

Cote 551

Chapter 551: The Pressure Falls on Yamauchi

As lunch break ended, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka could increasingly sense the subtle atmosphere in the classroom.

Two days had passed since the voting exam, and the undercurrents hidden within the class had grown more intense.

Because the voting was anonymous, no one knew if they might be expelled.

Compared to other classes, Class D of the first year could be considered the group with the weakest trust relationships.

When it came to their own interests, even Hirata Yosuke couldn't make everyone comply.

Therefore, Class D students were now fighting for their own interests, each fighting their own battle, instinctively trying to form groups and creating small circles.

Within their small circles, they made mutual promises to advance and retreat together, agreeing to cast Criticism Votes against people outside their circle.

The more companions in the circle, the safer they felt.

Although Ayanokoji Kiyotaka hadn't observed any circles exceeding 10 people yet, such large groups might emerge tomorrow - after all, people tend to follow the crowd blindly.

What was noteworthy now was Kei Karuizawa's small circle among the girls, including people like Matsushita Chiaki and Shinohara Satsuki, who unconsciously gathered around Kei Karuizawa.

With her angelic persona, Kushida Kikyo had built considerable popularity, and according to Ayanokoji Kiyotaka's knowledge, she was also well-liked among the boys, with some even inviting her into their circles.

Barring any unforeseen circumstances, Kei Karuizawa and Kushida Kikyo should be able to influence the female students' votes, particularly the latter.

Kei Karuizawa had previously left a poor impression, as many in the class disliked the hot girl who lacked boundaries and had an assertive personality.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka shifted his gaze away from them and turned his attention back to the boys.

During yesterday's class meeting, Yamauchi Haruki had attacked Kei Karuizawa and Kushida Kikyo, questioning why they were associating with Class A students and even spreading rumors that they frequently visited the boys' dormitory.

Free romance wasn't inherently an issue—even Ayanokoji Kiyotaka understood they had likely become Kaoru's "cream puffs"—but when brought into the open, it became unacceptable.

Yamauchi Haruki attempted to pin the blame for Class D's two zero scores on Kei Karuizawa and Kushida Kikyo, suspecting they had betrayed the class.

Such accusations were hard to verify as truth or falsehood, and Class D students occasionally witnessed them with Kaoru, inevitably leading to related assumptions.

Moreover, the accused found it difficult to prove their innocence on the spot.

Kushida Kikyo might manage, as her persona would only suffer a stain, but Kei Karuizawa could become a scapegoat.

Yes, a scapegoat.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka keenly sensed that the class was in dire need of a scapegoat; no one wanted to be expelled themselves, so it had to be someone else.

If there was a villain who could allow them to cast their Criticism Votes with a clear conscience, they wouldn't hesitate to do so.

Kei Karuizawa might become that scapegoat.

The atmosphere today was extremely tense; Kei Karuizawa's usual clique was more subdued than ever, and figures like Shino Sakazuki weren't engaging with her.

Thus, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka had reported this to Kaoru yesterday.

Kaoru's reply was brief.

[Drive Yamauchi out.]

It was an unreasonable demand—this person was his good friend, and Ayanokoji Kiyotaka felt slightly displeased.

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Time quickly passed to the afternoon, with everyone packing their bags.

Likely, after they returned home, about half would coincidentally "believe" Yamauchi Haruki's words.

"I have something to say about tomorrow's voting exam."

Horikita Suzune, beside him, stood up, instantly capturing everyone's attention.

"Didn't we discuss the voting yesterday?"

Yamauchi Haruki reacted vehemently, "Everyone should cast their Criticism Votes on those who betrayed the class! Such people could be spies for other classes!"

Openly attacking Kei Karuizawa and Kushida Kikyo like this was utterly unlike Yamauchi Haruki's usual cowardly behavior.

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka and Kaoru reached the same conclusion: someone was backing him, ensuring his safety.

"Ha, what evidence do you have that I'm a spy?"

Kei Karuizawa immediately retorted, "If getting close to other classes makes me a spy, should we all cut ties with them then?"

Faced with Kei Karuizawa's aggressive stance, Yamauchi Haruki felt a flicker of fear, but remembering Ryuen's promise, he mustered his courage and glared back fiercely.

"You even barged into someone else's room—is that what you call 'getting a little closer'?"

Though Yamauchi hadn't witnessed it firsthand, he could easily imagine the scene.

Just thinking about how he wasn't the one surrounded by beautiful girls made him grit his teeth in frustration!

Even Sakura Airi had betrayed him, blindly throwing herself into another man's arms—something must be seriously wrong somewhere!

"Hah, don't think I don't know—that Kaoru guy will definitely make Class A cast their Praise Votes for you!"

Kei Karuizawa's face flushed crimson with anger, but she couldn't find the words to retort, even feeling a twinge of guilt.

Seeing this, Yamauchi smugly lifted his chin, all traces of his earlier fear toward Kei completely vanishing.

'So this woman was just all bark and no bite after all.'

Meanwhile, Kushida Kikyo remained expressionless, mentally already marking Yamauchi for execution.

"Everyone, please calm down. There shouldn't be any dropouts in this class, and we can't make baseless accusations against our classmates, Yamauchi-kun."

Hirata Yosuke tried to diffuse the tension, only to be shut down by an overconfident Yamauchi with.

"Even your own girlfriend was stolen—why are you defending her?"

Instantly, the entire class fell silent.

Lost in his own world, Yamauchi had Ryuen's promise backing him—he felt absolutely no fear.

If he could get either Kei Karuizawa or Kushida Kikyo expelled, he'd even receive an extra 1 million yen as a reward.

What a shame—that little angel was so cute and had such a great figure, yet she'd been taken by some guy from Class A.

Yamauchi felt both bitter and intensely jealous, wishing he could take that guy's place.

But after this vote exam, everyone in class would surely recognize Yamauchi Haruki's power.

How should he spend his 1 million yen next?

"I believe the person who should be expelled in this exam is Yamauchi Haruki."

A cold voice came from behind.

Yamauchi's heart jumped, panic flashing in his eyes before he forced himself to appear calm.

"Hey, hey now, what nonsense are you spouting, Horikita!"

But Horikita Suzune completely ignored him and continued.

"Although Chabashira-sensei told us this exam is only meant to expel one person, the school hasn't given us a dedicated discussion period—instead, we're supposed to discuss after class. Because of club activities, we don't even have enough time now."

"Wh-what are you talking about?!"

"If we continue like this, I think everyone will privately discuss who to vote for, eventually creating an environment where everyone feels threatened, no one trusts anyone else, and people might even vote based on personal grudges."

Kushida was surprised.

Though this speech was typical Horikita, it was clear she'd considered others' feelings and thought from the majority's perspective.

"Hoh, these are quite reasonable points. So what do you propose?"

Koenji Rokusuke seemed genuinely interested—after all, he could also sense the class atmosphere and might even face expulsion himself.

"Based on the above premises, I'm grateful to Yamauchi-kun. His bold statements yesterday helped me understand many things."

Horikita Suzune unexpectedly expressed gratitude toward Yamauchi Haruki.

Yamauchi Haruki froze for a moment, then the corners of his mouth lifted.

"What's this? So you're actually praising me? If you wanted Karuizawa and the others expelled too, you should've said so earlier. Really, you're such a troublesome woman."

Sudo Ken's expression changed as he stared intently at his good friend.

"Some matters shouldn't be discussed behind closed doors. I believe we shouldn't casually grant someone the qualification for expulsion in this exam - it requires careful consideration."

Horikita continued, "Rather than targeting good students or bad students, we should prioritize expelling the latter. For example, Yamauchi-kun."

"W-wait a minute!"

Yamauchi Haruki couldn't accept this, "How could I possibly be a bad student? Weren't you just..."

Horikita Suzune cut him off: "First, your contributions to the class over the past year have been virtually zero. Your academic ability is extremely poor - you need help every exam or you'd face expulsion."

"Th-that's... Ken and the others are the same!"

Yamauchi Haruki panicked.

"Incorrect. Sudo-kun's current grades have surpassed yours."

Horikita said, "Moreover, in sports, Sudo-kun earned our class many points during the sports festival. What have you done?"

"I... I trained seriously! There are plenty of others who are just as bad at sports as me. Why aren't you targeting them!"

Yamauchi Haruki tried to find reasonable excuses for himself.

"Fine. Take Yukimura-kun for example - his athletic ability is equally poor, but his academic performance is excellent. He frequently participates in Hirata-kun's study sessions and helps tutor everyone. Can you do that?"

Horikita Suzune looked at him coldly, as if watching a penniless man about to reach a dead end.

"That's not... that's not... Kanji is similar to me! He was last in this final exam!"

Horikita Suzune sighed deeply, looking at Yamauchi Haruki as if with pity.

"On my list, you, Ike-kun, and Sudo-kun are all candidates for expulsion."

Yamauchi Haruki looked as if he was being choked, his face turning red as he couldn't make a sound.

Each person had exactly three Criticism Votes - exactly matching their trio.

"Am I included in your expulsion list too?"

Sudo Ken looked incredulous, but upon second thought, this was indeed the Horikita Suzune he knew.

Thus, he accepted Horikita Suzune's judgment.

"That's wrong!"

Yamauchi Haruki shouted, pointing at Karuizawa Kei and Kushida Kikyo, "We're discussing their matter right now! Compared to the lowest ranking students, wouldn't spies drag us down more easily!"

Kushida Kikyo slightly started, her eyes gradually misting over.

Though clearly heartbroken to the extreme, she forced a smile.

"Wh-why would you say that about us, Yamauchi-kun?"

She looked as if she was about to cry, suppressing sobs in her throat, "If you suspect me, I can swear - Kaoru-kun and I were never dating from start to finish. If you don't believe me, I can give you my phone."

Faced with a weeping girl, Yamauchi Haruki short-circuited.

Yesterday she had been sullen-faced - what was with this pure maiden act now?

In an instant, the pressure shifted to Yamauchi Haruki's side.

Chapter 552: Aggressive Momentum

Seeing Kushida Kikyo actually take out her phone, Yamauchi Haruki felt his scalp go numb.

He desperately wanted to snatch it, open her chat history with Kaoru, and let the entire class see it with their own eyes.

But the more fearless Kushida appeared, the more hesitant and uneasy he became.

What if their chat history contained no evidence of betraying the class?

If no proof was found, Yamauchi Haruki would become the target of everyone's attacks—a bully who tormented their little angel and made her cry.

Yamauchi swallowed hard, his eyes darting around nervously as he stammered, "Th-this kind of thing wouldn't be discussed over text! You can meet in rooms, so it's obvious you must have talked face-to-face!"

As he spoke, he began to believe his own excuse, gradually regaining some confidence.

Kushida Kikyo's expression grew even more sorrowful, her voice trembling. "If visiting a boy's room implies an impure relationship, then what about the time I, Yamauchi-kun, Ike-kun, and Sudou-kun held a celebration party in Ayanokouji-kun's room?"

As if reminiscing about those times or expressing her resentment toward him, the girl lowered her head, as though trying to hide her tears.

"Hey, Haruki, even I can't stand this anymore. The little angel is the little angel—it's normal for her to get along well with boys!"

As his close friend, Ike Kanji was the first to jump in, showing clear dissatisfaction and disappointment toward him.

That's right—how could the little angel possibly be some guy's plaything?

She's the little angel, after all!

Yamauchi Haruki was stunned.

Faced with numerous disapproving glares, he tried to salvage the situation.

"What are you talking about, Kanji? Weren't you furious with the Class A guys before? And didn't you initially tell us that little Kikyo must have been played by him?"

Ike Kanji, caught off guard by the retort, flushed red and snapped, "Don't talk nonsense! I never said anything like that!"

In truth, Yamauchi regretted his outburst the moment the words left his mouth. Why attack an ally at a time like this?

But seeing Ike sweating and blustering, a sense of satisfaction surged within him. Serves him right for jumping in unexpectedly—might as well drag him down too!

"Even if Kikyo isn't involved, Karuizawa definitely is! She must have evidence on her!"

Yamauchi suddenly pointed at Karuizawa Kei.

Although he hadn't personally seen her entering or leaving Kaoru's room, he was certain she was involved.

He had suspected it during the training camp, and this semester, he was almost sure—after all, he'd occasionally seen Karuizawa Kei on dates with Kaoru at the Keyaki Mall.

Even if they weren't dating, their relationship was at least ambiguous.

Furious at the accusation, Karuizawa Kei immediately fired back, "What evidence do you want? Do I have to explain who I'm with to someone like you?"

"Who knows if you two are—"

Just as Yamauchi was about to continue waving the class banner to pressure Karuizawa, Horikita Suzune's voice cut in from behind.

"Enough, Yamauchi-kun. Even if Kushida and Karuizawa have some kind of relationship with someone, you have no evidence to support your claims."

Seeing Horikita Suzune's indifferent expression, Yamauchi Haruki instinctively panicked.

"I-I do have evidence, isn't it obvious?" Yamauchi Haruki stammered, racking his brains as he spoke.

"Karuizawa wasn't in her room last night."

Karuizawa Kei's heart skipped a beat.

She was certain no one had followed her last night—how did Yamauchi Haruki know about this?

Kushida Kikyo, who had been pretending to cry, paused abruptly.

She subtly glanced at several female classmates and noticed some looking uneasy, clearly surprised that Yamauchi had brought this up.

Instantly, whispers broke out around them.

Horikita Suzune swept a glance at Yamauchi Haruki, but her gaze settled on the faces of the entire class.

Some were merely spectating, some wore expressions of shock, while others couldn't conceal the disappointment in their eyes.

The essence of this exam was to forcibly expel one person.

No one wanted to be expelled themselves, so they needed a seemingly reasonable justification to collectively target someone without hesitation.

As long as there was someone more suitable than themselves to take the fall, would they care about the specifics of the reason?

Thus, even if Yamauchi Haruki's claims were full of holes, and even if some realized he was spouting nonsense, since the expelled person wouldn't be themselves, everyone thought this way—shifting responsibility away from themselves.

Horikita Suzune estimated that nearly half the class harbored such thoughts, and for the first time, she felt strangely at ease.

This was the first time she had truly understood the class's atmosphere—this peculiar tension that had hung over everyone since the very second Chabashira Sae announced the voting exam.

Everyone had developed faint hostility and wariness toward former friends and classmates, forcing them to instinctively band together for warmth while simultaneously seeking a target most could agree on.

As long as everyone attacked that target, they themselves would be spared.

"I'm sorry, Yamauchi-kun, but I can't agree with you based solely on a few words," Horikita Suzune spoke up.

"Ultimately, these are just your conjectures. You actually don't have any decisive evidence, do you?"

"I-I see! You're covering for them!"

Perhaps because Horikita Suzune had left a deep impression on him before, Yamauchi Haruki seemed particularly lacking in confidence.

Horikita Suzune frowned. "In that case, let me ask you: What is the evidence that Karuizawa-san and Kushida-san betrayed the class?"

"O-Of course it's because they're on good terms with those guys from Class A!" Yamauchi Haruki argued stubbornly.

"Think about it—those guys already have girlfriends, yet they often get so close and go to their rooms. Isn't that strange?"

"How could you... that's too much, Yamauchi-kun..." Kushida Kikyo's little pearls of tears threatened to fall again, evoking pity from onlookers.

"So this is how you see me..."

Yamauchi Haruki's eyes widened.

She was using that trick again? Wasn't that just too unfair!

Sure enough, several girls rushed to comfort Kushida Kikyo, while others glared angrily at Yamauchi Haruki.

"Hey now, you guys—" Yamauchi Haruki tried to salvage the situation, but Horikita Suzune cut him off.

"This alone doesn't prove they've betrayed the class. Who spends time with whom shouldn't require special explanation to everyone. By that logic, wouldn't Ichinose-san have betrayed her class too?" Her words left Yamauchi Haruki momentarily speechless, even stirring thoughts of retreat in his heart.

"Taking a step back, even if they had betrayed the class, we weren't attacked by Class A," Horikita Suzune said calmly.

"During the sports festival, we were teammates with Class A. Would they have deliberately leaked our competition roster?"

This was truly difficult to refute.

Yamauchi Haruki had already realized he had walked into a dead end.

"During the partner exam, Class A didn't attack us, and we even gained 100 Class Points. During the training camp, Class A didn't do anything to us either. So what exactly did they betray?"

Faced with Horikita Suzune's imposing demeanor, Yamauchi Haruki involuntarily took a step back, his face full of panic.

Chapter 553: The Situation Reverses

Under Horikita Suzune's pressing questions, everyone gradually came to their senses, or rather, tacitly abandoned Yamauchi Haruki.

"That does seem to be the case. Yamauchi was too harsh on Kikyo and Karuizawa."

"Exactly. Believing Karuizawa and the others betrayed everyone based on some rumors is completely unreasonable."

"And he made Kikyo sad. Yamauchi is just awful!"

Hearing these voices, Yamauchi Haruki's expression shifted repeatedly. He grew increasingly agitated and panicked.

When he looked toward Ike Kanji and Sudo Ken, he found that his two good friends showed no intention of helping him.

An inexplicable anger rose within him.

Even though Horikita Suzune had called out both of them too, instead of refuting her together with him, they had surrendered without a fight.

What was that supposed to mean?

At this critical moment, he might actually get expelled.

Yamauchi Haruki didn't want to be expelled.

He still wanted to enjoy himself here a while longer, and someone had promised him corresponding rewards that would keep him comfortable for a long time.

"I-I refuse to accept this! You say I'm making baseless accusations, but you can't produce any evidence either!"

Yamauchi Haruki shouted loudly, "You can't possibly expect someone to obediently drop out just based on your few comments, right? How do you know I haven't been working hard? You have no right to decide who gets expelled!"

Horikita Suzune remained very calm. After Yamauchi Haruki finished shouting, she said calmly.

"I don't have that authority, but at this point, are you still going to keep hiding it?"

Her expression, as if she had seen through everything, made Yamauchi Haruki's heart skip a beat.

The panic on his face became even more obvious, and his earlier momentum diminished by more than half.

"W-what do you mean?"

Yamauchi Haruki asked with a trace of fear, inevitably thinking of a certain figure.

Noticing this, Horikita Suzune's mind stirred slightly, and she revealed a light smile.

"Although you thought you were being discreet, occasionally someone might pass by and accidentally overhear something."

Hearing these words suddenly in front of everyone, Yamauchi Haruki looked horrified, panicking so much that he retreated several steps and nearly bumped into Ike Kanji.

"Hey, Haruki, what's wrong with you?"

Ike Kanji felt something was off - this was the first time he'd seen Yamauchi Haruki with such an expression.

Hearing his voice, Yamauchi Haruki seemed startled.

"I... I don't know what you're talking about! I haven't done anything! You're talking nonsense! Don't go spreading things without evidence!"

Horikita Suzune originally hadn't been very confident and had only wanted to bluff him, but she didn't expect him to become so incoherent.

Now anyone could see there was a problem.

"As for evidence, isn't it in your hands?"

Horikita Suzune smiled slightly. "Since you could make Karuizawa prove her innocence and have Kushida hand over her phone, correspondingly, I can have you show your chat records, right?"

"Guh... W-we just happened to run into each other! What's strange about exchanging contact information?" Yamauchi Haruki was still trying to distance himself, unaware that Horikita Suzune was skillfully extracting information from him.

Meanwhile, those around them grew puzzled, unable to decipher the cryptic conversation between the two.

"Exchanging contact information?"

Horikita Suzune's smile vanished instantly. "Accusing others of colluding with Class A and betraying the class—and in your words, it becomes merely 'exchanging contact information'?"

Sudo Ken and the others were startled. Had Yamauchi Haruki betrayed the class?

"Wait, Haruki, who did you collude with? How could you betray the class? What's going on?"

Faced with the stares from Ike Kanji and the rest, Yamauchi Haruki grew even more flustered.

While insisting he hadn't betrayed the class, he clutched his head in agony, clearly never expecting Horikita to uncover his secret.

Under everyone's gaze, he felt his mental defenses crumbling.

Each pair of eyes felt like knives stinging his face.

Desperately trying to shield his burning cheeks, his shoulders trembled.

At every accusatory remark, he shook his head vehemently, as if this could ward off the surrounding scrutiny and hostility.

Yet, despite his state, Horikita Suzune showed no intention of letting him off.

"Attacking both Karuizawa and Kushida simultaneously—I believe this was also under their instructions. Given your usual temperament, I doubt you'd have the courage to do such a thing on your own."

"No, that's not true! I didn't!"

"How long will you keep denying it? Once the exam results are out, whatever he gave you will come to light, won't it?"

"Guh..."

Yamauchi Haruki was shaken to his core.

Ike Kanji, trying to make sense of the situation, kept shaking Yamauchi and demanding an explanation.

Horikita shifted her gaze away from him and addressed the others. "I think we can proceed with a vote now. To avoid further chaos, cutting our losses promptly is the best course of action. I'll be writing down Yamauchi-kun's name. If anyone has doubts, you might want to ask him directly."

In an instant, everyone's eyes turned to Yamauchi Haruki.

Whether it was Horikita's relentless pressure or Ike Kanji shaking what remained of his sanity to the breaking point, Yamauchi Haruki suddenly screamed.

"Impossible! How could you possibly know about my dealings with Ryuen? We were in a private karaoke room, just the two of us!"

As his words hung in the air, Ike Kanji and the others stared at Yamauchi in stunned silence, while he remained oblivious to his slip-up.

"Haruki, you really betrayed us?"

Sudo Ken said in disbelief, "Didn't you claim you saw Karuizawa and the others discussing the exam with Mitoma?"

Of course, Yamauchi Haruki had never witnessed any such thing—it was all a lie to placate them. But now, there was no turning back.

"Horikita, even if you all cast your Criticism Votes against me, I won't be expelled!"

Yamauchi Haruki tore off all pretenses. "I have 40 Praise Votes from Class C! I won't be expelled at all. You'd be better off listening to me and casting your Criticism Votes against Karuizawa!"

Indeed, the terms Ryuen Kakeru had offered him were highly favorable.

First, he promised that Class C would cast all their Praise Votes for Yamauchi.

Then, if Yamauchi managed to expel either Karuizawa Kei or Kushida Kikyo, he would receive an additional 1 million personal points.

Beyond this, Ryuen Kakeru somehow learned that Yamauchi Haruki held special feelings for Sakura Airi and expressed his intention to help him take down Kaoru in the future, assisting him in winning a lovely girlfriend.

Although Yamauchi Haruki felt terrified of Ryuen Kakeru, with Class C's Praise Vote and the chance to retaliate against Kaoru, he only hesitated briefly before immediately agreeing to Ryuen's conditions.

Worried that someone might discover his conversation with Ryuen, the transaction took place in a karaoke booth, and Yamauchi was certain no one had followed him.

There was no way Horikita Suzune could know—she was lying!

As if venting his inner frustration, Yamauchi's voice momentarily stunned the entire class.

Everyone widened their eyes, seemingly frightened by his outburst.

Noticing this, Yamauchi revealed a smug and crazed expression.

He knew there was no turning back, but so what?

What could these people possibly do to him?

Among the crowd, Kushida Kikyo could barely conceal her shock.

She stared intently at Horikita Suzune—this girl alone had managed to resolve the predicament facing both her and Kei Karuizawa.

Could it be that Kaoru wasn't just bluffing?

Was it possible Horikita Suzune would continue to grow?

Chapter 554: Protective Instincts

Unlike Kushida Kikyo, Horikita Suzune wasn't overthinking things.

She slightly furrowed her brows, having initially suspected Nagumo Miyabi as the mastermind, only to find it was Ryuen Kakeru.

Well, the reason she had bluffed Yamauchi was because his simultaneous attacks on Karuizawa and Kushida seemed suspicious, with Kaoru being the primary target.

Horikita immediately connected it to the conflict between Kaoru and Nagumo, suspecting Yamauchi had become Nagumo's pawn in dealing with Mitoma.

As for the reason, it was probably because they had been spending too much time with Kaoru recently, drawing Nagumo's attention.

Though she hadn't asked for more details, rumors had been circulating around her, and the student council turmoil had recently swept through the first-year classes—even Horikita had heard about it.

As if reading the classroom atmosphere, Horikita similarly deciphered the tension between Kaoru and Nagumo Miyabi.

From Nagumo's perspective, it was difficult for him to directly intervene in first-year conflicts, so he could only apply pressure and influence from the sidelines.

If Class A remained united with no one cooperating, he would have virtually no means to deal with Kaoru.

In that case, switching targets seemed much easier.

The moment this thought occurred to Horikita, she was surprised by her own reasoning and fell silent.

Thus, her silence appeared to Yamauchi as her being at a loss.

Even Horikita Suzune, who had repeatedly offered suggestions, was now helpless and confused when faced with his trump card—this peculiar feeling filled Yamauchi with considerable satisfaction.

"Haruki, what were you doing colluding with Ryuen?"

Ike Kanji was shocked. "So it was Ryuen who made you try to expel Kikyo?"

"What choice did I have? If I didn't do this, I would be the one getting expelled! It was a necessary act of self-preservation!" Yamauchi Haruki said as a matter of course. "Besides, you heard what Horikita said earlier—she thinks both you and Ken should be expelled. I was protecting you!"

Ike Kanji was stunned for a moment before angrily retorting, "You're just protecting yourself, aren't you? With Ryuen giving you Praise Votes, you're the last person here who needs to worry about expulsion!"

"Nonsense! If everyone votes for Karuizawa and Kushida, we can pass this exam smoothly!"

Yamauchi Haruki finally dropped all pretense. "I can even get Ryuen to reward you all. This is for your own good too. Karuizawa and the others must be connected to Mitoma somehow."

"Shut up, Haruki!" Sudo Ken couldn't take it anymore.

He could feel the entire class staring at their trio with extremely strange looks.

Yamauchi Haruki glared back with clear displeasure at being interrupted.

"Well, well. What an excellent performance today. Your acting was absolutely flawless, Red Hair-kun."

Koenji Rokusuke chuckled lightly and gave them a round of applause.

Sudo Ken's face flushed crimson.

Yamauchi Haruki was his close friend - who would have thought he'd betray the class by accepting Ryuen's orders to get a classmate expelled?

Now the entire class was glaring at him and Ike Kanji with hostile eyes.

The trio's reputation was likely about to hit rock bottom again.

"Yamauchi-kun, why are you going this far?"

The speaker was Hirata Yosuke, his face dark and pained.

"What's wrong with protecting myself? Besides, aren't you all struggling to decide who should be expelled? I'm helping you out here. I can split the points Ryuen gave me with everyone."

Of course, Yamauchi wouldn't reveal his true motives.

Even now, he kept making excuses to justify his actions.

Sudo nearly punched his so-called friend.

Even with his limited intellect, he knew Yamauchi's words would infuriate the entire class.

Yes, everyone might silently agree that someone had to be expelled.

They might even form factions to deliberately target someone.

But they could never say it out loud - that would make them all shameless villains.

Yamauchi Haruki was trying to tear off that veil of decency.

No one would agree to this unless they wanted to become social outcasts like him.

Hirata Yosuke's face turned ashen.

He couldn't accept anyone being expelled, but he equally couldn't accept Yamauchi's behavior.

"Ryuen-kun's condition was to have either Karuizawa-san or Kushida-san expelled, wasn't it?"

Horikita Suzune suddenly spoke up. "If we choose to expel you instead, would he still give you those Praise Votes?"

Yamauchi's smiling face instantly froze, like a duck being choked.

He fell silent, just staring daggers at Horikita Suzune.

"He can't, can he? After all, your plan has failed. There's no reason for him to waste effort saving a pawn that has lost its value."

Horikita didn't even glance at Yamauchi Haruki anymore, addressing the class with her final words.

"The official exam is tomorrow. I've said all I need to say. Who you choose to cast your precious votes for is up to you. Even if it's me, I don't care."

The room fell silent. Ayanokoji Kiyotaka withdrew his gaze and sent a message on his phone.

Someone's protective instincts are going too far. Even without him, things would probably be fine.

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Meanwhile, Kaoru obtained the key to the school building rooftop using the student council's authority.

"Yoohoo, long time no see, Master!"

The first figure to appear on the rooftop was Manabe, her school bag slung over her shoulder and a bright smile on her face as she waved enthusiastically at Kaoru.

Following her, Yabu and Yamashita also greeted Kaoru with surprised smiles.

Today was supposed to be a long-awaited reunion between master and servants, and they seemed quite excited, though Kaoru didn't quite understand what they were so thrilled about.

"I want to talk with you about Class C and the exam."

Kaoru got straight to the point.

Time was somewhat tight, and the rooftop wasn't the safest place either.

As rumors about him continued to spread, people paid more attention to his every move—it was safe to say almost everyone in the school knew him by now.

"Haven't we already talked about it on the phone?"

Manabe naturally moved closer to him, pressing against him and sniffing the scent that belonged to her master.

"Not today... I'm a bit happy..."

She seemed pleased, as if she had detected something.

Compared to Manabe's boldness, Yabu and Yamashita appeared much more reserved.

However, Kaoru suspected that if he gave the order, the two of them would obediently drop their guard.

"It's hard to explain everything in just a few words over the phone, and chat logs can easily leave evidence. It wouldn't be good if Ryuen suddenly caught us."

Ryuen hadn't yet considered the possibility of spies in his class, so his surveillance in this area wasn't particularly strict.

However, if they were exposed, he would likely suppress the situation with swift and severe measures to prevent further negative consequences.

While other classes might not be able to do it, Ryuen was fully capable of checking phones—confiscating the entire class's phones at once, leaving Manabe and the others no time to delete their chat records.

Kaoru brushed away Manabe's mischievous hand and turned to the other two girls.

"Has anyone been voting for you?"

Chapter 555: What a Master Should Do.

He had previously asked Shiina as well, and she believed that Manabe and the others would likely rank high, though it was hard to say if they would take the top spot.

Ryuen, Ibuki, Manabe, Takeko Nishino, and Ishizaki were among the students in Class C with poorer reputations.

They often acted willfully, without considering others' feelings.

Over time, it was natural for some classmates to hold grudges and dissatisfaction toward them.

If given the chance to expel one of them, Ryuen would undoubtedly be the top candidate.

His treatment of his own people was overly harsh, making him nothing short of a tyrant.

From the start of the school year until now, Ryuen's methods of ruling the class were often simple and brutal.

For those who disagreed, only fists could settle the matter.

Back then, he had "reasoned" with Ishizaki, Mio Ibuki, and Takeko Nishino in this manner until they submitted.

Although Mio Ibuki was only half-convinced and Takeko Nishino still resented his methods, Ryuen Kakeru remained the sole ruler of Class C.

In return, Ryuen Kakeru had promised them that he would lead them to replace Class A.

Therefore, no matter how dissatisfied they were, Class C had no choice but to accept Ryuen Kakeru's empty promises—after all, who else could lead the class?

Even if Ryuen Kakeru were the top candidate, no one would actually expel him, especially since he was still ruling the class. Without his consent, the matter would be difficult to resolve.

That was why Kaoru was so concerned about who Class C would choose to expel.

"Ryuen-kun hasn't spoken yet, and everyone is feeling uncertain right now. Some are whispering privately that those who don't fit in should leave."

Yamashita Saki said this while sneakily glancing at Manabe Shiho, making it obvious that the person she referred to as "not fitting in" was right here.

Manabe Shiho snorted lightly and cleared her throat.

"I think Nishino and Ibuki are possibilities too. They're usually annoying, so one of them might drop out."

Kaoru sighed helplessly and patted her petite bottom, asking: "Didn't I tell you before to tone it down a bit?"

Actually, Manabe Shiho was worse than Karuizawa Kei in behavior.

While Karuizawa Kei put on a strong front, her paper-tiger nature made her avoid conflicts with classmates, maintaining decent popularity in class.

In contrast, Manabe Shiho was completely delinquent - she enjoyed being the boss, forming cliques in class, and sometimes bullying classmates.

She was a typical villainess character, as evidenced by her unrestrained use of violence against Karuizawa Kei.

The reason she hadn't become universally hated was because Manabe Shiho was at least a competent leader who treated her own people with loyalty.

Since Kaoru took her under his wing, he had been monitoring her reputation and telling her to behave better in class.

"I have been toning it down! Like when Nishino bumped into me before - I didn't say anything then!"

Manabe Shiho put on a pitiful expression, then couldn't resist urging Kaoru, "How about we use this chance to make Ryuen drop out?"

In her eyes, since Ryuen Kakeru was ambitiously targeting Class A, they might as well get him expelled in one go.

Kaoru ignored her, contemplating what plans Ryuen Kakeru might have now.

Actually, Class 1-C faced the same predicament as Class 1-D - both classes needed someone to drop out.

If rationality wasn't maintained, the class would descend into chaos where everyone feared for themselves.

The instinct to form groups for self-preservation would concentrate votes on those deemed suitable for expulsion - typically students who were widely disliked, lacked presence, or had poor reputations.

The only difference was that Class 1-C had Ryuen Kakeru, whose current intimidating presence could still force the entire class to consolidate their votes.

"Ibuki's down there."

Manabe Shiho suddenly said, her gaze passing through the rooftop railing to look at the people below.

"As usual, she doesn't have a single friend."

Kaoru followed her gaze and saw Mio Ibuki walking back alone.

Whether she deliberately kept her distance from others or others avoided her, she had no one around her.

"Aside from acting with Ryuen, she basically never stays with anyone."

Yabu Naomi said, "I talked to her once - she seemed like a very cold person."

"Cold? I think she just doesn't know how to talk to people."

Yamashita Saki interjected, "Compared to Nishino, I think Ibuki is better. Nishino hits too hard."

The Nishino Takeko she referred to was one of the particularly strong fighters in Class 1-C.

Some people had hoped Nishino Takeko and Mio Ibuki would fight to see who was stronger.

Kaoru hadn't heard about them actually fighting - those hopes must have been dashed.

"Master is worried I might drop out, right?" Manabe looked up at Kaoru's face. "Since the exam started, you've been constantly gathering information about Class C. I'm sorry, but it seems we can't be of much help."

Aside from them, Kaoru had no other pawns in Class 1-C.

"We haven't reached the most critical point yet."

Kaoru gently patted her head. In truth, the most dangerous place was precisely their own Class 1-C, where his influence among the first-year students was weakest.

Manabe allowed him to stroke her hair for a moment before taking his hand and saying, "I heard about how you confronted Nagumo Miyabi in the student council meeting. But Karuizawa and Kushida from Class D are being criticized again, Ichinose from Class B needs your help, and you still have that agreement with Sakayanagi. You need to be careful about her sudden betrayal. This must be the most stressful time for you, Master."

"I have Praise Votes from two classes," Kaoru said calmly. "Moreover, I still have plenty of Personal Points."

Manabe blinked, surprised to see this unexpectedly adorable side of her master.

"Master, your weakness is too obvious," the girl said with a stern expression. "If we ever fought, I'd definitely target that weakness and hit you hard."

Kaoru wanted to argue that he wasn't panicking, that he was just trying to calm their unsteady hearts.

But seeing Manabe Shiho's cheerful smile, the words died in his throat.

They were right - he really was panicking.

Whenever it came to these matters, Kaoru found it difficult to remain calm.

Perhaps it was because he had faced too much malice back at the agency, developing an instinctive reaction etched deep into his genes and soul that kept his nerves constantly taut.

"Hehe, seeing how worried you are about me, Master, I suddenly don't feel jealous of them anymore," Manabe said happily, waving her finger in front of Kaoru's eyes. "But I think you really don't need to worry about me so much. Even if I get expelled, it wouldn't matter."

Kaoru grabbed her wrist, frowning. "Where would you go if you got expelled now?"

"Hasn't Master made arrangements?" Manabe countered. "I've noticed your location data - you've left the school before, right?"

It made sense that she would notice, since he'd taken the school phone with him when he went out with Ichinose Honami last time.

"I have, but only as a last resort."

"That's enough then. Saki-chan and I have prepared for the worst-case scenario. We're ready to take down Ryuen for you at any time."

"Isn't that a terrorist's statement?" Kaoru released her hand, sighing inwardly.

In truth, Manabe Shiho was mentally preparing herself.

Thanks to ANHS special systems, it was inevitable that someone from their grade would eventually be expelled.

Judging from this forced expulsion incident, future expulsions might become even more arbitrary - perhaps even decided by random lottery.

"Hehe, don't worry, it probably won't be my turn this time," Manabe Shiho said, her face returning to its cheerful expression.

"Master has so many countermeasures prepared. Even if everyone votes for me, you can still save me."

"That's true, but I don't know what I'm so worried about either." Kaoru thought for a moment. "I suppose I hate feeling powerless. If any of you got expelled and I couldn't do anything about it - that would be what I hate most."

Manabe Shiho watched him for a while before Yamashita Saki suddenly spoke up.

"That's completely irrational, Master."

"I'm the type of man who chooses 'all of the above,' so being irrational is normal for me," Kaoru said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Doesn't that match the impression you have of me?" "In my impression, our master was a more despicable and rational guy."

Manabe Shiho whispered softly.

Yabu Naami added, "A demon who could trick us into signing unequal treaties."

"Someone who could order us to take off our clothes without even blinking."

Yamashita Saki said with a stern face, her braided hair making her expression appear even more serious, as if Kaoru was an irredeemable villain.

The corner of Kaoru's mouth twitched, but then he saw Manabe Shiho tugging at the hem of his clothes with her small hand, her pretty face slightly flushed.

"Please do something that matches our impression of a master."

Kaoru remained expressionless.

Karuizawa and the others are succubi, and you all are too?

But on the school rooftop, it wouldn't be bad to indulge in corruption occasionally.

Chapter 556: The Student Council Tea Party

Kaoru wrestled with Tachibana Akane for a while.

Even without trying to feel it, the softness of the young girl still held an uncontrollable allure.

Perhaps because he had just been through the ordeal with Manabe Shiho and the others, his youthful body couldn't withstand even the slightest temptation.

Facing the girl in his arms, he couldn't help but recall the intimacy from two days ago.

At first, Tachibana Akane had wanted to beat him up, but as they wrestled, she suddenly felt a familiar stirring.

Noticing him staring intently at her, her body stiffened involuntarily.

The two exchanged a silent glance.

Tachibana Akane stopped, sitting blushing in his arms, not daring to move recklessly. Her voice carried a hint of anger.

"Pervert, put it away quickly!"

"If you just stay still, it'll be fine."

Kaoru felt somewhat awkward.

His control over his body seemed to be weakening; every time he encountered them, he couldn't resist.

"It's not that I'm cold-hearted. Even if we were to do it, Honami and the others are still here. We'd be discovered."

Tachibana Akane leaned closer, whispering to him, "They seem a bit displeased with me now. How was I supposed to know they were still inexperienced? It's not my fault."

Kaoru looked at her with a strange expression.

What was with this slightly smug look of hers?

Although he knew well that Tachibana Akane wasn't wrong, he couldn't help but want to tease her.

Spring had quietly arrived, the frost gradually melting—it was the season when ducks are the first to know the warmth of the river water.

The girl in his arms also felt warm to the touch, soft and emitting a faint, elusive fragrance.

This unique scent stirred something in Kaoru's heart.

His hands gently clasped her slender waist.

The small blazer suited her perfectly, outlining her youthful curves completely.

Certain images flashed before his eyes. Unable to suppress the impulse in his heart, Kaoru leaned close to her neck, inhaling her delicate fragrance.

Tachibana Akane's face flushed instantly.

She lightly pushed his shoulders and whispered, "Don't mess around. Why are you more impatient than I am?"

Kaoru's hand rested on her thigh.

Under her skirt were only slender legs clad in white calf socks, their smooth skin irresistible.

She instinctively resisted his movements but grew even weaker.

Tachibana Akane squirmed gently in his arms.

Though she could get up and leave, her gradually softening body wouldn't obey.

Under his restraint, Tachibana Akane couldn't struggle.

She only felt that these slightly rough hands possessed a magical power, sending shivers of tingling sensation through her, as if tiny ants were crawling all over her body.

Before long, Tachibana Akane was already gripping Kaoru's collar with both hands, her face flushed like a drunken person's, eyes misty as she stared fixedly at Kaoru.

Just as Tachibana Akane was gradually becoming immersed in the moment, Kaoru stopped and looked at her with an ambiguous smile.

Tachibana Akane snapped back to reality, extremely furious and wanting to bite this guy to death.

But she didn't dare move.

"Are you two doing something bad?"

Ichinose Honami leaned closer, her nose twitching as she obviously tried to detect any suspicious smells.

"Not at all!"

Tachibana Akane immediately denied it, "Honami-chan, aren't you going to teach this guy a lesson?"

"Why?"

Ichinose Honami took the opportunity to sit beside Kaoru, her citrus scent instantly cutting through the sticky atmosphere around them.

Tachibana Akane stammered, unable to come up with an answer. She just wanted to change the subject and had no real reason to begin with.

"Senpai, when you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

Kaoru looked at her flustered expression with amusement, happily patting her skirt.

Tachibana Akane was nearly driven mad with anger.

She originally wanted to bite Kaoru, but then her eyes shifted as if she had thought of a better way to teach this person a lesson.

So she began moving imperceptibly, right in front of Ichinose Honami, causing Kaoru's expression to freeze.

"Kaoru, maybe I'm worrying too much, but are you both going to be alright with your exams?"

Kaoru turned to see that Asahina Nazuna, who had been some distance away earlier, had now also sat beside him, bringing with her a fresh, girlish fragrance.

He could now be described as having his arms around both sides, with someone even clinging to him.

"As for me, I have Kaoru's Personal points, so I should be fine."

Ichinose Honami said, "But Suzune's situation isn't looking good, is it?"

It seemed they were quite concerned about Class D of the first year.

"From what I can see now, there shouldn't be any problems."

Before coming, Kaoru had already received a message from Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, and he was somewhat surprised by Horikita Suzune's performance.

Even so, Kaoru still explained the specific situation to Ichinose Honami and Asahina Nazuna, and both of them visibly relaxed considerably.

Asahina Nazuna hesitated for a moment: "Actually, I have a question I want to ask you."

Kaoru thought she was going to talk about Nagumo Miyabi and nodded slightly, while simultaneously pressing down on Tachibana Akane's slender waist in an attempt to stop her movements.

"During the training camp exam, did you stop Nagumo-kun's actions?"

Kaoru froze slightly, and even Tachibana Akane on him stopped moving.

"You know about that?"

"I overheard it by chance before."

Asahina Nazuna sighed softly, "I can understand wanting to save your own classmates, but I found out that might not be the case. This time when you attacked Nagumo-kun, was it retaliation for what happened before?"

Ichinose Honami suppressed her emotions and stared intently at Kaoru, waiting for his answer.

"You could say it's retaliation."

Kaoru neither confirmed nor denied it.

Asahina Nazuna remained silent for a moment: "If that's all, your retaliation is too childish. Nagumo-kun won't step down because of this. It's different from your usual style."

"How is it different?"

Kaoru asked calmly. Asahina Nazuna took a deep breath and smiled slowly. "Because you panicked. This is the first time I've seen you flustered. With four students facing expulsion in one grade, you don't know what Nagumo-kun might do. You're worried you can't protect them, so you decided to strike first and make Nagumo-kun panic instead."

Ichinose Honami fell into deep thought, seemingly pondering Asahina's words.

Kaoru initially wanted to resist a bit longer, but upon seeing Asahina's gaze, he gave up.

"Was I that obvious?"

"Not really. Someone who doesn't know you well probably wouldn't have guessed."

Asahina smiled faintly. "I was just thinking about how to understand you better. Little Honami told me that instead of continuing to struggle with it, I should take the initiative to share my thoughts with you."

Kaoru looked toward Ichinose Honami, who playfully stuck out her tongue at him.

"I don't understand why?"

Asahina looked at him with questioning eyes.

This question felt similar to Manabe Shiho's doubts about him, making Kaoru wrestle with his thoughts for a moment.

"Do I have to answer?"

"No need."

"Huh?"

Kaoru was confused.

If the question didn't require an answer, why were you being so serious about it?

Seeing his expression, Asahina couldn't help but laugh softly.

She poked his cheek teasingly. "I was just finding an excuse for myself. Your answer isn't important - I've already reached my own conclusion."

What that conclusion was, perhaps only she knew.

Kaoru felt somewhat frustrated, thinking he'd been tricked by this senior once again.

"I'll teach her a lesson for you."

Ichinose Honami suddenly whispered these words close to his ear.

Before Kaoru could react, the girl's small hand had already grabbed him.

In that instant, both Kaoru and Tachibana Akane were startled.

They saw Ichinose Honami looking at them with a knowing smile - it's not like they were fools, anyone would notice when someone was misbehaving nearby, right?

Soon enough, Asahina's eyes widened in shock as she stared dumbfounded at Ichinose's actions.

"W-wait, hold on! Could you at least consider my presence here!"

Tachibana Akane glared at Ichinose with a flushed face, but when she saw what was in her hand, she inexplicably grew timid.

Her mouth went dry as she tried to look away, yet couldn't help stealing glances.

"Seeing something so pitiful, don't you want to help him out, Tachibana-senpai?"

As she said this, Ichinose's gaze drifted toward Asahina nearby.

Clearly, Asahina, witnessing such a scene for the first time, had completely short-circuited.

"N-no, that's not what I meant! This makes me feel really strange! Am I just a tool for you two? Even I would feel embarrassed in a place like this! Right?"

Tachibana felt her mind go blank. Wasn't she supposed to be embarrassed?

Moreover, treating a senior like this clearly showed Ichinose was a disrespectful junior.

She must have misjudged her!

Though various thoughts flashed through her mind, when the familiar sensation truly came, Tachibana obediently closed her mouth.

Fine, if she's meant to be a tool, then so be it - that had been her original intention anyway.

Chapter 557: The Mantis Stalks the Cicada

While the student council was holding their tea party, Nagumo Miyabi had already found his target.

"What do you want with me?"

Sudo, who had been heading to the basketball club in a sour mood, found himself unexpectedly intercepted and led behind the school building.

The person before him was naturally not Nagumo, but Iijima Ryota.

As Nagumo Miyabi's most trusted subordinate at the moment, Iijima Ryota was responsible for conveying Nagumo's intentions to him.

Of course, Nagumo Miyabi didn't fully trust Iijima Ryota either, and was observing their every move from not far away.

"I'm quite interested in your first-year voting exam."

Iijima Ryota glanced behind Sudo Ken and saw no one there.

At this moment, Ike Kanji was with Yamauchi Haruki, so Nagumo Miyabi had chosen the isolated Sudo Ken.

Sudo Ken remained vigilant: "Who are you? An upperclassman?"

"Watch your tone with your seniors. The senior before you might actually be able to help you."

Iijima Ryota frowned slightly, reminded of Kaoru who often ordered him around.

Sudo Ken snorted disdainfully: "What could you possibly help me with?"

Under normal circumstances, given his temper, he would have turned and walked away long ago.

If Iijima Ryota hadn't mentioned the exam, which piqued his interest, he wouldn't have bothered with this nonsensical upperclassman at all.

"Let me introduce myself first. I'm Iijima from Class 2-A. Sudo-kun, pleased to meet you."

Perhaps because of Iijima Ryota's polite attitude, Sudo Ken relaxed his guard slightly, though still puzzled.

"How do you know my name?"

Iijima Ryota didn't beat around the bush and got straight to the point: "Yes, I specifically sought you out today, representing Nagumo-kun who wants to cooperate with you."

Sudo Ken was startled, finally realizing what Class 2-A meant.

The conflict between Kaoru and Nagumo had been the school's biggest news, especially since the cause was suspected to be a love triangle - a plot too juicy to ignore.

"You want to cooperate with me?"

Sudo Ken pointed at himself incredulously, "Do you think I can defeat Kaoru's Class A?"

"With Nagumo-kun here, we will win."

Iijima Ryota said sternly, "Besides, we don't expect you to defeat him. If possible, we hope to cooperate with your Class 1-D."

Sudo Ken instinctively wanted to refuse.

What did this have to do with him? He was already worried about expulsion.

Getting involved in the conflict between Kaoru and Nagumo would be suicidal.

"Actually, our goals align. Nagumo-kun wants Mitoma-kun expelled, and you want to climb to Class A too, don't you?"

These words made Sudo Ken waver.

If Ryuen Kakeru had said this, he would have at least hesitated.

But Iijima Ryota was an upperclassman, so there was no issue of collusion or betrayal.

Some people would kill to have upperclassmen help them.

"What's the point of telling me this? Horikita, Hirata, and Kushida would all be more useful than me. Aside from physical ability, I'm basically useless."

Compared to his arrogance at the start of school, the current Sudo Ken had a clear understanding of himself after being repeatedly put down by Horikita Suzune and others.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have accepted Horikita Suzune's nomination for his expulsion.

"No, before approaching you, we already conducted an evaluation. You're very suitable to be our cooperation partner."

Iijima Ryota lied through his teeth, "Kushida and Karuizawa have unclear relationships with Mitoma-kun, so it's hard to say if they would agree to cooperate. Hirata-kun and Horikita are too rigid and don't want to rely on our help."

His words were half-truths and half-lies.

Upon hearing the names Karuizawa and Kushida, Ken Sudo actually somewhat believed they had connections with Kaoru, which was why he didn't intervene when Haruki Yamauchi attacked them.

When it came to describing Horikita as rigid, Sudo completely believed Ryota Iijima, since the Horikita in his impression was exactly that kind of person—someone who only trusted her own strength and refused anyone's help.

Even so, Sudo still verbally insisted, "Even if you say that, I don't have the ability to help you. No one in the class cooperates with me."

Finally, he added, "Tomorrow is the voting exam, and I'm also within the expulsion range. I might be leaving here soon."

Yamauchi had stirred up trouble in the class, dragging Sudo and Kanji down with him.

Their names would undoubtedly be high-frequency topics in tomorrow's exam.

Despite his dissatisfaction, Sudo honestly hoped his friends could stay safe and that Ryuen would truly cast Class C's Praise Votes for Yamauchi.

However, Ryota Iijima noticed a trace of unwillingness in his eyes.

"In that case, let's treat this voting exam as our first collaboration."

Sudo looked at the person before him in surprise.

Hadn't his words been clear enough?

"You really want to help me?"

"Are you willing to just drop out like this?"

"But she's right—my contributions to the class have been too low."

"With Nagumo's power, your future will surely make her look at you in a new light. You might even lead the class to touch the crown of Class A. Don't you want to present this victory to her?"

In an instant, Sudo was deeply tempted, even swallowing hard.

"I think you're aware of Nagumo's capabilities. He reigns over the entire second year, he's the student council president, and he once led his class to surpass Class A in one fell swoop. Countless students dreaming of promotion to Class A gather around him. If he's willing, you too can break through the defenses of Classes C and B and make the lofty Class A witness your strength firsthand."

By the end, Ryota Iijima remained expressionless.

So what if Nagumo was currently being pushed back by Mitoma?

Who didn't have a glorious past?

Clearly, Sudo, unaware of the truth, was taken in by this.

After all, the day Nagumo assumed the student council presidency was his moment of greatest triumph.

Who could have imagined that in less than half a year, his reign would already be precarious and on the verge of collapse?

Sudo didn't pay attention to Ryota Iijima's expression; his mind was filled with images of himself leading Class D to rise to Class A.

How astonished his classmates would be then, and how pleasantly surprised Horikita would look.

"What... what should I do?"

Hearing Sudo's slightly flustered voice, Ryota Iijima sighed inwardly.

It was just as Nagumo had predicted.

"That depends on how much you can tell me. Without knowing your class's situation, there's not much I can do, right?"

Sudo held nothing back and immediately told Ryota Iijima everything that had happened today.

After listening, Ryota Iijima fell into deep thought.

Sudo watched him nervously, as if awaiting a doctor's final verdict.

Could this situation still be salvaged?

"Someone from your class must be expelled now." Iijima Ryota suddenly remarked, "However, this person doesn't necessarily have to be you or your friends. After all, your rationalist believes anyone who doesn't contribute to the class falls within the scope of expulsion."

The so-called rationalist naturally referred to Horikita Suzune - discarding the least useful members of the class was undoubtedly the most rational and emotionless decision.

Yet precisely this point happened to align with Nagumo Miyabi's way of thinking.

Chapter 558: Drawing Water with a Bamboo Basket

"You've done well."

After listening to Iijima Ryota's report, Nagumo offered a faint word of encouragement.

During their conversation, Iijima Ryota had kept his phone call on speaker, allowing Nagumo to hear everything clearly.

Perhaps the psychological shadow cast by Tonokawa and others ran too deep, making it difficult for Nagumo Miyabi to trust those around him now.

Even a childhood friend could be stolen away—it was a miracle he wasn't more paranoid.

"Will this really work?" Iijima Ryota asked cautiously. "Given the current situation, Class D is likely to cast all their Criticism Votes against Yamauchi-kun. Mitoma-kun hasn't used his Praise Vote yet."

He knew Nagumo's original plan—having Ryuen approach Yamauchi Haruki was Nagumo's decision.

Since the start of the third semester, Nagumo had been meticulously studying the interpersonal relationships around Kaoru.

After the training camp ended, he found himself deeply puzzled.

Kaoru's actions at the time were highly unusual.

If the other party had been aware of Nagumo's plans, he shouldn't have met with Yamamura Miki.

Feigning ignorance would have been the logical way to conceal his intentions.

Yet, Kaoru met with Yamamura Miki.

The moment they made contact, Nagumo knew his plan was likely exposed.

But he was so bewildered at the time, and based on past experiences dealing with Kaoru, he even wondered if Kaoru was deliberately baiting him.

It wasn't until after the training camp ended that he finally realized—Kaoru hadn't been in a rational state of mind at all.

Nagumo let out a soft sigh.

Though he had failed, he had managed to uncover a chink in Kaoru's armor.

If even someone like Yamamura Miki could provoke a reaction from Kaoru, Nagumo suddenly became very interested in the people surrounding him.

Moreover, with rumors proliferating during winter break, it became easier for Nagumo to gather intelligence about Kaoru.

Much of the information even came directly from students in Class A.

Kamuro, Sakayanagi, Morishita Ai, Yamamura Miki, Ichinose Honami, Amikura, Karuizawa, Kushida , Sakura Airi, Hasebe Haruka, Tachibana Akane, Kiryuin Fuka, Asahina Nazuna...

No wonder people called Kaoru the "Harem Overlord."

Even Nagumo was stunned for a moment—the number of girls he himself had hooked up with couldn't compare to Kaoru's.

However, this made Nagumo feel more at ease.

He wasn't afraid of a rival having a harem of three thousand; he was only wary of those who remained chaste and untouched.

With Yamamura Miki serving as an example, Nagumo's next move became obvious.

Since Kaoru had stolen his childhood friend, he would make Kaoru lose a woman in return—a fair exchange.

Class A was clearly not an option.

Nagumo had initially hoped Ichinose Honami might show some reaction, but she displayed no signs of struggling for Personal Points.

He could only conclude that Kaoru had spare Personal Points to support his little girlfriend.

Therefore, the targets had to be from Class D—Kushida, Karuizawa and others.

After observing Class D for several days, Nagumo finally noticed Yamauchi's existence.

The boy constantly complained to his friends about Kaoru's misdeeds and sometimes fantasized about girls in class confessing to him.

When Nagumo heard Yamauchi Haruki claim that Sakura Airi had once confessed to him, he was overjoyed.

Perfect! This was exactly the kind of "brilliant" person he needed!

Indeed, Nagumo Miyabi's plan was to utilize the "brilliant" Yamauchi Haruki to openly attack Karuizawa and Kushida, drawing Kaoru's attention—ideally making him cast his Praise Vote for these two.

Only after that would Nagumo's true target emerge.

"Making him think the dust has settled will also improve our chances of success."

Nagumo Miyabi revealed a faint smile. "It seems Horikita-senpai sister is quite capable. One can only say, as expected of siblings."

Due to Horikita Suzune's intervention, before Kaoru could even get involved, Yamauchi Haruki had already suffered a crushing defeat today.

By the time of tomorrow's exam, Class D's Criticism Votes would likely concentrate on Yamauchi Haruki.

Iijima Ryota remained silent.

Initially, he thought Nagumo's targets were Karuizawa and others, never expecting it to be merely a smokescreen.

Had he not been sent to contact Sudo today, he might have been kept in the dark by Nagumo until the very end.

"Should we meet with her?"

From both Iijima Ryota's and Nagumo's perspectives, Horikita Suzune had absolutely no connection to Kaoru.

In fact, she could even be considered part of the faction hostile toward him.

Horikita Suzune rarely interacted with Kaoru, maintaining an icy demeanor toward everyone—including him.

Moreover, her desire to reach Class A was too intense; she was single-mindedly focused on leading her class upward.

Over time, even Class D came to believe that although this woman wasn't good with words, her intentions were genuine. Some even began to find this trait endearing.

If even her classmates firmly believed this, it went without saying that Nagumo Miyabi, unaware of the details, viewed Horikita Suzune merely as Horikita Manabu's sister—an impression that wasn't particularly deep.

As Horikita Manabu's sister, ending up in Class D must be quite dissatisfying for her, right?

"Heh, of course I'll meet with her."

Nagumo admired Horikita Suzune's decision-making, finding it aligned closely with his own thought process.

Iijima Ryota showed hesitation, as if wanting to speak but holding back.

Nagumo Miyabi noticed his concern and asked, "Are you thinking our current chances of success aren't high?"

"From what I know, Sudo-kun and the others don't have particularly strong interpersonal relationships."

Iijima Ryota's tone was tactful, appearing curious while actually seeking more information.

"Sakura-san's presence may be faint, but I don't believe Sudo-kun has the ability to mobilize the majority."

"Iijima-kun, if you say that, Kanji won't agree."

Nagumo Miyabi smiled faintly. "From what I've heard, this student gets along quite well in their class. Although the girls tend to look down on him, the boys surprisingly welcome him."

If there were a few popular boys in Class D, aside from Hirata Yosuke, it would probably be Ike Kanji.

However, the latter's popularity came primarily from the male students.

Well, the boys in this class weren't shy about commenting on their female classmates' figures, with Ike Kanji and Yamauchi Haruki essentially leading the charge.

"As long as a quarter of them are willing to cast their votes, I can make her withdraw."

Since Yamauchi Haruki had already drawn the obvious fire, many would overlook how the remaining ammunition should be distributed.

They'd likely either vote for someone they disliked or follow Horikita Suzune's suggestion and target underperforming students.

During this process, Nagumo Miyabi had ample room to maneuver.

Instead of having Sudo Ken attempt to rally support to save Yamauchi Haruki, he promised that Ryuen's Praise Vote would be cast for them, ensuring it would offset the Criticism Votes they received.

How should this be executed?

Nagumo Miyabi's idea was to have them contact their dubious friends and gather as many votes as possible.

The specific pretext was that Ryuen's Praise Vote would neutralize the Criticism Votes, making it difficult for Yamauchi Haruki to be expelled.

Therefore, they needed to select another person to ensure the exam concluded safely.

As long as this group felt that merely voting for Yamauchi Haruki was not secure enough and that a backup plan was necessary, Nagumo Miyabi's plan would be halfway to success.

Who exactly should they target?

Of course, it would be someone who contributed nothing to the class, following Horikita Suzune's plan.

Once Sudo Ken, Ike Kanji, Yamauchi Haruki, Koenji Rokusuke, and others were excluded, the answer became obvious.

Sakura Airi—she was almost invisible in the class, with average grades, poor physical ability, and virtually no interpersonal relationships.

Even if she were expelled, no one would feel particularly burdened.

The reason Nagumo Miyabi targeted her was because she was part of Kaoru's study group.

Additionally, Ryuen Kakeru's probing of Yamauchi Haruki easily revealed that Kaoru and Sakura Airi had an unusual relationship.

Thus, Sudo Ken and Ike Kanji had only one task: to persuade those around them as much as possible.

At the critical moment when everyone's attention was on Yamauchi Haruki, if Sakura Airi accumulated a certain number of Criticism Votes, it could very well deliver a surprise.

After all, Criticism Votes and Praise Votes would inevitably concentrate heavily on the top candidates.

Nagumo Miyabi only needed to trim the top recipients of Criticism Votes.

He held Ryuen's Praise Vote.

If Sudo Ken could secure some additional Praise Votes, there was a strong chance of neutralizing the Criticism Votes for the top three candidates, allowing the fourth or fifth—Sakura Airi—to rise to the top.

Of course, secrecy was paramount.

Nothing could be leaked.

He needed to ensure Kaoru remained completely unaware.

Even so, Nagumo Miyabi was well aware of the risks involved.

Just as Iijima Ryota had said, it was entirely possible that all this effort would come to nothing.

He wondered if he could persuade Horikita Suzune tomorrow.

A quarter of the votes would be highly probable, while one-third would guarantee victory.

Chapter 559: Outsourcing the Outsourcing.

Kaoru received a message from Iijima Ryota in the evening.

Upon seeing Nagumo Miyabi's plan, he was genuinely moved.

Although it seemed risky and could easily fail—like a clown dancing on a tightrope—Kaoru understood his reasoning.

Nagumo Miyabi only had the Praise Votes of one class, while Kaoru had the Praise Votes of two classes.

The gap was simply too large, so Nagumo Miyabi could not afford to reveal his true intentions.

If exposed, his plan would have no chance of success, leaving him with no choice but to watch helplessly.

Kaoru was grateful that Manabe and the others had not been exposed and that he had kept them hidden.

Otherwise, Nagumo Miyabi would have attacked on both fronts, forcing him to use Personal points.

On the other hand, he began to worry about Asahina Nazuna's safety.

What if Nagumo Miyabi was even willing to target his own childhood friend?

It was clear that he needed to put an end to Nagumo Miyabi's schemes as soon as possible.

After some thought, Kaoru decided he had to meet with the acting chairman.

The controversy surrounding the impeachment of Nagumo Miyabi has persisted until now, yet the school has shown no response.

It is evident that the acting chairman forcibly suppressed this turmoil.

If it were an ordinary student, even if they realized this, they could only stare helplessly, as the chairman holds an authoritative position in the school—his word is the school regulation, even if he is merely an acting chairman.

Kaoru was contemplating what identity he should use to approach this acting chairman.

He knew the other party's identity, and the other party was likely wondering what exactly he was.

At the time, he had been too busy developing his career in the entertainment industry and hadn't delved deeply into the political and business circles.

Moreover, he died too quickly—right in the gap when these people were interested but hadn't yet made their move.

Recalling the past, Kaoru stood up and opened the window of his room.

He saw the bright moon hanging in the sky, casting a clear glow, with countless stars twinkling like faint city lights floating in the night sky.

"Miracles aren't necessarily about coming back to life, are they?"

At this moment, he was alone in the room.

Karuizawa had happily told him about her day, but the impact was so overwhelming that she couldn't come to his place and instead went to discuss tomorrow's exam with her girlfriends.

In reality, these girlfriends were taking the opportunity to comfort Karuizawa, using this chance to strengthen their bonds.

Kushida's situation was quite similar.

[We clearly agreed back then that you would be my outsourcing for life.]

Kaoru felt the gentle breeze from outside the window, then slowly exhaled a breath of turbid air, his eyes gleaming.

"To be honest, this time has been too long."

He turned and walked back to the living room, passing by the kitchen where he could see the cooking oil Horikita Suzune had used.

"What would they think if they saw me loafing around in a high school for a year or two?"

[Next time, I'll take you to a real otherworld—cat girls, dragon girls, bunny girls, and succubi. Whose jade feet you want to lick, you can lick.]

"Do you think that's possible?"

Not only was it impossible, but Kaoru even felt that staying here any longer was a bad idea.

He needed to resolve matters with the school and his agency as soon as possible.

[What about me... then?]

As soon as Kaoru sat down, his phone vibrated a few times.

Picking it up, he saw that Ayanokoji had called him.

"Sudo and Ike are secretly planning the vote. They intend to cast Criticism Votes for Sakura while having us cast Praise Votes for the two of them."

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka didn't bother with pleasantries and got straight to the point.

"I understand."

Kaoru's reaction was calm. "How many people are willing to cooperate with them?"

"It's unclear for now. Their specific reasoning is to find an alternative scapegoat to prevent Class C from actually casting Praise Votes for Yamauchi. So, they want to confirm a backup early to avoid accidentally harming their own people."

Just hearing this flimsy excuse, Ayanokoji was already speechless on the spot.

However, upon second thought, such an easily debunked reason might actually mislead people.

Since Sudo and Ike are also within the range of potential expulsion, this excuse would only make others think they are trying to save themselves, thereby overlooking the underlying scheme.

"Aside from me, they've approached quite a few others, such as Sotomura, Hondo, Miyamoto, Ijuin, and so on."

Kaoru was somewhat surprised.

This way, the other party had gathered nearly double-digit votes.

After Yamauchi Haruki's complete failure, Sudo Ken could still rally these people—no wonder Yamauchi Haruki had managed to secure covert support from quite a few.

"How did you know?"

"Sudo and Ike visited them one by one. Although I don't know exactly who agreed, these people usually have good relationships with them and are likely to have consented."

"Aside from using the excuse of abandoning Yamauchi to save themselves, what else did they say?"

"Nothing. They said they didn't want to be expelled. Sudo has contributions from the sports festival, and Ike was useful on the uninhabited island. That alone is enough to persuade some people."

"In comparison, Sakura has no presence, so even if she's expelled, it doesn't matter, right?"

"Right."

Kaoru pondered for a long while, while Ayanokoji Kiyotaka across from him waited quietly for him to speak.

"Who do you think might receive Criticism Votes besides Yamauchi, Sudo, and Ike?"

As if he had anticipated the question, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka replied without hesitation.

"Koenji, Horikita, Karuizawa, Shinohara. These are the ones likely to gather a higher number of votes."

"You're quite concerned about your own class."

Kaoru was somewhat speechless. "If you keep maintaining the presence of a background character, the next one to be expelled might be you."

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was momentarily at a loss for words. In reality, his situation was only slightly better than Sakura Airi's.

If someone really decided to vote for him, it was unlikely anyone would speak up for him.

However, after hesitating for a moment, he said, "If you cast a Praise Vote for Sakura, try to keep it minimal if you don't want to draw attention."

Kaoru fell silent for a moment. "The Ayanokoji I remember wouldn't be this caring."

"If I can earn a positive evaluation like 'caring' in your mind, then my goal is accomplished," Ayanokoji Kiyotaka said.

"As a partner, I think I'm doing quite well."

Kaoru chuckled. "Fair point. As a partner, I've decided—I'll take you to meet the new acting chairman."

"You're not planning to sell me out, are you?"

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka feigned concern.

"It depends on whether the other party is willing to pay more. With a title like 'Masterpiece,' you're at least worth a fortune."

Though he knew Kaoru was mocking him, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka could only feel frustrated inwardly, aware that he was no match for this person.

Perhaps not even his father could handle him—this person possessed real power.

"Next year," Kaoru suddenly said, "I'll leave the school. After that, I'll take you to see a broader world. The path your father laid out for you is utter trash."

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka didn't respond.

His eyes flickered slightly.

His father was striving for a position among the elite and needed his son's assistance.

After hanging up, Kaoru turned his attention to the Wish Machine and said, "What do you think of this outsourcing?"

[Amazing! It's just like the old you!]

"Good. I'll assign this person to you in the future. You can give me half the profits."

Kaoru thought the matter was settled, but the Wish Machine slowly typed out a question mark.

"What do you mean by typing a question mark?"

Kaoru was displeased.

He had kindly prepared a workhorse for the Wish Machine, only to be met with this kind of treatment.

[No, isn't this the outsourced task you gave me?]

Kaoru furrowed his brow, his expression growing even more displeased.

"Who told you this was your outsourced task? This is my outsourced task."

Even the usually lazy wish-granting machine was dumbfounded—could someone really take kickbacks like this?

Kaoru couldn't be bothered to deal with her. After making her do so much work without even being considered a formal employee, was it strange to pass the task along?

[I think you'd be more impressive in another world.]

"Just tell me if you want it or not?"

[Guh... I want it...]

Kaoru thought for a moment.

On the streets filled with an otherworldly atmosphere, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was licking the Succubus Lady's delicate feet—the image carried an inexplicably strong sense of twisted amusement.

But, after all, this was something Ayanokoji Kiyotaka had willingly chosen to do.

Kaoru was merely responsible for guiding him to experience a broader world, without lying about it.

[My outsourced task's outsourced task is not my outsourced task...]

The wish-granting machine muttered regretfully in his ear, but she would probably come to accept this reality in a few days.

Kaoru picked up his phone and began contacting Ichinose Honami and Katsuragi Kohei.

Chapter 560: The Dwarf King Sakayanagi.

The day of the exam was a Saturday, and students had to arrive at the classroom by 9 a.m.

Though everyone had their own thoughts, the atmosphere in the classroom today was more oppressive than ever, perhaps because it was the first time they faced the crisis of forced expulsion.

Many had arrived earlier than usual.

Just as Kaoru reached the school building's entrance, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

The moment he turned around, a finger was pressed against his cheek.

"Good news—our classmates' opinion of you has changed."

It was Ichinose Honami's voice, accompanied by the pleasant scent of citrus.

She smiled as she withdrew her finger, her smooth hair radiating the freshness of the morning sun.

Her blazer accentuated her strikingly attractive figure, while the white shirt beneath clung tightly to her full chest.

A bow tie rested on her collar, blocking any view of her fair collarbone and revealing only a small section of her swan-like neck, delicate and adorable.

Beside her were Chihiro and Amikura.

Kaoru hadn't seen them in a while.

To be honest, though they wore the same uniform, it made Shiranami Chihiro appear particularly petite and fragile, giving off the vibe of the girl next door.

Her short hair, especially, made her look like a child who hadn't quite grown up yet.

"Honami-chan told everyone about your offer—trading Personal points for Praise Votes. Everyone thought it was a pretty good deal."

Amikura casually moved a bit closer, blocking his view of Shiranami Chihiro.

"But without your proposal, these Praise Votes wouldn't have had much value to begin with."

Each person had two types of Praise Votes: one specifically for students in their own class and another for students in other classes.

For the former, everyone had three votes to give to anyone except themselves.

The latter consisted of only one vote, with very limited utility.

Kaoru's exchange of several million Personal points for Class B's Praise Votes was undoubtedly a bit of a loss for him.

However, in the eyes of Class B, his "loss" translated into boyfriend material, changing the opinions of some students who had previously been dissatisfied with him.

"Don't tell me your class has been gossiping about me behind my back every day?" As he spoke, Kaoru glanced at Shiranami Chihiro behind Mako Amikura.

The latter had been silently staring at him the whole time, which was somewhat unsettling.

"Ahaa, I don't think so. Everyone here is really nice." Ichinose Honami laughed somewhat guiltily.

It wasn't just Class B that was gossiping—the entire school was talking.

Kaoru immediately understood but didn't take it to heart as he placed his outdoor shoes in the locker.

"I'll just take it as them being jealous that I have such a cute girlfriend."

Ichinose Honami pursed her lips upon hearing this, yet couldn't suppress the upward curve of her mouth.

She seemed a bit too easily swayed by her boyfriend's sweet talk, didn't she?

Shiranami Chihiro stared quietly at the two, like an old cat watching a thieving kitten.

Kaoru felt a chill run down his spine, only to notice Amikura changing her shoes nearby.

The girl sported her usual high ponytail today, her back turned to Kaoru as she bent slightly, revealing a willow-like waist.

The hem of her skirt lifted just enough to hint at alluring curves, while her fair, full thighs displayed healthy, toned lines—neither too slender nor too muscular, bearing traces of exercise that suggested they'd feel wonderful to touch.

[Slap her feet],

[Use her shoes as a lunchbox],

[Put them in my mouth]...

Strange thoughts flashed through his mind.

Just as Kaoru tried to avert his gaze, Amikura noticed his peeking, the tips of her ears turning slightly red.

"Well now, seems I've arrived at the perfect moment."

Ryuen's voice appeared untimely beside them.

"Mitoma, I heard you gave your girlfriend millions. With that, both Class A and B have avoided dropouts. How enviable."

Kaoru sighed and turned to see Ryuen standing not far away with Ibuki, Ishizaki, and Albert—another typical Ryuen gathering.

"Ryuen-kun, I exchanged Praise Votes for Personal Points with Kaoru."

Ichinose Honami corrected Ryuen's statement.

She wasn't the type of woman who only relied on her boyfriend, though this transaction did appear more favorable to her.

"What difference does it make? I'm more curious about what he wants with those Praise Votes. Could he be planning to vote for himself with all of them?"

Ryuen tested Kaoru's intentions with a careless tone, suspecting that Kaoru might have learned about Nagumo Miyabi's movements.

But even if Kaoru had discovered something, it wouldn't matter. Ryuen had already received Nagumo's payment, and Class C's Praise Votes would still be cast.

"The special reward for this exam is Protection Points. I find them more useful than Personal Points."

Kaoru smiled. "You have Praise Votes too, right? Rather than letting your class waste them, why not give them to me?"

"How much can you offer?"

Ryuen showed keen interest.

Kaoru glanced at Ibuki and Ishizaki standing beside Ryuen before speaking.

"How about giving your class a spot in Class A?"

A spot in Class A?

Ishizaki's brain short-circuited.

With his intelligence, he couldn't quite process this, especially since Kaoru had directed the statement at him. Was he being bribed?

He couldn't help but look blankly at Ryuen.

"Are you trying to drive a wedge between us?"

Mio Ibuki was the first to react, glaring angrily at Kaoru. "Even if you want to buy our people out, we won't agree!"

'Just because you're rich doesn't mean you can do whatever you want!'

'These rich kids always think money can solve everything!'

'Go ahead and buy out their entire class, get them all promoted to Class A—otherwise i won't agree to this!'

Mio Ibuki understood all too well the terrifying trap hidden within Kaoru's words.

If anyone believed Kaoru and thought they could rely on his help to reach Class A, the class would inevitably split apart.

Some people didn't want to put in the effort, and with a shortcut right in front of them, they would stop at nothing to seize it.

Ibuki didn't know that Nagumo had once used this very method to divide students who tried to oppose him.

All she knew was that this was a trap.

"Don't get so worked up, Ibuki-san. Everyone wants to rise to Class A—I'm just offering them the opportunity. Have I done anything wrong?"

Kaoru shrugged innocently. "Honestly, I'd welcome someone like you in Class A."

Ibuki gritted her teeth, nearly stepping forward to punch him.

Fortunately, she held back, remembering they were at school, and abruptly turned her gaze to Ryuen beside her.

"Heh, Mitoma, while I'm honored that you like my Ibuki, she's one of my cherished students."

Ryuen gave a hollow smile. "How about converting this opportunity into Personal Points? I'll personally help you select students willing to rise to Class A."

Kaoru smiled faintly. "That's too much trouble for you. I just feel it's a shame that a student like Ibuki-san might end up expelled someday if she stays in your class."

Ibuki stared coldly at him, unmoved.

"It seems you're quite curious about who the dropouts on my side are."

Ryuen chuckled. "My thoughts align with Horikita's—those who don't obey should just drop out quietly."

Kaoru's gaze shifted as Horikita Suzune appeared nearby.

She had been silently eavesdropping on the conversation, and when the topic turned to her, she frowned slightly.

"My, my, it seems you're all having a lively chat."

Accompanied by the sound of a cane, Sakayanagi and Kamuro entered the school entrance.

Her eyes swept over Ichinose Honami, Ryuen Kakeru, and Kaoru in turn.

"May I join in?"

Sakayanagi wore a hat, making her appear even smaller and cuter.

Beside her, Kamuro stood like her personal bodyguard.

"Tch, I'm not interested in shorties."

Ryuen lazily stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Come talk to me after you've dealt with Katsuragi and this guy."

"You've become even more arrogant and conceited than before, Ryuen-kun."

Sakayanagi smiled sweetly, but the more amiable her smile, the more those familiar with her knew Ryuen had stepped squarely on her landmine.

To be honest, Ryuen was completely spreading rumors—her height wasn't short at all!

For instance, Karuizawa was 154 cm, while she was 150 cm.

If she were considered a shortie, then Karuizawa would be one too.

Kaoru almost laughed.

The reason she looked like a shortie was simple—she had the appearance of a sickly, petite girl.

However, as if equipped with radar, the moment he had that thought, the girl's sharp glare shot his way.