

Cote 511

Chapter 511: How Should I Pose?

Even with the [Emotion Perception], Kaoru was still utterly confused about the girl's feelings.

Suddenly handing him the camera and telling him to take the photos himself?

It seemed Airi was genuinely angry.

Kaoru hesitated, not voicing his thoughts as freely as before—he didn't want to risk upsetting her further.

Kaoru fiddled with the digital camera; it had been a while since he'd handled such equipment.

Then, he saw the photos Airi had just taken.

The poses were slightly bolder than her usual style, not deliberately cute or innocent, but subtly flaunting her figure—plump thighs, perky chest, and snow-white skin—undeniably highlighting her striking beauty.

Even without overtly seductive poses, just sitting on the chair, her stunning figure was alluring enough.

And in the last few photos, she playfully lifted her skirt, as if teasing the viewer's gaze.

Noticing he had paused for a moment, Airi suddenly realized what he was looking at and let out a soft "Eep!", her cheeks turning cherry-red.

Clearly, she knew he had seen the photos.

Her small hands clutched her skirt nervously, her face burning as she stared at him. Despite her shyness, she didn't stop him from continuing.

Shy as she was, Airi was eager to know Kaoru's thoughts.

How would he feel seeing these photos? Would he remember what had happened between them before?

If Kaoru told her now that he wanted her to send him more photos like this in the future, she knew she wouldn't be able to refuse—she might even go further.

Airi's blush spread to her ears. How shameless of her to imagine such things!

Besides, Kaoru had a girlfriend. Wasn't she acting like she was trying to seduce him? Airi began to feel disheartened.

But she needed to clarify one thing: Had Kaoru ever liked her?

If not, why would he harass her with an alt account?

Strange thoughts swirled in her mind, followed by worry. What if Kaoru really did like her? What should she do then?

She probably couldn't compete with Honami Ichinose. And Kaoru had admitted to having multiple girlfriends—could she handle that alone?

Her chaotic thoughts eventually led to one possibility:

Kaoru inviting her to join his harem.

"T-That's just too much... I'm doomed..."

"Airi?"

"N-No, I'll give you my answer tomorrow!"

For some reason, Airi was flustered, waving her hands frantically. Kaoru had no choice but to flick her forehead to snap her out of it.

"What are you even saying?"

Airi clutched her head with a soft "Ouch!" and stared at him, finally realizing she'd said something she shouldn't have.

"Did you... like them?" she asked cautiously.

"They're nice, but something's missing," Kaoru replied. "Let's take some outside."

"Eh? Outside?" Airi suddenly flushed bright red, her pretty face burning. "No, absolutely not! I can only take photos for you to see!"

This was terrible—she never expected him to have such tastes!

"Why not? The scenery outside would be even better, wouldn't it?" Kaoru looked at her strangely.

"Of course not! There are so many people outside... I... I could never!" Airi was both embarrassed and frustrated.

Just asking Kaoru to take photos of her had already taken all the courage she could muster in her entire life—how could she possibly agree to pose outside?

"No, no, I meant taking you to the rooftop. You can capture a much wider view from up there," Kaoru explained. "Taking photos by the window here is too limiting. There are more angles up top."

Airi froze.

So... he wasn't asking to photograph her, but the scenery?

Noticing her confusion, Kaoru added, "I have the key to the rooftop, so you don't need to worry about that."

He thought this would cheer her up, but instead, the girl puffed up her cheeks in anger.

"No scenery shots allowed!" Airi snapped. "Right now, you can only take photos of me—and they have to be... risqué ones!"

Now it was Kaoru's turn to be stunned. This was the first time he'd seen Airi this furious.

Of course she was angry!

She had dropped so many hints, and Kaoru had even seen her selfies—yet he showed no reaction at all and was only interested in the background scenery.

Before, he would've outright demanded her selfies and even forced her to take suggestive photos!

On top of that, Kaoru had been secretly dating Ichinose—and who knew how many other girls—while leaving her untouched.

This only made Airi feel even more wronged.

"What do you mean by 'risqué photos'?" Kaoru's initial intrigue quickly gave way to suspicion as he frowned and eyed her warily.

"Did someone ask you to take those kinds of pictures?"

Though his stern tone made Airi instinctively shrink back in fear and unease, knowing he was concerned for her melted away most of her earlier anger.

"N-No... I... I wanted to take them myself... but I couldn't get them right, so I wanted Kaoru to help me."

A small flicker of happiness sparked in her chest—he still cared about her.

"I'll only send them to you. No matter who asks, I won't give them to anyone else."

"But taking those kinds of photos..." Kaoru's expression turned odd.

Should he try to talk her out of it?

"I-I just want to document myself, that's all!" Airi blushed furiously, scrambling for a flimsy excuse.

"D-Don't ask any more questions! Just help me take them, no matter what!"

Truthfully, Kaoru was more than happy to oblige the girl's request.

But at the same time, he was genuinely worried about Airi's state of mind.

Was this because of his influence?

Kaoru couldn't be sure. But since Airi had come to him for help, he decided to play along for now, observing her reactions to figure out what was really going on.

"Fine. But what kind of photos do you want?"

Even with "risqué" photos, there were still questions—what outfit to wear, what poses to strike, what angles to use.

These were all worth considering.

This stumped Airi as well. She racked her brain for a while, but unfortunately, she had no prior experience with this kind of thing.

"If nothing else works, then just—"

"U-Um... down there!" Airi Sakura interrupted Kaoru, her face flushed red, "You can take pictures of my lower half, my chest too, whatever you want to shoot, I'll do it all!"

Kaoru nearly dropped the camera.

Watching her grip her skirt, her entire demeanor radiating shyness, he even briefly wondered if she was deliberately trying to seduce him.

"Airi?"

"I... I'm Shizuku-chan now... s-so I'll do my best to cooperate. You can do anything you want with your idol..."

Then, Airi added in a whisper, "B-but only for you, as a fan... don't get the wrong idea..."

At this point, Kaoru quickly realized—the girl wasn't repulsed by discovering his secret account. Instead, she was trying her hardest to accept him.

In Airi's eyes, he was probably just an extreme fan—someone who wore a polite mask in public but obsessed over her in private.

Kaoru opened his mouth slightly, then closed it again.

Well... he couldn't exactly argue with that.

The only puzzling part was that despite knowing his identity, Airi had chosen to accept him.

"Airi is Airi. Shizuku-chan is just a persona," Kaoru said softly. "I was never Shizuku-chan's fan to begin with. Compared to Shizuku-chan, I like Airi more. I'm your fan."

Halfway through his words, Airi's eyes had already widened.

By the time he finished, the girl was completely at a loss.

Her heart had never pounded this fast or this violently before—it felt like all the blood in her body was boiling, her mind going blank as she stared at him in a daze.

The next moment, the sound of a camera shutter suddenly snapped her back to reality.

Kaoru was holding up his camera with a mischievous grin—he'd clearly captured her previous expression.

"W-wait, no! Don't take that!"

"That's not what you said earlier. Besides, I'm taking photos of you right now, not Saku-chan."

"Guh..."

At this moment, Airi felt this was the most embarrassing time of her life.

Yet, despite the humiliation, she inexplicably felt an overwhelming joy that made her almost unable to contain her excitement.

Her heartbeat was so loud it drowned out her thoughts.

"Airi, can you lift your skirt now?"

Airi stiffened, seeing Kaoru holding the camera with a serious expression, his gaze alternating between her lower half and her chest—clearly up to no good.

Normally, under such a lewd stare, Airi would have bolted immediately.

But the situation was different now. She had willingly allowed Kaoru to look at her this way, so she had no reason to run.

Biting her lip tightly, Airi's cheeks burned crimson with shame.

Her hands, which had been clutching her skirt, gradually lifted the hem under the lens of his camera, revealing plump, fair thighs.

The smooth, delicate inner thighs pressed together slightly, fleshy and soft, as she slowly exposed the color he had glimpsed earlier.

The more aware she became of her actions, the more she wanted to flee, her heart racing wildly.

Never in her past had she imagined she would strike such a shameless pose before a man—before a camera.

Click—click—

Despite the shutter sounds, he didn't tell her to stop.

Airi could only endure the intense humiliation and continue raising her skirt.

No—rather than lifting it, it was more like she was exposing herself completely, like an exhibitionist. Even her lower belly was now visible.

"Uuu..." Airi regretted it deeply.

She should have chosen a different method—this was far too humiliating!

Yet, even as she thought this, she failed to realize another issue: she felt only pure shame, not the slightest reluctance to let Kaoru see her this way, nor any objection to him taking these risqué photos.

The girl even recalled Kaoru's earlier words to her, growing anxious as she pondered how best to satisfy him.

Chapter 512: Too Much to Bear.

Watching the blush on her face, Kaoru felt a stir in his heart—especially seeing her endure the shame, refusing to give up despite the embarrassment, and striving to cooperate with him.

So, Kaoru let out a relieved sigh.

It seemed Airi hadn't fallen into depravity.

Since she wasn't planning to post them online, combined with her earlier words, Kaoru could mostly confirm her intentions.

Kaoru didn't plan to break the mood right away.

After Tachibana Akane, Ichinose had told him his approach was flawed—even if a girl liked him, no one would agree immediately under such circumstances.

Because his current situation wasn't like normal romance. In a typical mutual affection, the sooner the truth was revealed, the better. But he had to consider them.

For a girl, accepting him meant accepting them—a decision requiring immense resolve.

Still, it was going too far.

Kaoru decided to teach her a small lesson.

"Airi, you've never taken photos like this before, have you?"

Airi shook her head with a flushed face. T

here was no way she had ever taken such indecent photos before.

Even disregarding whether she had or hadn't, just facing Kaoru's camera made her cheeks burn as if on fire, her entire body stiffening so much she didn't know where to place her hands.

Her fingers trembled slightly, and her legs were pressed tightly together, as though that could block Kaoru's gaze—but it was futile.

Her skirt was hiked up high, revealing her pale, soft belly, even the slight dip of her navel visible.

The slender, healthy lines of her skin curved downward, undeniable proof of the girl's delicate youth and vitality. It was as if her little belly contained boundless life energy, making one want to reach out and pat it.

From Kaoru's perspective, Airi Sakura had clearly never done this kind of photoshoot before—she was far too nervous.

Her movements were stiff, her poses not seductive enough, too inexperienced.

And yet, precisely because of that, she was more alluring than a professional model right now.

Even though she had been the one to suggest this, she unconsciously carried herself like someone being bullied by Kaoru, her eyes glistening with pitiful tears.

She didn't dare lift her head, much less look at him, her gaze shifting slightly to the side as if she were a small animal helplessly submitting to a man's teasing.

Kaoru took a deep breath, suppressing the restlessness inside him.

Truthfully, a pretty girl could be enticing just by standing still. He felt Airi Sakura could easily make a living off her looks alone.

"Hike your skirt up a little more, then lean against the table," Kaoru ordered.

Airi recalled the times she had posed for photo collections before. It seemed she had been directed like this by photographers then too—but this time was different.

It wasn't as if she had never hiked up her skirt before.

Like a trendy girl such as Karuizawa, she had secretly tried it a few times in private. But the results had been too indecent, so she had stopped.

In front of Kaoru, Airi felt for the first time just how embarrassing this action was.

Just tucking her skirt into her waistband had already thrown her into a flustered mess, her heart pounding so fast it felt like it might explode.

Once she had adjusted her skirt, Kaoru moved closer, crouching beneath her with his camera raised.

The distance between them was so small now that she could practically see his gaze through the lens.

"W-Wah!"

Airi instinctively covered her skirt. "W-Wait, I'm not ready yet!"

"It's fine, Airi. It's no different from the photos we took earlier," Kaoru said matter-of-factly. "And if we can't even get this shot, what about the more extreme ones later? How are we supposed to take those?"

'T-This was too much!' Airi's eyes welled up with tears.

She wanted to call the whole thing off now.

"We need to shoot the front, and the back too."

"Uuuu..."

"After the lower half, we'll do your chest."

"Aah!"

Airi crouched on the ground, clutching her chest tightly, her head lowered like an ostrich's.

"N-No more... uuu..."

Kaoru lowered his camera, unable to hold back a laugh.

"You can't handle even this?"

Of course she couldn't! Airi had never been good at facing other people's cameras to begin with, let alone taking photos like these.

She was already regretting her earlier impulsiveness.

"I-I-I need to think about it... T-tomorrow... I'll take the photos tomorrow... N-no no no... I-I'll take them myself and show you..."

Airi stole a glance at his expression. If she could just send him the photos like before, she felt she might barely be able to handle it.

"You're going to send me lewd photos?" Kaoru asked with evident interest.

Airi lowered her head again, closing her mouth like a naughty child.

"Airi showing me lewd photos would indeed make me happy," Kaoru said gently, "but being happy doesn't mean it's the right thing to do."

"I like Airi and want to be friends with you, not because I'm lusting after your appearance or constantly thinking indecent thoughts. I don't want Airi to have that kind of impression of me either. What I want is the Airi who can happily chat with me normally."

As if something had touched her, Airi's shoulders trembled slightly. She raised her head, her eyes misty as she looked at Kaoru.

Sometimes she would lose herself in her own world.

More often, she felt an overwhelming loneliness—ever since elementary school, she'd been taking care of the entire world alone, deceiving herself into keeping everyone at a distance.

She remembered the camera her father had given her, the words the talent scout had said, the countless times she'd secretly listened to her classmates' laughter.

"I... I'm sorry..." Airi spoke haltingly, "B-because you have a girlfriend now... so... so I thought maybe you'd abandoned me... forgotten about me... I don't want you to go to someone else, I want to play with you... I-I-I..."

Kaoru was momentarily stunned.

Looking at the girl before him, he realized for the first time how much she'd come to depend on him emotionally.

"B-being with you makes me really happy. You tell me so many stories—about the entertainment industry, teaching me photography, comforting me, showing me how to handle fans... You always praise the photos I send you. You helped me during the sports festival too, inviting me to join your group. I was so happy because you cared about me, worried about my grades. And I understand why you wanted me to be friends with Koko-chan and the others. I really, really didn't know what to do."

Growing more emotional as she spoke, Airi grabbed Kaoru's arm, clutching tightly at this first real friend she'd ever made.

"I... I know you have strange thoughts about me, that's why I thought of doing this... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to make you angry..."

Kaoru felt something cool drip onto his arm.

The girl seemed to want to say more, racking her brains to properly express what was in her heart.

"Actually I—"

"I'm not angry."

Kaoru embraced Airi, cutting off her words. "Not noticing your feelings sooner was my fault. Drawing you out of your world only to neglect you—in the end, I was only thinking about my own wishes."

Airi was stiff at first, then gradually relaxed, trembling slightly in his arms as if crying.

Chapter 513: Cannot Be Taken Back

Holding Airi like this for the first time, Kaoru was surprised to realize how small she was.

So small that she seemed to melt into his embrace, his arms wrapping snugly around her waist as if to keep her from escaping.

He could even feel the rhythm of her heartbeat, the faint tremble of her shoulders, and the muffled whimpers rising from her throat.

Perhaps one day in the future, the girl would no longer feel such emotions.

As Kaoru reflected on their journey from their first meeting until now, even he hadn't fully grasped the impact he'd had on her.

Nor had he ever imagined she would harbor such intense possessiveness toward him—something that could no longer be explained by mere friendship.

Gently stroking Airi's back, Kaoru pondered what to say next.

"Airi."

He felt her shift slightly in his arms. "I'm not leaving. I won't ever leave. Even if I have Honami and the others, I'll always be by your side. You can come to me anytime."

Airi let out a soft "Mm," then whispered, "You... you said you liked me earlier... What did that mean?"

What she really wanted to ask was why he had hugged her.

Now that she'd regained her senses, she found his embrace warm and comforting—something she liked very much.

But she was too shy to ask, let alone push him away.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Kaoru replied. "Just like how everyone enjoys sweet things, that's how I feel about you, Airi."

Airi didn't quite understand, but she clearly heard the word "like," making her blush even harder. Fidgeting, she asked in a daze.

"What about Ichinose?"

It felt like a scripted exchange by now. Kaoru answered without hesitation, "The same, yet different."

"Huh?"

Airi lifted her head, staring at him in confusion, her eyes still glistening with traces of tears.

"My feelings for you are the same. Even the reasons I first approached and grew to like you are nearly identical." Kaoru brushed away her tears with his fingertips. "But the experiences and emotions I share with you are different from those with her. Those unique moments are what make my feelings for each of you both the same and distinct."

Airi finally understood, her cheeks burning.

So he really had been eyeing her all along!

In other words, Kaoru intended to make his move on her too.

Her earlier wild thoughts had come true—Kaoru was inviting her into his harem.

What should she do? What was the right response now?

"Airi."

"Eek! Y-yes?!"

Bracing herself for a confession, Airi tensed up, staring at him without blinking, barely daring to breathe.

"Being with you makes me happy."

"M-me too..."

"Did you enjoy today's gathering?"

"W-well... a little... Kaka and Miki were really nice..."

"That's enough."

Kaoru patted her head. "We still have a long time until graduation. Plenty of opportunities to get to know each other, grow closer, and understand one another—slowly enjoying a wonderful, happy high school life together."

Airi blinked in surprise.

'Wait... that wasn't a confession?'

However, instead of feeling lost, she didn't have that urgent and tense sensation from earlier anymore.

It was as if she had let out a sigh of relief, her whole body going limp as she leaned into his embrace, basking in his warmth.

If Kaoru were to confess to her, she probably wouldn't make up her mind right away—she might even reject him.

"Is this enough?" Airi Sakura murmured to herself.

"It's enough. I originally hoped you could have a high school life different from your middle school days, Airi. Don't always stay alone—sometimes, you should experience a different world too."

Kaoru smiled faintly, teasing her a little. "Actually, I think you could tell others about your photography. Kaka and Miki might be willing to be your models."

Airi Sakura's face flushed bright red in an instant.

As if trying to hide her burning cheeks, she buried her face in his chest.

"N-no, stop talking about it... Ugh... Forget it... Just forget what just happened..."

"Too late. Any normal man would remember this for the rest of his life."

Kaoru patted her perky little bottom. "If you don't get up soon, I won't be able to hold back. You know very well what happens when a man loses control, right?"

In an instant, Airi sprang away from Kaoru like a released coil, flustered and nearly knocking into the nearby table.

Only when she saw Kaoru's amused smirk did she realize—she had been tricked by him again!

"Hmph!"

Airi Sakura puffed out her cheeks, making it seem as though she was easy to tease.

But in truth, she wasn't actually afraid of the so-called "consequences."

Kaoru froze for a moment—not because of her expression, but because of the problematic angle now.

As the girl stood up, towering over Kaoru from above, the hem of her skirt was now exposed.

Unlike the earlier photo shoot, she hadn't intentionally exposed this area.

It was simply because her rolled-up skirt had become too short, and from Kaoru's crouched position on the ground, he happened to catch a glimpse of the maiden's scenery.

Compared to deliberate exposure, this accidental view was even more tantalizing—especially with her wearing white thigh-high socks that accentuated her slender, straight calves, plump and fair thighs, and even the subtle curve of her hips.

For a moment, Kaoru wasn't sure whether he should look away.

"Are we... going to stay friends from now on?" Airi Sakura didn't realize she was exposing herself.

She was preoccupied with his earlier words.

Staying friends felt frustrating in a way, yet also strangely comforting.

If possible, she wanted to be more than just an ordinary friend—preferably the most special one in Kaoru's life.

As for being his girlfriend... Airi felt she couldn't compete with Ichinose and the others, so she resigned herself to this.

"Aren't we already friends now?"

"I mean in the future."

"In the future, you'll have even more friends. You'll meet so many new people."

"I... I don't want that! You said this was enough, so having you and Kaka-chan and the others is all I need."

"But Airi, didn't you say you wanted to be an idol? If you're going into the entertainment industry, you'll have to—"

"This is enough!"

For the first time, Airi raised her voice. "Do I really have to meet so many people? If Kaoru is going to leave me, then I don't want to be an idol anymore!"

Kaoru was stunned.

It felt like he was seeing a familiar scene replay before him, stirring a powerful thought in his mind once again.

"Ahem... I—I just want... to be with you. With all of you!"

Airi grew emotional. "I care about you, Kaoru. So I want you to treat me as someone special too—even just a little bit is enough..."

As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized what she had said and flushed crimson.

A brief silence hung between them before Kaoru suddenly chuckled.

"I get it now. Honestly, I already think we're pretty special. I'm the only one who knows Airi is Shizuku-chan, and you just invited me to take... those kinds of photos. I don't think I'll ever forget that."

Airi was both embarrassed and annoyed.

Why was he bringing that up again?

The next moment, Kaoru stood up and, to her shock, gently kissed her.

"I think this is what makes us special."

He murmured softly, "And... this is my selfish wish for you, Airi."

"Uhh... uh..."

Steam might as well have been rising from Airi's head—her brain had completely short-circuited.

"If you don't like it, I can take it back."

"T-taking it back now... is... is punishable by death... sexual harassment..."

"..."

Chapter 514: You Dare Hit Me?

In the end, he couldn't resist.

On their way back, Kaoru kept reflecting on his actions while pretending not to hear whatever Airi was muttering beside him.

Earlier, he had tactfully suggested she adjust her skirt, and she had finally punched him—with no less force than anyone else could muster.

Now, Airi was clutching her skirt tightly, terrified of accidentally exposing herself again, her gaze full of wariness as she glared at Kaoru.

Though she was the one who took the initiative to invite him—an act that could be called bold and audacious—she now stared at Kaoru as if he were a criminal, leaving one at a loss for words.

After leaving the special teaching building, Kaoru glanced at the sky.

It was nearly evening, and few figures could be seen on the road.

"Airi, I think even Karuizawa and the others would be interested in your photography."

Worried that Sakura Airi might misunderstand his words, Kaoru added, "Scenery like this—I think they'd like it too."

Airi was always running around alone with her camera.

After the incident with the shop clerk and now with Haruki Yamauchi popping up recently, Kaoru felt it was dangerous for her to continue like this.

If it were anyone else, he wouldn't be so concerned, but the problem was that Airi's personality made her inherently bad at handling such situations.

"I... I understand."

Airi didn't seem as resistant anymore. "Will... Kaoru come too?"

"I'll drop by when I'm free. Besides, the student council won't have as much work in a few days."

Kaoru couldn't help but think of Nagumo Miyabi.

Rumor had it he was recruiting new members and had even set his sights on Kiryuin Fūka.

Airi felt a little happy and followed behind him.

Though they were the same age, his back inexplicably gave off a tall, imposing presence.

His slightly slender shoulders carried a youthful air, and as she slowly matched his pace, she could secretly steal glances at his profile—the sharp, masculine line of his jaw, the Adam's apple brimming with masculine hormones—everything made Airi's heart race.

Before she knew it, Airi found herself staring at his hands—knuckles distinct, fingers slender and long—stirring a restless feeling within her.

Kaoru was completely unaware.

He thought he was the one with improper thoughts about Airi, but in truth, Airi harbored the same improper thoughts about him.

"Wh-why are you two together?!"

Someone suddenly shouted.

Airi flinched and quickly hid behind Kaoru, timidly peeking out to see that it was Haruki Yamauchi.

"Damn it, don't you already have a girlfriend?!"

Haruki Yamauchi glared at Kaoru with a fierce but hollow expression.

"If you keep bothering Sakura, I-I'll tell her right away!"

That said, Haruki Yamauchi was panicking.

He hadn't been able to catch up to Airi earlier and had lost sight of her on the road.

Only after asking a few passersby did he barely manage to figure out where she had gone.

To his shock, the moment he arrived, he saw Kaoru leading Airi out of the special teaching building—especially with Airi blushing furiously and clutching her skirt.

At that moment, Haruki Yamauchi, who was already prone to wild imagination, immediately conjured up countless scenarios in his mind, his face turning pale.

"Tell Honami?" Kaoru looked puzzled. "Are we even close to you?"

Haruki Yamauchi wasn't actually planning to tell Ichinose—he didn't even dare approach such an overwhelmingly popular girl.

The reason he brought it up was to warn Airi that this guy was a scumbag with a girlfriend.

There were already rumors in class about him being involved with Karuizawa and Kushida.

"N-none of your business! Sakura and I are good friends, you know!" Haruki Yamauchi's expression softened a bit.

In his imagination, his relationship with Airi was naturally quite good—they often managed to converse.

Moreover, he was even planning to confess his feelings to Airi.

Even if it wasn't mutual affection, at the very least, they were in that ambiguous "more than friends, less than lovers" stage!

Thinking this, Haruki Yamauchi urgently looked toward Airi Sakura, who was hiding behind Kaoru, and said anxiously.

"Sakura, this guy is dangerous! Come over here quickly—I'll hold him off!"

Though he didn't know what was going on, Haruki didn't want to dwell on it too deeply.

In fact, he even suspected that Kaoru might be threatening Airi.

After all, Airi's figure was so indecently alluring—if he were in Kaoru's place, he'd definitely seize some leverage over her and have his way with her.

Kaoru stayed silent for a moment.

Though he had anticipated this, the way some people perceived his reputation was downright exaggerated.

Haruki Yamauchi saw himself as the heroic savior, rescuing his princess from the clutches of the harem tyrant, Kaoru.

There was no helping it—if he didn't hype himself up like this, Haruki might have turned tail and fled immediately, surrendering his woman without a fight.

However, Airi ignored him.

Instead, she recalled what Kaoru had said earlier, her eyes widening slightly in surprise.

So this was the suspicious person he had mentioned—Haruki Yamauchi?

"What's wrong, Sakura? Hurry up and come here! He already has a girlfriend, and he's constantly flirting with other girls, you know?"

Haruki tried to warn Airi further, but instead of the reaction he hoped for, she completely hid herself away, not even sparing him a glance.

"You care about Airi that much?" Kaoru smirked faintly.

"O-of course! We're friends! We make eye contact in class every day, and we talk all the time!"

Haruki Yamauchi lied without batting an eye or blushing—or perhaps he had even convinced himself it was true.

Airi tugged lightly at Kaoru's sleeve and whispered in protest, "L-lies... I've never... even spoken to him..."

"If you're friends, then what do you like about Airi?" Kaoru asked calmly.

Haruki instinctively thought of her enormous breasts.

To be honest, aside from her being a gloomy girl with glasses, those were the only thing that left an impression on him about Airi.

But of course, he couldn't just say that outright. He stammered for a while before finally blurting out.

"A-are you even friends with Sakura?"

"Yeah, of course I am." Kaoru answered matter-of-factly.

"Oh ho? Then what do you like about Airi?"

Haruki retorted smugly. "You're just after her body, aren't you? Guys like you—popular, playboy types—I've seen plenty. You get bored with one girl and move on to the next. What, Ichinose's chest not enough for you anymore?"

Kaoru stared at him for a moment before suddenly stepping forward.

It happened so abruptly that even Airi didn't react in time.

In an instant, Haruki's face paled with fear.

Realizing something was wrong, he turned to run—only to feel someone grab his shoulder before he could take a single step.

"W-wait! If you lay a hand on me, I'll report you to the school! Violence and bullying are strictly forbidden!"

When Kaoru raised his fist, Haruki Yamauchi nearly lost his footing.

He didn't have Sudou's physique—aside from boasting, he was just your typical underachieving student.

But when Kaoru stopped, Yamauchi thought there might still be a way out.

"Go ahead, hit me if you dare! I'll make sure you get expelled!"

Yamauchi wore a smug expression, as if victory was already his.

Thud!

Kaoru punched him, leaving his face bruised and his vision blacking out.

Yamauchi couldn't believe it—had he actually struck him?

"You bastard! You're dead! I swear, you're getting expelled for this!"

"I am the student council."

Kaoru said calmly, "There are no cameras here, no witnesses. What exactly do you expect me to investigate?"

Yamauchi froze, only to take another punch.

His earlier confidence turned to terror as he tried to fight back, but Kaoru easily overpowered him.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

After taking over a dozen hits, Yamauchi finally begged for mercy.

When Kaoru asked why he was here, he hesitated before finally confessing.

"I-I wanted to confess to Sakura... I wanted her to be my girlfriend, so I couldn't help but follow her."

Airi, who had been stunned by Kaoru's violence, slowly snapped out of it and stared at Yamauchi in disbelief.

How could he possibly like me?

"What exactly do you like about Airi?" Kaoru threatened him with his fist.

Yamauchi stammered, "H-her... chest! Don't let the glasses fool you—she's definitely got a dirty side, and her body's top-tier!"

As he spoke, he grew more and more excited.

Kaoru punched him again and said flatly, "Just admit you're a pervert. What makes you think Airi would ever accept your confession?"

Yamauchi shot Kaoru a resentful glare.

Of course a normie like him wouldn't understand.

"I-I could never compare to someone like you! You can have Sakura!"

Yamauchi groveled, "There's another girl in our class, Hasebe—she's just as dirty as Sakura! I'm close with her! If you let me go, I can set her up with you! You can do whatever you want with her!"

Kaoru suddenly lost all desire to hit him.

Yamauchi was nothing but a compulsive liar.

Sure, teenage boys often had some twisted thoughts, but someone as rotten as him was rare.

"Get lost."

Too disgusted to bother with him, Kaoru simply let him go.

Yamauchi blinked, then scrambled away in a mix of terror and relief.

After running for a while, he glanced back to make sure Kaoru wasn't following.

When he saw that Kaoru wasn't chasing him, a shadow flickered in his eyes—but he quickly fled.

"Kaoru...?"

Airi cautiously looked at Kaoru. This was the first time she'd seen him resort to violence.

"Sorry, I lost my temper for a second."

Kaoru spoke the words, but his mind was already working on how to arrange Yamauchi's expulsion.

"Did I scare you?"

Airi didn't answer.

Instead, she stepped closer and gently touched the hand he had used to hit Yamauchi.

"Being... being looked at with such lewd eyes by that kind of person is disgusting... but... but I wouldn't mind if it were Kaoru... I'm... I'm happy..."

The girl's words left Kaoru momentarily stunned before he silently flicked her forehead.

"Oww..."

"Don't say things like that again. I might lose control."

"..."

As for what kind of loss of control he meant, Kaoru didn't elaborate, and Airi Sakura didn't ask—she simply lowered her head, her face flushed.

Chapter 515: Starting Chaos Only to Abandon It

In truth, Kaoru wasn't just occupied with student council work; he was also contemplating another important matter.

Shortly after Kushida's birthday, Horikita Suzune's would follow—less than a month apart.

Every time he thought about this odd pair, Kaoru couldn't help but feel a strange mix of emotions, especially since Kushida had explicitly hinted that she wanted to celebrate Horikita Suzune's birthday together with him.

That alone would have been manageable, but the day before happened to be Valentine's Day, coinciding with Horikita Suzune's birthday.

Having just resolved Airi Sakura's matter, Kaoru could already feel a headache coming on.

Before he could even begin to think of a solution, Kiriya Ikuyo came knocking.

"Our exam results are out. Class 2-A lost a full 150 Class Points, while our class gained 100."

Despite the victory, Kiriya Ikuyo seemed hesitant to speak. "But... Nagumo-kun completely ignored Class 2-A. He didn't lift a finger, and now Tonokawa and the others are being questioned by their classmates."

Unlike the relatively calm first-year students, the upperclassmen had immediately faced another special exam upon returning to school.

Because of this, Tachibana Akane hadn't had time to seek out Kaoru these past few days—her class was still locked in a life-or-death struggle with Class 3-B.

Kiriyama Ikuyo and the others weren't faring much better. Despite having moles like Tonokawa Sosuke and the lower-ranked classes stirring up trouble, Nagumo Miyabi still refused to acknowledge them.

They had tried to lure Nagumo into their carefully laid trap, only for him to not only see through it but also disdain even bothering to act.

This wasn't just out of contempt—there was a strategic benefit.

Nagumo's reasoning was simple: if his classmates wanted to overthrow him, fine. He'd let these incompetents see what would happen without him.

What followed was an odd spectacle.

While everyone else scrambled to act, Nagumo remained indifferent, amusing himself and even harassing Asahina Nazuna at one point, completely ignoring the movements of other classes.

His antics left Class 2-A in an awkward position.

Far from breaking free from Nagumo's influence, Tonokawa Sosuke had instead cost them 150 Class Points, filling the class with resentment.

Kaoru considered the situation. If he were in Nagumo's place, he might not have taken the same approach, but inaction was also a valid strategy.

What he hadn't anticipated was that Kiriyama Ikuyo and the others lacked even the ability to force Nagumo's hand. Clearly, he'd overestimated them.

"What's your next move?" Kaoru asked.

Kiriyama Ikuyo hesitated awkwardly. "There's one last special exam before finals. Tonokawa and I discussed whether we might be able to corner Nagumo-kun this time."

The exam hadn't started yet, and Kaoru didn't intend to say much, merely stating, "You've worked hard, senpai. The gap between your class and Class A is getting smaller, right?"

At the mention of this, Kiriyama Ikuyo couldn't help but smile. "Heh, it's still over 400 points now, but everyone in class is really motivated."

From being the former kings who were knocked down to earth, to breaking free from their subjugated position and climbing step by step to where they were now, Kiriyama Ikuyo felt the future was promising, despite some minor frustrations along the way.

"Congratulations, senpai," Kaoru said. "I think getting Nagumo to withdraw from the competition next semester won't be a problem. The key is to deplete his Personal Points—the rest will be much easier."

Kiriyama frowned. "That's easy to say, but people like Tonokawa-kun aren't trustworthy. They could betray us at any moment."

He trailed off, hesitating to continue, because Tonokawa Sosuke had hinted—intentionally or not—about his collaboration with Kaoru.

Compared to Asahina Nazuna, Kiryūin Fūka in their class did have some minor issues—she wasn't good at pleasing men.

"No problem. Don't we have a more suitable candidate?" Kaoru chuckled. "In these troubled times, someone stepped forward, stood by Nagumo's side, firmly supported him, and kept saying they wanted to take down Tonokawa-senpai and Mizowaki-senpai."

Kiriyama was stunned for a moment before his eyes widened. "Are you talking about Iijima-kun?"

This person was practically their only spy currently embedded in Class 2-A, and his identity still hadn't been exposed.

"Your schemes didn't succeed. Now, Class 2-A will likely revert to being under Nagumo Miyabi's control. If you want Tonokawa-senpai and the others to act, you have to isolate them now—make them feel that if they don't take down Nagumo, everyone else will take them down."

"In the meantime, Iijima-senpai will be our ally. Nagumo will definitely return to his command position in the next exam. As long as someone begs him to come back, he won't refuse—he might even reward that person."

"Once he's back in his original position, given his personality, he'll probably retaliate. Whatever he did to you before, he'll do a hundred times worse—just to make you remember the cost of defiance."

"So, your task is simple: just endure."

As long as they endured Nagumo Miyabi's retaliation, he would inevitably spend his Personal Points recklessly. Kaoru could even imagine Nagumo taking the opportunity to attack him as well.

"That's what we thought too, but won't you intervene?" Kiriya had already come to trust this junior's abilities.

If it were him, he could probably suppress Nagumo in the second year.

"He'll probably come looking for me himself." Kaoru did want to get involved in the second-year affairs, but unfortunately, he still had to figure out how to handle their birthdays and Valentine's Day.

After Horikita Suzune's birthday came Kamuro Masumi's, then Karuizawa's and Sakayanagi Arisu's—their birthdays were practically clustered together.

If not for having dealt with similar situations before at the agency, Kaoru would probably have lost his mind by now.

Kiriya hesitated to speak further and silently helped him with student council work.

With finals approaching, many clubs needed inspections—like weeding out the half-dead ones.

...

"Your energy seems off today. Who kept you up all night playing with them again?"

A needle-like voice reached Kaoru's ears as Kamuro Masumi propped her elbow, long strands of hair cascading beside her ears.

The dazzling spring sun cast a shimmering halo behind her, illuminating her slightly upturned nose and pursed lips.

Yet her gaze held a suspicious glint that made Kaoru feel uneasy.

"Couldn't sleep last night because I was thinking of you."

Kaoru remained expressionless, his eyes flickering toward her thighs—today, she was wearing black knee-high socks again, leaving a stretch of pale, plush skin exposed.

It was tempting to reach out and touch.

Masumi had long grown immune to his corny pickup lines. She didn't react at all, not even a hint of irritation.

"What exactly were you thinking about?"

Kaoru was surprised she'd actually engage with the topic. For a moment, he wondered if he'd crossed into an alternate timeline.

"Probably the same thing you were thinking."

Kaoru smirked. "What's the worst thing you've ever done, Masumi?"

"The last person I'd tell is you."

"Mm, so I've been disciplining this disobedient Masumi in my imagination instead."

"How disgusting."

Masumi curled her lip. "Stuck in your fantasies—guess that's all you'll ever amount to."

Kaoru's expression turned odd. If she didn't want him imagining it... did that mean she wanted him to actually do it?

"I heard you often take girls to the special instruction building for dates?" Masumi suddenly said.

The rumor had been circulating lately.

Kaoru didn't even need to think—it had to be Haruki Yamauchi spreading nonsense.

Too cowardly to name Airi Sakura outright, let alone mention what really happened that day, he'd resorted to whispering half-baked gossip instead.

"If it were you, Masumi, would you go on a date with me there?"

"No. Because it's disgusting."

"If even you wouldn't, then obviously no one else would either. That building isn't some romantic hotspot."

"The rumors about you keep piling up. Some say you toyed with over a dozen girls in middle school before tossing them aside."

"Others claim I'm skilled in dark magic, secretly hypnotizing and conditioning beautiful girls. Would you believe that?"

"You definitely messed around with girls before."

"..."

Well, this conversation was going nowhere.

Kaoru realized how deeply rooted prejudice could be—people doubted him now, just as they had back at the agency.

At least there were no paparazzi here at school.

After a brief silence, Kaoru suddenly asked, "Is there anything you've wanted to do but never dared, Masumi?"

Masumi hesitated. "...Can I hit you?"

"Sure. But only if you stand up first."

Kaoru cheerfully guided her. "Lift your foot and stomp on my chest—barefoot, in stockings, or with shoes on, whatever you prefer."

Masumi fell silent for a moment. "...Are you only this perverted with me?"

She suspected Kaoru had double standards.

After careful observation, she'd noticed he never spouted such vulgarities around Miki Yamamura, Ai Morishita, or Arisu Sakayanagi.

"Masumi, I think you might be a little too self-conscious."

Thud!

Kaoru nearly toppled over as she kicked his chair—this time, she'd wisely aimed for the seat instead.

The classroom had grown accustomed to the noisy bickering from the back row—this quarrelsome pair fought like cats and dogs every day.

Aside from Miki Yamamura stealing a glance, no one else paid them any mind.

"Am I the only one who gets the brunt of your bad mood?"

"Sorry, but my bad mood happens to be caused by a certain someone."

"Honestly, I'm asking sincerely—do you have any regrets, Masumi?"

"My regret is ending up in your hands."

"Is there anything you want to do?"

"I don't want to talk to you."

"..."

Kaoru frowned.

It seemed getting her cooperation was impossible. He'd have to rely on Sakayanagi Arisu instead.

When noon arrived, he seized the moment as Sakayanagi left the classroom and immediately followed her.

"Let's have lunch together today."

His words were casual as he fell into step beside her. Sakayanagi looked slightly surprised before breaking into a soft laugh.

"Fufufu, so you've finally remembered me?"

Kaoru turned his gaze toward her.

What was with that resentful tone?

Chapter 516: Our Father Seems Quite Satisfied with Me

Sakayanagi Arisu didn't seem particularly skilled in domestic matters—at least, Kaoru had never seen her bring a homemade lunch to class.

She usually settled for the cafeteria.

Given her health, he didn't dwell on it.

Besides, she was an ojou-sama—it was only natural she wouldn't excel in such things.

Kaoru occasionally ate in the cafeteria too, but dining with Sakayanagi today was unusual.

The surrounding stares grew uncomfortably sharp.

"Didn't Ichinose prepare a loving wife's bento for you?"

Perhaps because of her earlier tone, even this question carried a hint of bitterness.

Kaoru glanced at her face—she was smiling.

"I've been waiting for your loving wife's bento." He answered tactfully.

Another girl might have flustered, but Sakayanagi didn't blush.

Instead, she tilted her head and asked with amusement.

"Fufu, would you like me to feed you in front of everyone in class?"

"Sure. I could feed you too." Kaoru suggested, "Actually, we could try it right now."

Sakayanagi fell silent for a moment before chuckling. "Mitoma-kun, you really are shameless with girls. It's like anything you do is a reward for you."

"That's because Arisu is a beauty. Just being with you is a pleasure in itself."

Standing at the counter, Kaoru asked, "What do you want to eat?"

'It seemed he was treating.'

Sakayanagi promptly picked the most expensive set meal.

Kaoru carried two meal trays and deliberately found an empty seat in a corner.

"I'll start eating."

After all, it was a rare sight to see the young lady dining.

Kaoru couldn't take his eyes off her.

Compared to others her age, Sakayanagi Arisu wasn't particularly short, but her delicate and frail appearance made her seem smaller, evoking a sense of pity in others.

Her silver-white hair fell neatly to her shoulders, meticulously maintained and smooth.

At first glance, she looked like a well-behaved, quiet child—especially with the beret she wore, giving off the vibe of a little girl on an outing, exuding an innocent and adorable charm.

No wonder, in some people's eyes, he and Sakayanagi Arisu were seen as a lolicon and a loli.

But anyone who knew Sakayanagi Arisu even slightly would never mistake her for an innocent little girl—rather, she was a cunning little devil.

"You're being rather rude, Mitoma-kun."

Sakayanagi Arisu looked at him with displeasure. "Please don't think strange things in front of me."

"I was just curious why you haven't thrown away this ring."

Kaoru shifted his focus, his gaze landing on the [Wedding Ring] on her finger.

Though he didn't say anything, Sakayanagi Arisu could easily imagine his inner thoughts—Wasn't she particularly reluctant back then?

Why has she kept wearing it until now? No matter who asks, she never denies it.

Besides, both of them knew what this ring signified—a question Sakayanagi Arisu couldn't avoid confronting.

"As far as I know, there's no identical one."

Sakayanagi Arisu smiled faintly, a glimmer of triumph flashing in her eyes, as if she had caught Kaoru in a trap.

Of course, there was no identical one.

Kaoru knew better than anyone the effect of the [Wedding Ring], but her reasoning was too flimsy.

Had she discovered the secret somewhere else?

"It's a custom-made engagement ring, so of course there's no identical one." Kaoru said, "Can I call you 'wife' now?"

"Sure. Should we get married right away?"

Sakayanagi Arisu replied seriously. "I can give you the marriage registration form right now. Once we're married, you're not allowed to get close to any other stray cats, okay?"

If he agreed, his currently peaceful and harmonious harem would probably explode instantly.

Kaoru cleared his throat. "I remember you have to be an adult to get married. I'm not even 18 yet."

"Is that so?" Sakayanagi Arisu gave him a meaningful look.

After spending so much time together, she knew exactly how to deal with him.

Kaoru took a sip of his drink and changed the subject. "You spend the most time with Masumi. Has she—"

"Haha, I don't know."

Sakayanagi Arisu cut him off. "Did you really think I'd help my fiancé pursue another girl?"

Kaoru was momentarily speechless.

He hadn't expected her to refuse, nor had he expected her to openly acknowledge their engagement.

A strange feeling welled up inside him.

"This is where you fall short, Mitoma-kun. You should treat me like a normal girl sometimes. Even though Masumi is my good friend, I can't just surrender in this regard."

Sakayanagi Arisu continued, "Besides, you should think carefully about what to give her for her birthday. You can't just copy my answer."

It seems I made a misstep.

After all, Sakayanagi Arisu's birthday is next month.

Asking a girl about another girl's birthday gift when her own birthday is approaching feels somewhat disrespectful.

Kaoru pondered for a moment before asking, "Let me rephrase—what does Arisu want?"

Sakayanagi Arisu studied him seriously. "Are you here today to discuss both Masumi's and my birthday?"

"Is that not allowed?"

"It's strange. You're not doing this out of some sense of obligation to repay me, are you?"

"Isn't it normal to prepare a birthday gift for one's fiancée?"

"..."

Sakayanagi Arisu slightly regretted digging her own grave, but she didn't dwell on it too much and quickly changed the subject.

"My birthday is after the final exams. By then, the winner will already be decided, so I don't need your gift. Your defeat will be the best present for me."

What she regretted most was that they were in the same class, which made many things difficult to execute.

If they had been in different classes, Sakayanagi Arisu believed things would have been far more interesting.

Not being able to face him head-on in a fair, direct confrontation was something she couldn't let go of.

Kaoru thought to himself that if he lost, the one who would struggle to move on would probably be her.

"Regardless of the outcome, a birthday is still a birthday. I'd like to spend that day slowly with Arisu."

"Heh, are you asking me out on a date?"

"Consider it a favor to your fiancé."

"I'd like to say yes, but Father told me you're no good."

"There's just a small misunderstanding between Father and me. It'll be resolved soon."

"You adapt your words quickly. Only here do you show such shamelessness."

"I'll have to call him that sooner or later anyway."

"You really have no shame."

The conversation between Kaoru and Sakayanagi Narumori was, of course, known to Sakayanagi Arisu

After all, as her father, Sakayanagi Narumori cherished his daughter deeply.

Hearing that someone had designs on his precious girl inevitably filled him with shock and anger.

What saddened Sakayanagi Narumori even more was that when he cautiously asked his daughter about it, she openly admitted it and even complained that he shouldn't interfere in her affairs.

His heart nearly broke.

Still, this was also the reason Kaoru managed to escape unscathed—otherwise, he wouldn't even have the chance to be sitting here now.

That said, Sakayanagi Arisu hadn't shared her true thoughts with Kaoru.

While she held great interest and curiosity toward him, she wasn't at the point of outright rejecting marriage, nor was she ready to marry him immediately.

Chapter 517: The Loli is Too Cute

Kaoru suggested playing chess with her, and she quickly agreed to the date.

Clearly, Sakayanagi Arisu still couldn't let go of her previous defeat.

Even if she risked facing a similar outcome again, she bravely took the bait.

After finishing their meal, the two strolled leisurely around the campus.

Winter was nearing its end, with faint wisps of clouds drifting across the sky. Sparse trees lined the paths, and patches of snow still lingered on the grass.

The lake had long since thawed, its shimmering surface almost blindingly bright.

Sakayanagi Arisu brought up her father. Sakayanagi Narumori would be leaving the school this week, and a new acting chairman would take his place.

Logically, this wasn't something that should have been disclosed to Sakayanagi Arisu.

She didn't understand why her father had told her, leaving her full of doubts.

ANHS was a special high school founded by her grandfather, with her father Sakayanagi Narumori taking over as chairman.

Though not a family business, it was still one of their capital assets.

Yet now, someone had the power to transfer her father away and install their own people—something rather peculiar.

"Also, Dad mentioned you left the school. Are you two hiding something from me?"

Seeing her slightly stern expression, Kaoru averted his gaze.

Was she going to meddle in this too?

"Because of the stock shares issue, the Shinomiya side is investigating me thoroughly. If I don't handle it, they might send people to the school."

"You took Ichinose with you."

"Arisu, are you planning to go on a date with me outside?"

"So it was a date?"

"You're being a little cute right now."

"..."

His skin was thicker than steel plate.

Sakayanagi Arisu found she couldn't pierce through his shamelessness.

Her eyes flickered slightly before she smiled. "Since you went to the Shinomiya household, did you meet their treasured jewel?"

The "treasured jewel" she referred to was naturally the young lady of the Shinomiya Financial Group—rumored to be a girl raised in seclusion, kept sheltered since childhood, with very few having seen her.

"A middle schooler? Why would I meet her?"

Kaoru found the question baffling.

"So you only target high schoolers?"

Sakayanagi Arisu spoke leisurely. "From what I know, there was once a producer who deceived middle schoolers—even elementary schoolers weren't spared. Luring innocent young girls into the filthy entertainment industry speaks volumes."

Kaoru's face darkened. Shiina Hiori and Komiya Kondo joined of their own free will, didn't they?

"If I'm a lolicon, then what are you?"

"A little adventurer, always ready to uncover the secrets of Monte Cristo."

"And so you wear this detective hat every day and carry a cane around?"

"To guard against desperate last stands from enemies."

"Careful someone kicks your cane away."

"I've been keeping an eye on Mitoma-kun's movements."

"Meaning I can kick it away anytime?"

"Heh."

After walking for a while, Sakayanagi Arisu, whose stamina wasn't great, was allowed to rest on a bench by the roadside while Kaoru went to buy drinks.

"I can't have cold drinks right now."

Kaoru glanced at her before sitting expressionlessly beside her.

He seemed to have caught something valuable in her earlier words.

"How considerate today, spending your entire lunch break with me."

Unaware of what she had just revealed, Sakayanagi Arisu gazed at the school building in the distance.

"Are you worried about finals? Or Valentine's Day and your birthday?"

"A bit of both. But more importantly, I wanted to talk to you."

Kaoru felt complicated.

Only she and Hasebe Haruka knew about his past to some extent, but he wasn't sure what Sakayanagi Arisu truly thought.

"What did you want to say to me?" Sakayanagi Arisu blinked. "Planning to do something bad to me here?"

After hesitating, Kaoru asked, "If you found out someone you liked was hiding another woman behind your back, what would you...?"

"Execute him, of course?"

Sakayanagi Arisu tilted her head. "That's blatant betrayal. I wouldn't tolerate it."

"Yeah, I figured."

Kaoru gave up resisting.

Sakayanagi Arisu frowned. "Why can't people just be faithful?"

"Perhaps he doesn't yet understand what true devotion means—only that the person before him is someone he can't let go."

Kaoru said, "In the past, he thought this world was nothing more than a grand reality show. When the curtain falls, it falls. Like finishing a game, you naturally put down the console and move on to the next one."

"Does he regret it?" Sakayanagi Arisu asked.

"I don't know. Often, it takes just a fleeting moment—hearing a familiar voice—before he suddenly realizes that they were never truly gone." Kaoru replied.

Sakayanagi smiled faintly. "That sounds completely unlike the impression I had of him. Like a shameless fraud repenting before the Bible."

"You're not wrong. Truthfully, even now, he doesn't feel much remorse."

Kaoru nodded. "The problem is, he's surprised that someone would still believe in him after all this time."

"Which just proves he's soft-hearted rather than tough—unexpectedly easy to handle."

Sakayanagi patted her own thigh. "If he wants to repent, he can come to me. I'll listen to his story slowly."

Kaoru gave her a sidelong glance. She puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction, as if to say, What's wrong with that?

"Can I call you 'Mom'?"

Sakayanagi nearly lost her composure. What kind of weird fetish was this?

"No. Because it's disgusting."

"If I can't say it out loud, it'll be hard for me to tell this story properly."

"Mitoma-kun?"

Seeing her unfriendly gaze, Kaoru wisely lay down, resting his head on the girl's soft thighs, facing upward where he was met with a slightly dazed expression.

"You're not lying to me, are you?" Sakayanagi Arisu murmured.

"No, my words just now were completely sincere. It's just that someone's curiosity is too strong."

Kaoru smiled faintly. "I once died, and behold, I am alive again, living forevermore, holding the keys to death and the underworld."

His smile seemed to conceal something, and a chilling breeze swept past.

Sakayanagi Arisu suddenly felt goosebumps rise on her skin as she stared fixedly at the man lying on her lap.

His slightly youthful face bore an uncanny resemblance to a producer who had been declared dead two years ago.

Just as he had said, Sakayanagi Arisu didn't feel the slightest bit of fear. Instead, she reached out and touched his forehead.

The warmth of his body was unmistakable, the pulse of his veins almost visible beneath his skin, reminding her of the needle marks on her own arm.

"Could you not be so curious?"

Kaoru sighed helplessly and lightly flicked her nose. "Even the undying don't believe me. If you keep staring at me like this, do you really believe what I'm saying?"

"Which saint back then would have believed he was the mouthpiece of the gods?"

Sakayanagi Arisu whispered. "Besides, you're right here with me. No matter the reason, I can't just ignore it."

Feeling like the conversation had strayed off track, Kaoru shifted the topic. "Class is about to start. Let's talk about something more ordinary—has Nagumo contacted you?"

Running away again.

Sakayanagi Arisu resolved to one day fully expose his true nature, even suspecting that his initial motives toward her were hidden somewhere within it.

Holding onto such thoughts, she was unaware that the Wish Machine had already eavesdropped.

"I did have contact with him, but I gave up on it later."

Sakayanagi Arisu said quietly. "He doesn't seem capable of dealing with you. I've found a more suitable candidate."

Kaoru was taken aback.

He had considered the possibility of Nagumo Miyabi collaborating with Sakayanagi Arisu, but he hadn't expected her to abandon Nagumo.

And now she claimed to have a better alternative?

Who else could serve as a capable opponent besides Nagumo?

Could it be... Ryuen?

Chapter 518: Mischievous Intentions

After Sakayanagi Arisu's explanation, Kaoru finally understood the sequence of events—it had indeed happened during the sports festival.

"Nagumo told you about Honami's past, and you actually used it against her?"

Kaoru's expression turned blank.

He had assumed Nagumo Miyabi was behind it, but the real culprit was right in front of him.

"You've protected her too well. Simply avoiding the past won't help her grow."

Sakayanagi Arisu said. "Put another way—if she were to lose you, would she be able to face others' malice on her own?"

"That's still no reason for you to target Honami. Besides, your hypothetical doesn't hold up. What do you mean by 'losing me'? Am I not by her side right now?"

"But you also chose to let her face the scrutiny of the class. Aren't our thoughts aligned?"

"Because I believe in her."

Kaoru said calmly. "She will fight for the right outcome herself. I believe in her and her friends."

Sakayanagi Arisu fell silent. A heavy quiet settled between them.

Just then, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed from nearby.

"Am I interrupting?" Kamuro Masumi eyed the silent pair suspiciously, her gaze growing even more peculiar as she watched Kaoru resting his head on Sakayanagi Arisu's lap.

"No, you came at just the right time."

Sakayanagi Arisu said very seriously, "Masumi-san, please help me teach this shameless fellow a lesson."

She hadn't reacted in time and had let him take advantage until now, even suspecting he'd done it on purpose.

"Hey, you were the one who invited me, weren't you?"

Kaoru sat up from her lap—he'd already fulfilled one wish anyway. "Masumi, I've decided. There'll be a surprise waiting for you next week."

Hearing the word "surprise," Kamuro Masumi seemed to shudder, instinctively hugging her arms as two words escaped her lips almost reflexively.

"Pervert."

Kaoru's mouth twitched.

Whatever—it wasn't worth arguing. His image had long been ruined anyway.

"Mitoma-kun."

Sakayanagi Arisu suddenly called out to him, "If you keep this up, people will only find you increasingly disgusting. Be more honest, more extreme. Gentleness was never your true nature."

Kamuro Masumi was utterly confused. What topic had those two been discussing earlier?

"My dark side isn't that extensive."

Kaoru paused, "To put it simply, I just want your rewards. As for the methods—this world never stipulated that only bad deeds count."

Sakayanagi Arisu chewed on his words. Were these "rewards" the same things he often talked about?

"Masumi, do you think I should stay as I am now, or should I be more extreme?"

"What's the difference between a pervert and an even bigger pervert?"

Kaoru was slightly annoyed. Her stereotypical impression of him seemed to be deepening.

...

At the Keyaki Mall bookstore, Kaoru surveyed a row of shelves filled mostly with classic foreign literature.

"Found anything interesting here, Mitoma-kun?"

Turning his head, he saw Shiina Hiyori appearing beside him like an auto-refreshing NPC, dressed in a dark-colored dress with several books hugged to her chest—her slightly prominent bust drawing attention.

Her eyes sparkled as she reached for a book on the shelf without waiting for his reply.

"Based on your usual reading preferences, I think you'd enjoy this one."

Though they occasionally met in the library, she'd memorized his tastes perfectly. This girl was somewhat terrifying.

"I'll give it a read, but I'm not here for myself right now."

Kaoru took the book from her hands, "Suzune's birthday is coming up. Since she's a bookworm too, I thought about gifting her one."

This was intel he'd picked up from Horikita Suzune herself—she had no interest in phones or shopping, spending her free time solely with books.

Kushida had told him that during summer break and training camps, Suzune only brought a few books, often reading quietly alone in her room.

"Horikita-san from Class D?"

Shiina Hiyori seemed to recognize Horikita Suzune.

"Yeah, have you met before?" Kaoru asked.

"We crossed paths at the library once. A new batch of books had arrived, including one I'd reserved, so I rushed there and ran into her."

Shiina Hiyori tightened her grip on her books, "But Horikita-san didn't seem very interested in me."

Since some books were hard to find in stores and unavailable in digital formats online, Shiina Hiyori could only place reservations at the library, requesting them to purchase these titles in their next acquisition.

Of course, Hiyori could buy them herself, but nothing brought her more joy than stumbling upon beloved books in the library.

"Sorry, don't take it to heart. That's just Suzune's personality."

Kaoru sighed helplessly.

Although Horikita Suzune recognized the limitations of individual effort and sought to utilize more people, she was clearly single-mindedly focused on reaching Class A, neglecting normal interpersonal relationships.

It wasn't hard to imagine that in Suzune's eyes, Hiyori was merely an enemy one could communicate with—but nothing beyond that.

"It's alright, I was being too abrupt."

Hiyori smiled sheepishly. "Mitoma-kun calling her that... is it like what the rumors say?"

It seemed his reputation had reached universal awareness.

"Our relationship is somewhat complicated. She calls it a 'debt relationship.'"

"Debt relationship?"

As expected, Hiyori didn't understand, nor did Kaoru expect her to.

"I don't quite get it, but what kind of books does Horikita-san usually read?"

When it came to this topic, Hiyori was eager to help Kaoru brainstorm. "I could offer some suggestions."

Here lay the problem.

Kaoru awkwardly averted his gaze—he'd never discussed this with Suzune.

Noticing his expression, Hiyori immediately understood.

With gentle tact, she asked, "What impression do you have of her, Mitoma-kun?"

After some thought, Kaoru replied, "She probably dislikes postmodernism and lacks any romanticism. Her thinking is always grounded in practical benefits, believing she can handle everything alone. She looks down on others with prejudice, demanding strict standards for herself and everyone else. Yet spiritually, she's filled with confusion and emptiness, engaging in self-criticism without mastering its tools. She likely enjoys realism—it helps her contemplate her own meaning and judge others."

Hiyori was stunned.

After a pause, she gave him a strange look. "You should apologize to Horikita-san."

"I'm not saying she's wrong. Suzune's flaws are part of her charm."

Kaoru explained, "She's incredibly stubborn and obsessive, quick to abandon anything she deems pointless."

"I—I give up! You clearly already know what gift to get her!"

Hiyori puffed her cheeks in frustration. "Mean... you're so mean!"

With that, she grabbed her books and scampered off, leaving Kaoru bewildered as he watched her retreating figure.

Chapter 519: The Taste of Chocolate

Horikita Suzune was unaware that Kaoru was presumptuously analyzing her mental state.

All she knew was that as Valentine's Day approached, the atmosphere around her seemed to be growing subtly peculiar.

At first, she hadn't noticed this restless stirring - like the announcement of spring's arrival, with bees fluttering their wings, coveting fragrant nectar.

The faint vibrations hidden in the air caused some people's gazes to inadvertently intertwine for a moment.

Sudo began inquiring about Horikita Suzune's Valentine's Day plans.

When he heard her say it had nothing to do with her and that she wouldn't be giving any chocolate, he clearly showed disappointment.

Indeed, Horikita Suzune subconsciously never considered Valentine's Day relevant to herself.

She had never even given obligation chocolate before, let alone accepted anyone's chocolate.

It wasn't until after school, when Kushida approached her with a smile and told her she must give Kaoru love chocolate, that Horikita Suzune finally understood.

"Ahaha, you don't have to give it, but then I'll make sure he disciplines you thoroughly."

Horikita Suzune wasn't particularly concerned about this threat, but she was puzzled.

"I'm curious, how are you all planning to spend Valentine's Day?" she added. "If you're all planning to go on dates with him, my presence shouldn't matter, right?"

Since it was Valentine's Day, it should be a holiday for couples.

Horikita Suzune considered her relationship with Kaoru to be one of debtor and creditor, so Valentine's Day didn't apply to them.

The thought of following behind Kaoru like a little girlfriend, this feeling of blind obedience, made Horikita Suzune uncomfortable. She felt her own affairs were more important.

"Hehehe, keep pretending," Kushida pursed her lips. "Anyway, come tomorrow night. Even if we have a sound party, you'll be the main attraction. You can't escape!"

"Has your brain become completely filled with nothing but vulgar thoughts?" Horikita Suzune expressed her dissatisfaction as well.

Honestly, she was quite bothered by the idea of going together with Kushida.

Kushida snorted coldly - she really couldn't stand this girl.

"Can't be bothered to argue with you. Just know we'll all be waiting for you tomorrow."

...

"Masumi, this is your chocolate."

Kamuro watched as the man beside her took out an expensive-looking chocolate, her pretty face remaining cold and indifferent as she didn't immediately accept it.

"Has no one told you that boys are supposed to return the favor with chocolate next month?"

"I know, but I had a feeling Masumi wouldn't give me any chocolate today, so I had to be the one to give some."

"..."

As if he heard her click her tongue in annoyance, she turned her face completely away, then tilted her hand slightly, shoving a chocolate rather aggressively into Kaoru's line of sight.

"This is..."

"I picked it up on the street. The convenience store was packed with people buying chocolate today, so I just grabbed one for you."

Though her tone sounded impatient, her cheeks and neck were faintly flushed.

Kaoru took the chocolate from Kamuro, unwrapped it, and found it to be just an ordinary piece—not even heart-shaped.

"Masumi."

"What? If you don't want it, give it back."

"I'm going to keep this chocolate as a memento. For now, let's share mine—it has a heart on it."

"Don't you dare keep it. Eat it right now."

"No way. Its value as a keepsake far outweighs its edible value. I suggest we eat mine instead."

Kamuro glared at him fiercely, suspecting he was deliberately teasing her.

When a girl gives chocolate to a boy, of course, she hopes he'll taste the feelings she put into it.

But before she could say anything, a familiar, crisp sound tapped against the floor.

"May I have a taste?"

A hand reached over and naturally picked up the chocolate from Kaoru's grasp.

Of course, it was his chocolate she took, not Kamuro's.

"So sweet."

Sakayanagi Arisu frowned, then took another piece. "So this is the flavor you carefully selected, Mitomakun?"

"Shouldn't you offer your own chocolate in exchange when you take someone else's?" Kaoru glanced at her empty hands.

"Just thinking about how you'll get to taste so many different chocolates today made me not want to prepare any for you."

Sakayanagi Arisu unwrapped a piece of chocolate. "I thought Masumi-san felt the same way, but it turns out she secretly prepared some for you."

Kamuro retorted, "It's obligation chocolate. Giving it to him is no different from giving it to anyone else."

"Hehe, I was talking about obligation chocolate too."

Sakayanagi Arisu brought the chocolate in her hand to Kaoru's lips. "If you're free today, this one's for you."

Both of them froze for a moment at the scene, especially Kaoru, who hadn't expected her to actively feed him.

If he had thought about Sakayanagi Arisu's words a little, it would have been easy to catch her underlying meaning—asking if someone is free on Valentine's Day itself carries ambiguous implications.

However, Kaoru said quietly, "Arisu, the same tricks won't work on me."

With that, he decisively opened his mouth, taking in the girl's fingertip along with the chocolate, letting it melt in his mouth.

The heated sensation left the girl rooted to the spot.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

The first one to lose her composure was Kamuro, her eyes wide and face flushed.

After the initial shock, Sakayanagi Arisu seemed to snap out of it, as if she had stumbled upon something incredibly amusing.

With a smile, not only did she not pull her finger away immediately, but she began to playfully tease Kaoru's tongue.

The slightly bitter chocolate quickly dissolved in his mouth, the creamy milk filling blossoming forth.

The girl's fingers carried a faint milky fragrance.

"Aha, Mitoma-kun is truly a disgusting man to the extreme."

Like a little devil teasing her pet, Sakayanagi Arisu looked at Kaoru with playful indulgence, her twisted tastes no less perverse than his depravity.

"You two! Unbelievable!"

Kamuro could hardly continue speaking.

This despicable pair before her were absolutely made for each other!

Kaoru grabbed Sakayanagi Arisu's wrist, slowly pulling the sticky fingers out of his mouth.

"Should I say 'thanks for the treat' now?"

Sakayanagi Arisu smiled faintly: "You're welcome, though it's really disgusting."

"You call it disgusting, yet you didn't hesitate to stir your fingers in someone else's mouth. You're plenty disgusting yourself," Kaoru said. "Do you feel no revulsion toward me now?"

"Before that, I should ask you - will you feel any revulsion toward me?"

Sakayanagi Arisu countered.

Kaoru didn't answer.

Sakayanagi withdrew her hand, took a handkerchief from her pocket, and carefully wiped it clean.

This chocolate would likely leave a deep impression, both for him and for Sakayanagi Arisu.

Only Kamuro watched them with a hopeless expression, clearly greatly shocked by what she had witnessed.

Chapter 520: His Daily Life

Due to the Valentine's Day atmosphere, Class D of the first year was also experiencing commotion.

Several girls had given chocolate to Hirata Yosuke, instantly igniting the boys' enthusiasm.

"Horikita, about that mock exam..."

Just as Sudo spoke up, Horikita Suzune had already begun packing her things, flatly refusing.

"Regarding tutoring, let's discuss it after the mock exams."

His cheering squad, which had been encouraging him moments before, immediately fell into disarray and completely collapsed.

Sudo's plan had never stood a chance from the beginning.

Before leaving the classroom, Horikita Suzune inexplicably glanced toward Kushida and Karuizawa's direction, noticing they were dealing with Valentine's greetings from both boys and girls.

Chocolate...

Walking along the corridor, Horikita Suzune had just reached the entrance when she saw Kaoru leaning against the wall, staring intently in her direction while completely ignoring everyone around him.

"What are you doing here?"

The girl instinctively tensed up, guessing he might be planning to ask her for chocolate or forcibly take her back to the dormitory.

"I have a favor to ask you. It should be resolved quickly." Kaoru paused briefly before adding, "It's related to Horikita-senpai. You don't have to come if you don't want to."

Instantly, most of the wariness in Horikita Suzune's eyes disappeared, replaced by confusion and unease.

Related to her brother?

Various bad possibilities flashed through Horikita Suzune's mind, but seeing Kaoru had already started walking outside the school building, she anxiously hurried after him.

"Explain clearly. Did something happen?"

"Well, it's somewhat connected to the student council."

"But he already resigned, didn't he?"

"Correct. Right now, I want to show you the work he did before stepping down."

Horikita Suzune found she couldn't understand what he was saying.

Racking her brains about what crisis her brother might have encountered, she suddenly realized she knew virtually nothing about him at all.

Although the school intentionally isolates interactions between different grades, making it normal for first-year students to be unaware of the situation of upperclassmen, this only applies to exams.

The school does not interfere with daily communication.

For instance, in clubs, Horikita Suzune actually had the opportunity to gather information about upperclassmen and inquire about Horikita Manabu's activities.

However, Horikita Suzune had never considered doing so.

On one hand, she was already satisfied just being able to come here and get a little closer to Horikita Manabu.

On the other hand, she subconsciously felt she had no right to approach his world.

This contradictory, almost self-deprecating mindset led Horikita Suzune to never actively contact Horikita Manabu, let alone learn about his circumstances.

Regarding Horikita Manabu, she only knew that he was formerly the student council president, currently a student in Class 3-A, and about to face graduation exams.

Beyond that, she knew nothing more specific.

Horikita Suzune followed Kaoru for a while, frowning slightly—this seemed to be the direction of the teachers' office?

Unexpectedly, an upperclassman from the third year soon appeared before them.

She remembered her name was Tachibana Akane, the person Kaoru had recently targeted.

"You're too slow!"

Tachibana Akane immediately scolded Kaoru upon meeting him. "You made me rush over in a hurry, yet you're taking your sweet time. So inconsiderate to a girl!"

"Don't be angry. I have some chocolate here. Would you like some, senpai?"

Kaoru took out today's chocolate from his bag and handed it to Tachibana Akane without waiting for a response.

"Who gave you this chocolate?"

Tachibana Akane was very suspicious.

"I bought it myself." Kaoru replied.

"Can you stop lying? I'm not an idiot. Telling the truth won't make me angry—it's not like you don't have plenty of girlfriends anyway."

Tachibana Akane didn't believe him at all.

Today was when girls give chocolate, not boys—how could he have bought it himself?

After saying this, Tachibana Akane unwrapped the packaging and popped a chocolate into her mouth.

She remembered this was the most expensive chocolate from the convenience store—no reason not to eat it.

Watching the two of them eating chocolate, Horikita Suzune couldn't hold back any longer and asked.

"What exactly happened to my brother?"

"Brother?"

Tachibana Akane mumbled with her mouth full.

After a moment, she finally remembered—Horikita Suzune was Horikita Manabu's younger sister!

"No wonder the surname Horikita sounded so familiar!"

Tachibana Akane exclaimed excitedly. "I had no idea Horikita-kun had such a cute little sister!"

Mid-sentence, she suddenly glared at Kaoru, leaving him completely baffled.

"Horikita-senpai is fine for now, but today I plan to have you experience student council work."

Kaoru paused briefly. "I think it'll be somewhat beneficial for you. Senpai is here to help."

"Experience student council work?"

Horikita Suzune felt quite displeased—so she was tricked into coming here for manual labor.

"Ahem, actually, Mitoma-kun told me about your situation,"

Tachibana Akane cleared her throat. "I've decided that I'll take responsibility for repairing your relationship with Horikita-kun. First, I'll explain what Horikita-kun usually does!"

Horikita Suzune grew even more confused, feeling like she had accidentally boarded a pirate ship.

However, at this point, it seemed she had no chance to escape—Kaoru had inadvertently blocked her retreat.

Horikita Suzune remained silent for a moment. "Although I don't know what you're planning, I need to return by 5 PM."

Tachibana Akane and Kaoru exchanged glances, simultaneously breaking into mischievous grins.

Soon enough, Horikita Suzune understood what the student council's daily work entailed.

Instead of taking her to handle paperwork, the two brought her to inspect various clubs.

Despite final exams approaching, the student council was obligated to monitor club activities—this being Kaoru and Ichinose Honami's usual task.

They conducted inspections approximately once a week, primarily checking whether clubs were actively functioning, identifying ghost club members, and temporarily addressing club issues.

Horikita Suzune was surprised, realizing for the first time how many clubs existed at this school—larger ones like basketball club, archery club, soccer club, judo club, and so on.

What surprised her more was how nearly everyone recognized Kaoru and Tachibana Akane, whether first-year or upperclassmen.

Some even attempted to ask Kaoru if he knew hypnosis techniques.