn't mean no one could.

And so, he successfully derailed the conversation—the forum now buzzed about the feasibility of a harem.

Kaoru knew exactly what these people were thinking.

They were just here for the drama, waiting for him to crash and burn, expecting a messy love triangle or a battlefield of jealousy.

It wasn't outright malice, more like schadenfreude.

But just arguing online wasn't enough.

Beyond leveraging [The Midas Touch] to cement his relationships with these girls in everyone's minds, there was no way to completely erase the odd looks from others.

Kaoru could only minimize the fallout—after all, having a harem king in their midst would naturally raise eyebrows.

In other words, Kaoru would delete the nastier comments, keeping the discussion civil.

Of course, not everyone was happy with his methods.

Kamuro was furious, demanding he delete the parts about her immediately.

"Morishita isn't even in a hurry, so why are you?"

In front of her, Kaoru felt no need to save face—she already knew exactly what kind of person he was.

"Besides, Masumi, you're always around me. People might misunderstand anyway, so why not just lay it all out for them?"

Kamuro was livid, but there was nothing she could do.

Too many eyes were on them in the classroom—what if someone actually started teasing them?

Before Kaoru arrived, she had seen a crowd surrounding Sakayanagi, bombarding her with questions about affairs and who the "real" girlfriend was.

Suddenly, Kamuro remembered the sports festival and immediately backed down.

She wasn't used to being the center of attention.

Even so, some people quickly mustered their courage, such as Totsuka Yahiko and others, who approached Kaoru with intense curiosity to confirm the truth.

Kaoru wouldn't deny it—choosing that option in a game would lead straight to a Bad End.

But he couldn't outright admit it either, as that would only provoke everyone and keep the topic burning.

Thus, his answer had to be subtle.

"I'm their backup boyfriend, just waiting for my chance to be promoted."

Kaoru glanced at Sakayanagi. "If you don't believe me, Arisu can vouch for me."

Sakayanagi, who had been enjoying the show, suddenly found herself under everyone's gaze.

She blinked in mild surprise, then smiled. "What would you like me to prove, Kaoru-kun?"

"Do you like me, Arisu?" Kaoru asked.

As the words fell, the classroom atmosphere froze for an instant before erupting into uncontrollable excitement and fervor—an actual live confession!

And the opening line was already a bombshell!

Sakayanagi's smile deepened, her teeth gritting in amusement.

This guy had actually pushed the question onto her.

Whether she admitted it or not, Kaoru had successfully diverted everyone's attention.

"Fufufu, what kind of answer would you like to hear, Kaoru-kun?" Sakayanagi murmured softly.

"If it's Ichinose-san's answer, I can't say it."

Gossip was always something humans relished, especially when it involved a love polygon—even the question of who was the "main wife."

Even Katsuragi grew intrigued!

"I want the answer that would allow me to marry you."

Without a doubt, Sakayanagi was instantly sunk.

This almost cheating play left her unable to continue the topic, because any further response would only descend into petty jealousy.

For example, if she asked, "Aside from me, do you also want to marry Ichinose-san?"

Or if she said, "So you'd rather marry me than Ichinose-san?"

Neither would make a difference—both would look like petty squabbles to onlookers.

Unless Sakayanagi outright rejected Kaoru.

But she doubted even that would stop others from interpreting it as jealousy.

Sakayanagi was starting to regret entering this game so quickly.

...

Even after school, Kaoru noticed the strange looks from students passing by, as if he were some rare panda on display.

He had already messaged Ichinose and the others.

Aside from Tachibana Akane cursing up a storm, the rest told him not to worry about them.

When he arrived at the student council office, Nagumo was still absent, leaving only Tonokawa Sosuke organizing documents.

Ever since Nagumo discovered that everyone was a traitor, he immediately realized the impending reality of being sidelined in the student council.

He had to recruit new allies.

Unsurprisingly, Kaoru had indeed sidelined him.

The core functions of the student council now rested in Kaoru's hands, leaving Nagumo with only two choices: either purge all members or pretend not to notice.

Nagumo didn't purge them outright.

Instead, he made a decision.

He stopped fulfilling his duties as president.

Acting entirely on whim, Nagumo came and went as he pleased, leaving a backlog of work piling up since the start of the semester.

Still, Kaoru could gather the entire student council to petition the school for Nagumo's removal.

But the school would never agree to that—they'd likely just smooth things over.

After all, Nagumo hadn't done anything egregious enough to warrant school intervention in student affairs.

Kaoru greeted Tonokawa before taking the president's seat.

Since Nagumo wasn't here, he naturally had to exercise his vice president's authority and handle the work.

It was just that the original secretary, Tachibana Akane, had been replaced by a man, which made Kaoru feel slightly uncomfortable.

"Tonokawa-senpai, our student council has authority over the school's anonymous forum, right?"

"We do, but normally we—"

"If anyone maliciously attacks me, delete their post immediately and ban them."

Tonokawa obediently shut his mouth.

He, too, knew what the school forum had been discussing lately.

Kaoru wasn't afraid of people discussing things—he was wary of those with ulterior motives.

The malicious comments had to be suppressed with a heavy hand.

The two of them worked for a while longer.

Ichinose and the others were out on a mission, leaving only scattered sounds in the office.

Tonokawa wanted to say something several times but ultimately held back.

He was wondering why Kaoru hadn't brought up the collaboration yet.

Should he be the one to broach the subject now?

It was simple—Kaoru was deliberately keeping him waiting.

This was the so-called "hawk-taming" tactic.

Last time, he had only made Tonokawa think there was room for negotiation.

As Kaoru's advantage grew, that room would gradually shrink until it disappeared entirely.

Not only that, but Kaoru also intended to leverage the situation to pressure him.

He had Sakayanagi Narumori's phone number saved, and now was the perfect time to make the call.

Chapter 499: White Room

"Hello, is this Chairman Sakayanagi?"

As the call connected, Tonokawa froze for a moment, casting a doubtful and suspicious glance at Kaoru, who sat in the president's seat.

Of course, Kaoru showed no change in expression.

A chairman was nothing special to him.

"Is this Mitoma-kun?"

Sakayanagi Narumori was initially surprised but soon chuckled. "Heh, are you calling to request permission to leave campus?"

Kaoru did have that intention.

He needed to step out soon to handle external matters—otherwise, people like Muto Hiromichi and Sato Keisaku would be in trouble.

Additionally, this call served another purpose: sending a signal to Tonokawa.

Not only could Nagumo, the student council president, directly contact the school administration—Kaoru could also reach the chairman himself, further eroding Nagumo's advantage.

If Tonokawa were a little sharper, he might even connect this to the earlier involvement of the Shinomiya Financial Group.

It sounded underhanded, but Kaoru was never one to play fair.

"Yes, I plan to leave campus this week to handle some equity matters." Kaoru stated his reason plainly.

Selling off these shares wasn't something that could be done in a day or two—he intended to tap into his old connections.

If he insisted on holding onto them, the Shinomiya Financial Group would be the first to come after him.

Beside him, Tonokawa looked stunned.

Sakayanagi didn't agree immediately, pausing briefly before responding.

"How many days do you need?"

Kaoru tested the waters. "A weekend?"

"Heh, Mitoma-kun. As chairman, I do have the authority to grant you special privileges, but this would go against the school's traditions. In principle, it's not allowed."

Unexpectedly, Sakayanagi seemed inclined to refuse.

Kaoru frowned but didn't immediately question why this contradicted their earlier discussion.

Instead, he smiled.

"Chairman Sakayanagi, I've always respected the rules. The school's traditions were established by you and your predecessors, and they've earned everyone's trust and care. I have no intention of breaking them—I merely wish to obtain the same opportunity to leave campus as club activities permit. What would it cost?"

Not being allowed to leave was a rule, but so was the principle that Personal Points could buy anything.

Using one rule to counter another should still fall within the rules.

Even though the school had once denied Katsuragi Kouhei's request to leave.

"What do you think would be appropriate?" Sakayanagi asked with clear interest.

Kaoru couldn't quite grasp the chairman's intentions, but years of experience allowed him to instantly discern that something significant must have happened—the other party was trying to protect him.

Leaving the school might seem like an insignificant privilege.

Students were informed before entering ANHS that they would spend their entire high school years there, so normally no one would think to purchase the right to leave campus.

Even if someone requested it, the school would refuse.

However, certain clubs could leverage participation in competitions as an opportunity to leave the school under teacher supervision.

Thus, in the school's eyes, leaving campus wasn't an outright forbidden request.

With valid reasons and teacher accompaniment, approval was often granted.

If a threshold needed to be set, it should be one that deterred most students.

Currently, Class A of the first year received 200,000 Personal Points per month.

"1 million for one day?" Kaoru tested the waters, "And the school could assign a supervising teacher—no one would desert."

The next moment, Sakayanagi Narumori's laughter came through the phone.

"Hehe, just as Arisu described—your reactions are indeed quick. Leaving campus requires legitimate justification; we can't simply make an exception for you alone."

Kaoru pursed his lips.

'You're the troublesome one here. What could've been done quietly now needs a whole new rule.'

"However, 1 million is too little—they won't agree. It needs to start at 2 million at minimum," Sakayanagi continued.

"And the off-campus range must be within Tokyo, with a report submitted to the school."

Kaoru frowned, only to hear another chuckle from the other end.

"Are you thinking how inconvenient this is? That I'm going back on my word?"

"No, not at all. You jest—I was merely considering potential implications."

"Heh, there are none to speak of. Just a tailor-made rule carved out for your sake."

Kaoru was taken aback.

If this wasn't a joke, the favor carried immense weight—a clear indicator of how highly he was regarded.

"Pressure is being applied from certain quarters. Even if you hadn't called, I would've contacted you eventually," Sakayanagi sighed. "I'll soon be taking leave, likely with someone replacing me as acting chairman next month."

Understanding dawned on Kaoru.

Sakayanagi was being forced to relinquish his position and couldn't uphold prior promises—hence rushing to carve this backdoor into school regulations before departing.

"Might I ask what happened?" Kaoru was perplexed.

After finally establishing this connection with Sakayanagi, it was about to vanish.

Expecting reticence, he was surprised when Sakayanagi hesitated only briefly before resolving to speak.

"Has Arisu ever mentioned the White Room to you?"

At the mention of the White Room, Kaoru realized trouble was brewing.

His gaze instinctively shifted to Tonokawa, who immediately grasped the cue and discreetly exited the office.

This was a significant signal, though Kaoru didn't dwell on it.

Only when alone did he inquire further.

The root lay with Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

His father had visited the school last December demanding his withdrawal—a request Sakayanagi had refused.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was an unusual high school student—he was a product of the White Room, and his father was none other than its creator.

Through Sakayanagi's words, Kaoru came to fully understand the nature of the White Room for the first time.

Over a decade ago, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka's father, Ayanokoji Atsuomi, proposed an idea: since Japanese society had a significant problem with abandoned and unwanted children, why not have the government take them in and educate them?

The plan was rejected by the government, forcing Ayanokoji Atsuomi to aggressively pitch it to politicians and capitalists instead.

By taking in their illegitimate children in exchange for financial support, he secretly carried out the White Room project underground.

Chapter 500: Explanation

At the time, Sakayanagi Narumori had believed they were kindred spirits.

But looking back now, he realized the plan was likely far more complex than it appeared on the surface.

From what he knew, Ayanokoji Atsuomi had been subordinate to a certain political faction.

Later, due to conflicts and pressure from his superiors, the White Room was temporarily shut down.

During its operation, the White Room had taken in many children of politicians and capitalists.

Once they reached adulthood, these children could influence their fathers.

Of course, this was a behind-the-scenes secret—never openly acknowledged.

Sakayanagi Narumori could only speculate.

In the beginning, naturally, few people trusted the White Room.

As a result, it had to rely on abandoned infants, gradually refining its methods through trial and error.

The so-called "experience" was benchmarked against elite education, aiming to cultivate children who surpassed elite standards in every way—thereby attracting the support of politicians and capitalists.

Sakayanagi had once visited the White Room and reviewed some of its records.

He found Ayanokoji Atsuomi's methods for handling children utterly ruthless.

Practices like "cry-it-out" training—something even modern Western societies would find appalling—were used on these children without hesitation.

The goal was to strip away their emotions, preserve their rationality, and force-feed them knowledge far beyond their age.

By two or three years old, they could solve elementary-level math problems.

Children who failed to meet expectations were punished.

Only the top performer received rewards—all to instill an obsession with being first.

To convince politicians and capitalists of the White Room's effectiveness, Ayanokoji Atsuomi even threw his own newborn child into the program, subjecting him to the harshest training standard—dubbed the "β Curriculum," a superhuman regimen.

What exactly did it mean to surpass humanity?

Sakayanagi Narumori recounted that Ayanokoji Kiyotaka could solve high school-level math problems independently by age seven.

By nine, he had defeated seven or eight instructors in hand-to-hand combat.

Out of over seventy children in his cohort, he was the only one left in the end.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was the White Room's greatest masterpiece to date—so much so that even Ayanokoji Atsuomi could no longer gauge the extent of his abilities or design further curriculum for him.

When the White Room was shut down, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka followed the adults into the outside world—only to slip away unnoticed by his father.

After wandering for a year, he submitted his profile to an elite school, passed the entrance exam, and enrolled.

Now, of course, Ayanokoji Atsuomi had come knocking—demanding that Sakayanagi Narumori hand over his son.

Sakayanagi Narumori refused to let Kiyotaka go.

He felt that Ayanokoji Kiyotaka had suffered too much in the White Room, deprived of a normal life, and wanted him to stay at ANHS to experience more of what ordinary life had to offer.

Thus, Ayanokoji Atsuomi began mobilizing his connections to pressure Sakayanagi Narumori, intending to install his own proxy as chairman and expel Ayanokoji Kiyotaka from the school within its rules.

Hearing all this, Kaoru had only one thought—utter nonsense.

In Kaoru's eyes, this so-called White Room seemed like pure fantasy.

Forget about adopting abandoned infants—the Japan he knew wouldn't even bother with such things.

The survival of Ayanokoji Atsuomi's White Room likely relied on the backing of certain wealthy individuals, helping them take in children who couldn't be acknowledged publicly.

If any of them showed talent, those benefactors wouldn't mind restoring their status as legitimate heirs.

The neon world has no concept of a legitimate firstborn; as long as one possesses talent, they don't even care about blood ties.

Even a son-in-law can inherit the family business, as long as they can preserve it.

Kaoru pondered that Ayanokoji Atsuomi was likely a subordinate of someone, and he probably had the other party's hints.

With the connection of having children, they could help each other in the future and become a source of support.

As for the White Room's curriculum, aside from being fanciful, Kaoru had to add one more thing.

Insane.

The educational experiments aimed at young children weren't exclusive to the White Room; across the ocean in the last century, it was even more deranged, ultimately ending in dismal failure.

Not to mention its reliability, just the psychological issues of children alone made Kaoru question whether the White Room was running a pyramid scheme, as it perfectly aligned with parents' psychology regarding their children.

As long as they teach diligently, the children will surely learn; if they don't, it's the child's fault.

Moreover, the methods employed by the White Room to deal with children were as simple and brutal as dog training, with punishments for mistakes.

The only difference was that when a child did something right, there was no guarantee of a reward; it was taken for granted.

The so-called greatest masterpiece was filled with the unique one-sidedness of the neon people, sacrificing a heap of manpower and resources to create something they believed could end everything, which in the past was called a "one-man charge," and in modern times, the "Ultimate Decisive Weapon."

Sacrificing dozens, even hundreds of children, to produce a single greatest masterpiece nearly made Kaoru laugh in anger.

However, despite his disdain, Kaoru held a significant regard for Ayanokoji Atsuomi.

Being able to have Ayanokoji Kiyotaka defeat a bunch of instructors with the strength of a child likely indicated some capability.

Furthermore, under pressure from his superiors, the fact that Ayanokoji Atsuomi could regain momentum and even force Sakayanagi Narumori to step down was undeniably impressive.

Not only Ayanokoji Atsuomi, but Sakayanagi Narumori's current attitude was also somewhat intriguing.

As a chairman, he actually shared this matter with a student.

Although Kaoru held the identity of the Shinomiya Financial Group at this moment, it felt too polite to say so; clearly, he was being treated as an equal conversational partner.

When they first met, he did not have the identity of the Shinomiya Financial Group.

"Excuse me, Chairman Sakayanagi, does Ayanokoji-san currently hold significant influence?"

To be able to push Sakayanagi Narumori off the stage, Kaoru felt that it wasn't solely Ayanokoji Atsuomi's achievement; there might be other reasons involved.