

Cote 561

Chapter 561: Too Much Gunpowder in the Air

As more and more students lingered in the entrance, curiously observing every move, Ryuen began to grow bored.

"Mitoma, let's continue our conversation another time."

Ryuen shoved his hands in his pockets and turned away from the group.

Seeing this, Ibuki shot a resentful glare at Kaoru before quickly following after him.

Apparently having caught on, Daichi Ishizaki also glared at Kaoru.

"I thought Ryuen-kun would at least care about this exam, but I guess I expected too much."

Ichinose Honami sighed beside them. "Still, the tension between you two keeps growing. Are you sure that's alright?"

"He acts like this in front of everyone. Wild animals roar at anything they see—it's a self-defense instinct."

Kaoru wanted to say that there was a lion hidden in his eyes, but Ichinose Honami definitely wouldn't get the reference.

"W-wild animals? No one would describe a classmate like that..."

As she spoke, Ichinose Honami struggled more and more to hold back her laughter, finally bursting out with a snort.

"Wild... wild animals..."

Her sense of humor was a bit strange.

Just then, Amikura poked Kaoru.

"Was what you said earlier about the Class A spots true?"

Facing her gaze, Kaoru answered without hesitation. "False. I don't have that many points to give away."

Amikura breathed a sigh of relief.

She leaned in slightly and lowered her voice: "Even though Honami hasn't told you, the class doesn't think very highly of you. Some people see you as a liar and a scumbag, but you did pretty well this time."

Kaoru looked at her in surprise, but she had already retreated back as if nothing happened.

"It seems I missed something."

Sakayanagi walked up to his side, her gaze fixed on Ichinose Honami as she gently applauded.

"I heard you managed to pass the exam smoothly. I sincerely congratulate you all."

Despite her smile, there was an inexplicable sense of sarcasm in her tone—perhaps that was Sakayanagi's natural talent.

"No, it is I who should congratulate you, Sakayanagi-san. This supplementary exam required no thought at all—someone has already paved the way to victory for you."

Ichinose Honami responded to Sakayanagi Arisu's applause with a smile of her own. Her tone was flawless, even carrying a hint of envy.

"Heh, so someone has already admitted their own weakness and had no choice but to rely on others. How surprising."

Sakayanagi Arisu gave a faint smile but silently tightened her grip on her cane, as if something had stung her eyes, causing her to narrow them slightly.

"I've always believed admitting one's weakness isn't a bad thing, because I know there will be people by my side, giving me the strength to move forward."

Ichinose Honami's eyes shone with a gentle light, unintentionally sweeping over Amikura and others before finally settling on Kaoru.

"Someone once said courage is knowing what you don't need to fear."

Kamuro could feel the middle school student beside her clenching her teeth tightly.

She felt utterly speechless, not understanding what the two were arguing about.

"Masumi, how do you think everyone sees me?" Kaoru suddenly asked her.

"Pervert."

Kamuro uttered the two words as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Being with you will infect me with perverted germs."

Kaoru nodded - being with him indeed brought pressure, just like back at the agency.

"I might be leaving for a while."

Instantly, Kamuro felt her entire body stiffen. What did he mean by that?

Kamuro turned her gaze to see Kaoru's face completely calm, as if he hadn't said anything at all.

This guy must be joking.

"How disgusting."

Kamuro stopped looking at him.

This kind of joke was just too disgusting.

Yet her heart continued to beat stiffly, as if a chill was gradually approaching, making her feel uneasy.

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Meanwhile, Ryuen encountered Yamauchi Haruki on the road.

The moment Yamauchi saw him, his face lit up with wild joy.

Perhaps thinking Ryuen was his lifeline, Yamauchi Haruki cried and begged incessantly, repeatedly asking if Ryuen would really give him the Praise Vote.

'This guy is beyond help,' Ryuen Kakeru thought, too lazy to humor him, and had Ishizaki drive him away.

If Sudo hadn't arrived in time, Ishizaki would probably have used his fists to make him leave.

"Why would you vote for this disgusting guy?" Ibuki frowned.

She deeply disliked the weeping Yamauchi Haruki - full of lies, and now clearly having a breakdown.

Ryuen didn't explain anything to her.

In fact, he hadn't told anyone in the class about the origins of this matter.

"Ibuki, do you know how many points I have now?"

"How would I know?"

"Fifteen million."

Hearing this number, Ibuki stared at Ryuen in shock.

She knew these weren't points squeezed from their class, but rewards Ryuen had obtained through his secret schemes.

"A wonderful number, isn't it, Ibuki?"

Ryuen laughed. "But the closer I get to twenty million, the more strongly I realize how shallow I was back then. Mitoma made me understand one thing."

Without waiting for Ibuki to speak, he continued on his own.

"The rules here can be changed. The school's bottom line is quite flexible, or rather, the school tacitly allows us to change the existing rules."

Ryuen recalled his past experiences - he had intentionally damaged cameras before, but the school only deducted some Class Points, not caring about what he had done.

Things like fighting should have been strictly prohibited by the school, but when he had beaten Ishizaki and Ibuki and others, during the school's inquiry, as long as the parties involved insisted it was accidental and the victims didn't press charges, the school would turn a blind eye.

Moreover, the fact that Kaoru could purchase points made Ryuen deeply aware of just how flexible the school's bottom line truly was.

Since the school was willing to concede to such an extent, could he push even further?

For instance, getting the school to alter certain rules or add new ones.

Ryuen had a wild idea: even the student council had the right to petition for rule changes, and he possessed the so-called all-powerful Personal Points—why couldn't he achieve the same?

Ibuki seemed startled by him, frozen in place as her mind raced, trying to grasp his meaning.

"What do you mean, Ryuen-kun?"

Daichi Ishizaki didn't understand. "Are you saying we can swap Class A for Class C?"

Ibuki's lips twitched, and she felt like punching him.

However, at that moment, someone spoke calmly.

"It's too troublesome, and the school might not agree. Why not just join the student council, Ryuen-kun?"

Ibuki and Ishizaki turned warily to see two figures appear on the nearby staircase, one with strikingly golden hair and a carefree smile that left a strong impression.

Almost no one in the entire school was unfamiliar with this person.

Second-year Class A, the current student council president, Nagumo Miyabi—the legend who once dominated the second-year students.

Chapter 562: You Are All His Slaves.

Ibuki had seen Nagumo before but didn't know him personally.

Besides, it was Saturday, and aside from first-years, there shouldn't be any upperclassmen in the school building.

Just as she grew wary of Nagumo's sudden appearance, Ryuen laughed heartily without a care.

"Hahaha, Nagumo, only idiots would join the student council now!"

His laughter was filled with mockery.

The person beside Nagumo moved, glaring at him indignantly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Because only fools would fall for it. Even your master is in trouble now—why should I wade into muddy waters?"

"You!"

"Iijima-kun, that's enough."

Nagumo reached out to stop the person beside him, smiling faintly.

"Ryuen-kun is right. The most important position in the student council is the president, and the most crucial authority belongs to the president. Everything else is trivial. It's understandable that Ryuen-kun isn't interested."

Iijima Ryota had no choice but to swallow his anger and put on a loyal facade in front of outsiders.

"However, Ryuen-kun, after I leave, the presidency will fall to Mitoma. How confident are you against him?"

Nagumo spoke calmly. "Among the first-years, you are the most likely to oppose Mitoma. Ichinose can't, Sakayanagi can't, and Class D is even less capable."

Ryuen teased, "Are you suggesting I become president?"

In an instant, Ibuki and Ishizaki held their breath.

If Ryuen became student council president, what benefits would their Class C gain?

The previous student council president was Horikita Manabu, and now it was Nagumo—both seemed incredibly formidable.

"Mitoma's Class A has over two thousand points, three to four times yours. Do you have any other options?"

Nagumo countered.

Without a doubt, the current first-year Class A was a veritable monster, with Class Points equal to the sum of the second, third, and fourth places combined

.However, Ryuen lazily remarked, "You always say joining the student council has benefits, but I haven't seen how the student council helps with special exams."

Iijima Ryota frowned. "What kind of treatment are you expecting? The student council can change the rules—isn't that what you want?"

His words drew a derisive laugh from Ryuen, as if he had seen something ridiculous, which irritated Iijima Ryota.

'Don't these juniors know how to respect their seniors?'

"Ryuen-san, why don't we join the student council?"

Ishizaki couldn't help but interject, feeling tempted by Iijima Ryota and Nagumo's words.

Ryuen stopped laughing and punched him lightly, saying irritably, "Idiot, he's the president. Only he has the authority to change the rules. Am I supposed to work for him for free for a year?"

Ishizaki closed his mouth, feeling wronged.

"So that's how you see me, Ryuen-kun. It seems there's a bit of a misunderstanding between us."

Nagumo smiled. "Although the student council is troublesome right now, the school has already approved my proposal. Moving forward, it will be easier for you to advance to Class A, and I won't make you work for nothing."

Ryuen sneered, completely unconvinced by what he saw as empty promises.

As Nagumo's current collaborator, he could withdraw at any time.

But joining the student council would mean binding himself to Nagumo.

They would either take down Kaoru together or sink with Nagumo.

"Mitoma bought Ichinose's Praise Votes. Your plan might be exposed."

Ryuen changed the subject, watching Nagumo with glee. "But unfortunately, according to our previous agreement, even if the plan fails, I won't be refunding you."

Ibuki glanced at him, then at Nagumo, finally understanding where his point had come from.

"Hah, I don't need that little money."

Nagumo's lips twitched.

He had been keeping an eye on the first-years and had learned the news almost simultaneously with Ryuen.

"I told you, as long as you're willing to deal with Mitoma, I'll cover all the expenses."

Ryuen deliberately whistled and said to Ibuki, "Hear that, Ibuki? From now on, don't ask me why. Everything is for our dear Mitoma."

Not only Ibuki's face darkened, but Iijima Ryota and Nagumo's expressions also turned grim.

"Whoa, got it! For Mitomaaaa!"

Ishizaki wholeheartedly echoed his leader.

"Nagumo-kun, why don't we collaborate with Horikita-san instead?"

Iijima Ryota voiced his dissatisfaction. "After all, Horikita-san is Horikita-senpai sister. I think she's more suitable to be the next president."

Nagumo gave him an expressionless glance, and Iijima Ryota laughed awkwardly.

"Now isn't the best time to talk to Horikita. Let's wait until the exam results are out."

Iijima Ryota agreed but felt puzzled.

Didn't he say he wanted Horikita Suzune to have the final say?

But upon second thought, Nagumo already knew that Kaoru had bought the Praise Votes from Class 1-B, which meant his plan had failed.

It wasn't surprising that he was giving up now.

To be honest, Iijima Ryota was secretly gloating.

He had never been optimistic about Nagumo's plan from the start, and not just because he was a spy.

The gap between the two sides was too vast.

The moment Kaoru detected even the slightest anomaly, Nagumo would fail.

This was because the plan hinged on two critical points: the Praise Votes from Class B of the first year and the Criticism Votes from Class D of the first year.

While Nagumo might manage the latter, securing the former—the Praise Votes from Class B—was an impossibility.

Without Class B's support, Nagumo could fail at any moment, and Ichinose Honami remained firmly on Kaoru's side, securely under his control all along.

"Right now, there's something I'm more concerned about than the exam," Nagumo said calmly.

"Ryuen-kun, would you like to place another order?"

Ryuen, assuming he was referring to the next exam, replied casually, "As long as you can afford the price, there's nothing I won't do."

"Good. I guarantee you'll be satisfied, provided you can deliver results that satisfy me as well."

Nagumo glanced at Ibuki and Ishizaki standing behind Ryuen, then further down the first-year hallway where occasional figures passed by.

His gaze then shifted back, settling briefly on Iijima Ryota beside him before locking onto Ryuen.

"There's a traitor among us."

The moment these words were spoken, Ryuen's smile vanished, and a flicker of panic crossed Iijima Ryota's eyes.

Before they could react, Nagumo laughed, a calm that seemed to precede madness.

"Every move we make is under Mitoma's surveillance. He knew our plan from the very beginning. There might be his people not only around me but possibly even in your class."

Ibuki's expression shifted sharply as she stared intently at Nagumo, searching for any trace of deception on his face.

Yet, she found nothing.

Because Nagumo stated his most certain truth in the calmest tone.

"The first years, second years, and third years—this school will soon become his playground. After I fail, all of you will become his slaves."

Before Ryuen could speak, Ibuki burst out, "Impossible! There's no way there's a traitor in our class!"

Nagumo shot her a cold glance. "What confidence do you have in Mitoma to shout that so boldly?"

Ibuki retorted immediately, "And what evidence do you have to suspect us?"

"Heh, because the truth speaks for itself," Nagumo said coldly. "Fools like you, who only know how to argue, will end up as Mitoma's slaves sooner or later."

Ibuki couldn't tolerate his mockery and rolled up her sleeves, ready to fight.

"Stop, Ibuki," Ryuen reached out to block her. "This isn't your place to speak. Go back to the classroom quietly. Ishizaki, you get out of here too."

Ibuki wanted to explode, but Ishizaki loyally restrained her and forcibly escorted her away, as the upcoming discussion was not something either of them should overhear.

Chapter 563: Desperate Struggle

The moment Nagumo spoke, Iijima Ryota instinctively panicked, his mind flashing with images of how Nagumo had previously dealt with traitors.

For a moment, he almost begged for mercy.

If not for his remaining rationality, Iijima Ryota might not have held on until now.

His mind went blank, repeatedly questioning himself: where had he gone wrong?

He was sure he hadn't done anything to expose himself.

He rarely met with Kiriya or Kaoru, contacting them only through his Alt account.

Instantly, Iijima Ryota's pupils trembled slightly.

He hurriedly reached into his pocket, attempting to delete his phone's chat history while he had the chance.

At that moment, Nagumo seized his wrist.

"Should I call you impressive, or foolish, Iijima-kun?"

Nagumo's voice held no trace of gentleness; instead, his laughter carried a dark undertone.

"Truly remarkable. Even when your woman fell for me, you didn't resist but swallowed your pride. I always thought you were a coward. Did Mitoma give you courage?"

The moment Nagumo grabbed him, Iijima Ryota knew he was finished.

He shouldn't have panicked like that—it had only exposed his identity.

"W-what are you talking about? I've long since lost any feelings for Rie!"

Iijima Ryota struggled desperately, but facing Nagumo's gaze, an inexplicable fear surged within him, as if he had been transported back to their first year.

Back then, Nagumo was the undisputed ruler of their grade.

Single-handedly, he had led their class to surpass Class A.

He brutally eliminated anyone who dared oppose him, and his commands were enforced from Class A to Class D—no one dared voice dissent.

In this moment, Iijima Ryota once again felt that same powerlessness.

Unaware that this emotion was psychologically termed "learned helplessness," he simply believed it was impossible to resist this person.

The more clueless he was about how he had been exposed, the deeper his despair toward Nagumo grew.

This guy was truly too difficult to deal with.

"You bastard! You've turned the entire class, the entire grade, into a playground for your selfish desires!"

Iijima Ryota's teeth chattered. "Everyone wishes you'd drop out immediately. We'd be far better off without a tyrant like you!"

Ryuen observed the two with keen interest.

It was the first time he had heard someone other than himself referred to as a tyrant.

"Heh, idiot. Do you think anyone is fooled by your righteous-sounding words? This is nothing but your dissatisfaction with my existence."

Nagumo wore an intensely mocking expression as he tightened his grip on Iijima's wrist and swiftly pulled the phone from his pocket.

Iijima glared at him with pure hatred, veins bulging on his neck.

Despite having the strength to fight back, he could only watch in humiliation as his phone was taken.

"Are you wondering how I uncovered your identity?"

Nagumo deliberately provoked Iijima's nerves, and the latter was indeed fixated on this question, though his thoughts were too chaotic to form a coherent response.

Nagumo sneered coldly and glanced at Ryuen. "This plan—only I know its full scope. The reason I had Ryuen-kun approach Yamauchi was because I couldn't get involved directly and risk alerting Mitoma."

"Actually, the initial situation unfolded exactly as you described."

Ryuen interjected, "Yamauchi was such a fool—so easy to manipulate. He mindlessly targeted Karuizawa and Kushida. That very night, my people witnessed them going to the second floor of the student dormitory."

Nagumo stated calmly, "It's no surprise Kaoru saw through my scheme. But the fact that he immediately stirred up a commotion against me proves he knew what I was thinking. He wanted to cloud my vision."

"Your plan was doomed from the start. He holds more cards than you do." Ryuen laughed.

Precisely because he knew this, he had no interest in participating in this exam from the very beginning.

"He knew what I was thinking, yet he didn't interrupt my plan immediately. Instead, he allowed me to push it this far."

Nagumo sneered repeatedly, "The answer is already obvious. He knows who my target is, and he knows exactly how far I've progressed."

Ryuen crossed his arms, asking with interest, "So, you suspect someone close to you betrayed you?"

This reasoning seemed far-fetched.

Nagumo knew he had contacted Sudo and others—these people could have leaked information, allowing Kaoru to learn about his actions.

But—

Who said the mole had to be just one person?

Nagumo suspected that not only were there people around him, but Kaoru's influence extended throughout the first year, including Ryuen's class.

Moreover, this wasn't even news.

He should have realized it earlier—Kaoru's Harem was spread across the entire grade, and this network was already everywhere.

He thought boys would be more reliable, but they turned out to be even less trustworthy.

"Ryuen-kun, you'd better thoroughly investigate your own class when you return."

Nagumo believed he was offering the most well-intentioned advice, but Ryuen responded with scorn.

"My class has only one voice, and that is my command."

Ryuen was completely unfazed.

His class had little contact with Kaoru.

If he had to name someone, it would be Shiina Hiyori—this literary girl often exchanged reading insights with Kaoru in the library.

He had observed them a few times and found that their conversations were entirely about some novel, so he quickly lost interest.

Shiina Hiyori might betray him, but she would never betray the class.

Ryuen could tolerate Ibuki, and even Takeko Nishino who firmly opposed him, so Shiina Hiyori was naturally no issue.

"You're becoming more and more paranoid."

Iijima Ryota's rationality was gradually returning.

After figuring out Nagumo's meaning, he couldn't help but show a mocking expression.

"What if there's nothing on my phone? What if the one who betrayed you is from the first year? What would you do then?"

Nagumo glared at him with disgust. "I used to only value people's abilities. Now I realize I was wrong. The test shouldn't just be about ability, but also your loyalty."

Iijima Ryota gritted his teeth. "That's exactly why I can't tolerate you staying any longer!"

These people had always been dissatisfied with Nagumo's methods.

However, past victories had allowed them to endure it and accept his rule.

But now, Nagumo was in a precarious state, and these people were no longer willing to suppress their discontent.

Nagumo was well aware of this, so he straightforwardly said to Ryuen, "If you can find Mitoma's people in your class, I'll give you one million points for each person you find. If you can prove there are no Mitoma's people in your class, I'll also give you one million points."

Ryuen frowned.

Was this doubting his control over the class?

"If you're going to all this trouble, why not just give me the points directly?"

"I don't trust anyone right now, including you."

"Thinking about it, if you lacked the ability to cooperate, I would abandon you immediately."

"It seems I should thank you for telling me this good news in advance."

"One thing at a time. Since the plan has failed, should I give up on voting?" Ryuen smiled, "Mitoma must have formulated a plan specifically targeting your scheme. If we abandon it outright, it might backfire."

Nagumo pondered this issue, not immediately rejecting the idea.

Iijima Ryota felt the impending outcome wouldn't be favorable, so he stated bluntly.

"He only needs to concentrate the Praise Votes on Sakura. Even if you withdraw the Criticism Votes, the one expelled will either be Yamauchi or Sudo."

Looking at the total numbers, Class 1-D currently had 120 Criticism Votes.

Since students couldn't vote for themselves and duplicate names were prohibited, each person could accumulate at most 39 Criticism Votes.

Yamauchi Haruki was likely in first place, possibly receiving over 30 votes.

Even with around 90 votes remaining, considering the class was a small circle of acquaintances, most people would probably vote for those disliked by the group—typically individuals who were particularly unpopular.

The second and third places would also have relatively concentrated votes, likely ranging from 20 to 30 each.

This would leave about 30 votes scattered among others.

In short, votes would cluster around the top three, with the rest being dispersed—an intuitive judgment.

In fact, Iijima Ryota wasn't wrong.

Yamauchi Haruki and others had little positive reputation in Class 1-D, so the majority of Criticism Votes would focus on them.

If Nagumo could use Praise Votes to reduce the Criticism Votes of the top three, Sakura Airi, as fourth or fifth, would indeed have a chance to rise.

Unfortunately, he only had Ryuen's Praise Votes.

Spending at least 30 on Yamauchi Haruki would leave the remaining Praise Votes with little advantage.

Thus, Nagumo needed to involve Sudo Ken and others, not only to have them cast Criticism Votes for Sakura Airi but also to secure as many Praise Votes as possible through deception.

Initially, things went smoothly. Nagumo received a pleasant surprise from Sudo last night—they had formed a small group of about 10 people.

He was somewhat surprised because Sudo mentioned the group included girls, apparently thanks to Ike Kanji, who had recruited a girl named Shinohara.

This girl had her own circle, quickly expanding the group's size.

This gave Nagumo an additional 20 Praise Votes, making the plan's success probability roughly fifty-fifty.

He had intended to approach Horikita Suzune today; if she cooperated, it could decisively tip the scales without Kaoru's knowledge.

Unfortunately, Nagumo knew he had been betrayed.

"Give the votes to Sudo. Let Yamauchi fend for himself."

Nagumo didn't care about Yamauchi Haruki's fate at all.

After all, Sudo Ken and Ike Kanji had already proven their usefulness to him.

These days, even troublemakers had their skills; keeping a few fools around wasn't a problem—they might come in handy someday.

Nagumo's gaze fell on Iijima Ryota, who strained to lift his head and meet his eyes, as if to prove his bravery.

"It seems I need to clean house in the class."

The second years also had their final exam; this was an opportunity to eliminate these traitors.

Though he thought this, Nagumo felt intensely frustrated.

His fingers unconsciously clenched into a fist, nails nearly digging into his skin and flesh.

If he didn't have to maintain composure in front of Ryuen, an outsider, he would have long since vented his rage.

All the meticulously crafted plans had now completely failed!

It was always like this every single time!

At this thought, Nagumo's heart twisted painfully.

While he was fuming with rage, his childhood friend might very well be pinned beneath Kaoru—someone who should have been his exclusive property!

Chapter 564: Class A's Outcome

The official exam began at 9:00 AM.

Before that, first-year students were required to remain in their respective classrooms, awaiting instructions from their homeroom teachers.

Therefore, the moment Mashima Tomonari entered the classroom, every student's eyes were fixed on him.

"The class vote will now commence. When your name is called, please proceed to the voting room in order."

Though it sounded tedious, individual voting ensured the anonymity of the ballots—likely a carefully considered decision by the school.

Immediately after, Mashima Tomonari began calling out names according to student ID numbers.

In just a short while, it was Kamuro's turn, who sat next to Kaoru.

Before standing up, she deliberately lowered her voice and asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to cast my Praise Vote for you?"

The student with the most Criticism Votes would be expelled, while the one with the most Praise Votes would receive Protection Points.

Kamuro believed the latter would be beneficial for Kaoru, especially given his ongoing rivalry with Nagumo.

"I'm not interested in that."

Kaoru propped his chin on his hand, his mind seemingly elsewhere.

Since Protection Points were non-transferable and served only their literal purpose, what use did he have for them?

Seeing his reaction, Kamuro naturally didn't press further.

She had only asked on a whim, and even if she wanted to vote for him, it was too late now.

After the girl left, Kaoru gazed at Sakayanagi Arisu and Katsuragi Kohei in front of him, pondering the day's exam results.

In reality, Nagumo's assumption that he had 80 Praise Votes was incorrect, as that was merely a theoretical number.

Kaoru could have gathered that many Praise Votes, but there was no need.

Including the Praise Votes Nagumo would funnel into Class 1-D, if he added another 80 Praise Votes, the concentration of so many in one class would be alarming.

The reason Nagumo had sent Yamauchi Haruki to target Kei Karuizawa and others was not only to use him as bait to divert Kaoru's attention but also to clearly identify who would be expelled.

Praise Votes should be cast for those with Criticism Votes.

If Nagumo didn't know who the top three candidates were, his plan would be impossible to execute.

Thus, after assessing Class 1-D's situation, he had already predetermined the top three candidates.

Even Nagumo had heard of the infamous "Idiot Trio," indicating their reputation within the class.

Therefore, knowing this, Kaoru only needed to follow Nagumo's voting strategy: cast votes for individuals other than Yamauchi Haruki to offset the remaining Criticism Votes.

Assuming Yamauchi Haruki had 30 Criticism Votes, Kaoru only needed to contribute 40 to 50 Praise Votes—perhaps even fewer, considering Nagumo's Praise Votes and the existing Praise Votes within Class 1-D.

Hence, this time, Kaoru only informed Katsuragi Kohei, and his Katsuragi faction was able to contribute 26 Praise Votes.

It might not sound like much, as the Katsuragi faction only accounted for half the class.

But one must not forget that Class 1-A still had some neutral students who remained passive, like Morishita Ai.

They didn't care who the leader was, as long as they remained in Class A.

After excluding the neutral faction, Kaoru easily calculated the number of Sakayanagi faction students remaining around Sakayanagi Arisu.

The claim that fewer than 10 people remained was already the most polite way to put it.

In any case, Kaoru now had 66 Praise Votes—enough to crush the conspiracy targeting Sakura Airi.

He even had enough surplus to discreetly distribute Praise Votes in Class C, secretly casting votes for Manabe Shiho and Shiina Hiyori among others, though not in large quantities.

"Next, Kaoru Mitoma."

Mashima Tomonari's voice interrupted Kaoru's thoughts.

Collecting himself, he stood up and left the classroom for the so-called voting room.

It was a separate classroom supervised by teachers, with four ballot boxes labeled with each class's designation.

Kaoru wrote Katsuragi Kohei's name on a Criticism Vote, randomly filled two other names, then cast a Praise Vote for Yamamura Miki.

After finishing his vote, he noticed Hasebe Haruka appearing at the doorway, still visibly simmering with anger.

When Hasebe Haruka saw Kaoru, she seemed to want to say something but immediately closed her mouth, clearly mindful of the teacher's presence.

Kaoru secretly gestured to her before exiting the voting room.

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The voting lasted about an hour.

After the final voter returned, Mashima Tomonari announced that the school would release exam results before 11:00 AM, and everyone was required to remain in the classroom until then.

Though there was minor unrest, the class atmosphere quickly settled.

They had nothing to worry about—Katsuragi Kohei had proactively asked them to cast Criticism Votes against him before the exam, something that had surprised even Kaoru.

The reason for Katsuragi's stance was simple: even knowing no one would actually be expelled this time, seeing oneself chosen by everyone would likely evoke complicated feelings.

Thus, Katsuragi Kohei decided to become the "expelled" student himself to prevent any fissures from forming within the class.

Kaoru could only think this bald guy was somewhat naive—essentially an honest and upright person.

So when Mashima Tomonari returned, the first name he announced was, unsurprisingly, Katsuragi Kohei.

Thirty-eight students had cast Criticism Votes against him, likely because his follower Totsuka Yahiko stubbornly refused to obediently vote against his leader.

However, Totsuka Yahiko's defiance couldn't change the outcome.

Not far away, Morishita Ai already had her phone ready to transfer 20 million Personal Points to the school at any moment.

"The student who received the most Praise Votes in this special exam—Sakayanagi Arisu, you obtained 24 votes."

After announcing the final results, Mashima Tomonari felt inwardly stirred.

In previous years, Class A would inevitably lose one or two students by this point—both Nagumo and Horikita Manabu's Class A had operated with incomplete rosters.

Yet this year's Class A not only safely navigated their first year but did so without major losses, the entire process proceeding remarkably smoothly.

Even with one final special exam remaining, Mashima didn't believe it would threaten Class A's position.

Compared to other classes, they might as well start popping champagne corks already.

"How could it be her?"

Totsuka Yahiko expressed disbelief, "Do people still think she's better than Katsuragi-san?"

"With all the Criticism Votes concentrated on Katsuragi-san, why is it strange for the princess to receive Praise Votes?" Hashimoto Masayoshi was utterly speechless.

"The princess is so adorable, and you still won't vote for her?"

Totsuka Yahiko was momentarily stunned into silence.

Just as everyone expected another argument to break out, he closed his mouth instead—perhaps he actually acknowledged Hashimoto’s reasoning.

"Thank you for speaking up for me, Hashimoto-kun. I must admit, I’m quite surprised too."

Sakayanagi Arisu showed a look of astonishment before breaking into a gentle smile.

"I never imagined I would be chosen. Thank you, everyone."

She truly hadn’t manipulated this additional exam.

When she suddenly found herself in first place, she almost suspected Kaoru was behind some mischief.

Twenty-four Praise Votes—it seemed that aside from her own faction, many other students held favorable impressions of her.

Kaoru, however, felt a bit frustrated.

Had he known earlier, he would have asked Katsuragi to vote for Yamamura Miki instead.

Who would have thought the votes would be so scattered?

Little did he know that he was actually the runner-up right after Sakayanagi Arisu, with twenty-two students voting for him.

Over half the students believed that Class A should currently be led by Kaoru, Katsuragi Kohei, and Sakayanagi Arisu.

This included Hashimoto Masayoshi, who had been vigorously promoting Kaoru's leadership behind the scenes.

Unaware of this, Kaoru assumed Katsuragi had overt control of the situation. In reality, everyone knew who the true leader was.

After all, it was common knowledge that even Sakayanagi Arisu was under his influence.

Some even radically believed that the conflict between Katsuragi Kohei and Sakayanagi Arisu was merely Kaoru's way of amusing himself—using Katsuragi to discipline his "little wife" and repeatedly make Sakayanagi suffer setbacks.

If Kaoru were to step forward and lead the class now, about half the students would likely follow him immediately.

The other half would simply remain passive, caring only about maintaining their status as Class A, regardless of who was in charge.

Chapter 565: The Dropouts

Time rewound to before 9 o'clock. A noticeable commotion arose in Class D's classroom.

"Before we begin voting officially, I have something to say to everyone."

Hirata Yosuke suddenly stood up. Facing everyone's gaze, his expression was remarkably calm, as if he had already resolved himself.

In that instant, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka understood exactly what this "Mr. Nice Guy" intended to do.

"After hearing Horikita-san's words yesterday, and considering Yamauchi-kun and others' anxieties and opinions, I've given it serious thought. The key point of this exam is deciding who should be expelled, right?"

Everyone exchanged glances, unsure of what Hirata was planning.

Some began whispering among themselves.

"First, I want to apologize for not stopping Horikita-san's argument with Yamauchi-kun, and for Yamauchi-kun's actions toward Karuizawa-san and Kushida-san. I deeply regret this and apologize to you all. Selfishly, I also ask that you reconcile."

Hirata bowed formally with utmost seriousness.

His actions left Horikita Suzune at a loss, while Kushida Kikyo even showed a concerned expression.

"Um, Hirata-kun, even if you hadn't said anything, I would have done the same."

Even in such a situation, the little angel would stay true to her character—especially since Hirata had actively given her an opportunity to shine.

"Thank you, Kushida-san."

Hirata smiled, but it carried an unsettling undertone.

Horikita Suzune spoke up, "Are you trying to make us abandon voting for Yamauchi-kun?"

Yamauchi Haruki seemed to have grasped a lifeline, his eyes shining as he looked at Hirata Yosuke.

"That's right, I have a more suitable candidate."

Hirata Yosuke responded to Yamauchi Haruki's expectations, addressing the entire class.

"Please cast your Criticism Votes for me. As long as I'm the one who gets expelled, no one will get hurt."

After saying this, he bowed to the class, even deeper than before.

"No, impossible! I could never let Hirata-kun be expelled!"

"How could I possibly cast a Criticism Vote for Hirata-kun!"

"Why not just expel Yamauchi!"

The most vehement reactions came from the girls, who would never allow this kind-hearted gentleman to be expelled.

In a word, the girls were all solid supporters of Hirata Yosuke.

"It's fine. Even if I'm expelled, it won't affect the class. In fact, it might be better this way."

Hirata Yosuke responded to the chorus of opposition from the girls, but this only made the class more chaotic.

"You want to sacrifice yourself?"

Horikita Suzune couldn't comprehend his way of thinking. "No one wants you to be expelled. Do you understand the consequences of losing someone who coordinates the class?"

"Even so, I don't care."

Hirata Yosuke said to Horikita Suzune and everyone else, "Since I've started to hate this class, I hope you'll let me be free."

His words were so unexpected that no one could react immediately.

"Hirata, I'll vote for you!"

The first to speak was Yamauchi Haruki, who shouted ecstatically, "This is for Hirata's sake! Everyone, hurry up and vote for him too!"

"Being with you all never seems to lack opportunities for entertainment."

Koenji Rokusuke let out a light laugh at Yamauchi Haruki.

"What are you talking about? This is Hirata's wish!"

Yamauchi Haruki bristled like a cat.

On one hand, he thought Ryuen would vote for him, but on the other, he was terrified he might actually be expelled.

At that moment, Sudo suddenly slammed the table and stood up, drawing everyone's attention.

"Hirata can't be expelled! No matter what you say, I think Horikita's point is valid. The one who should be expelled now is someone who contributes little to the class."

Horikita Suzune had expected him to support Yamauchi Haruki, taking the chance to shake off his own disadvantage, but instead, he spoke up for her.

"Wh-what are you saying, Ken?!"

Yamauchi Haruki was in a panic.

Weren't they good friends? Shouldn't they be working together now? What was with this sudden resignation?

"Everyone should think carefully about who usually contributes little to the class and who contributes the most."

Sudo Ken said, "Hirata's contributions are clear to everyone. As for me, Haruki, Kanji, Koenji, and Sakura, I think you all know the answer."

Ike Kanji immediately added, "That's right! I won't vote for Hirata-kun either. My votes will go to people like Koenji and Sakura!"

Mentioned out of nowhere, Koenji Rokusuke nearly laughed in anger.

They didn't dare attack Sakura Airi directly, so they lumped him in with them.

Indeed, Sudo Ken and Ike Kanji's quick thinking, using Hirata Yosuke's scheme, was quite effective.

Many people agreed with them, and some even started asking who this "Sakura" they mentioned was.

Hasebe Haruka, who had been watching the drama unfold, grew increasingly uneasy.

Seeing someone nodding while asking who Sakura was, she immediately realized what was happening.

With just a few words, Sudo had successfully implanted an impression in everyone's minds—that Sakura Airi was no different from them, equally suitable for expulsion.

Looking at Sakura Airi, the fool was still stupidly playing ostrich, hiding her head in the sand.

Just as Hasebe Haruka was about to retort, she heard the sound of Chabashira Sae's high heels clicking against the floor.

"Now we'll begin the class voting. I'll call your names one by one..."

...

The exam results caused no turmoil in Class A, quickly concluding with Morishita Ai's intervention.

However, Class D was thrown into an uproar.

"The student with the most Criticism Votes in this supplementary exam, receiving thirty-seven votes—Yamauchi Haruki."

The moment Chabashira Sae announced the result, Yamauchi Haruki showed a stunned expression, while even Sudo Ken and Ike Kanji were frozen in shock.

Bang!

Yamauchi Haruki immediately slammed the desk and stood up, veins bulging on his forehead as he shouted.

"Impossible! You cheated! Ryuen clearly said he'd give me Praise Votes! Why does it have to be me getting expelled? Hirata told you to vote for him, you bastards!"

"What an unsightly display."

Koenji Rokusuke casually filed his nails, "You can't even handle simple tasks. Is it strange that Ryuen Boy abandoned you?"

Yamauchi Haruki's face turned crimson.

Knowing he was no match for Koenji Rokusuke, he could only vent his frustration on his desk, pounding the surface with his fists while repeatedly shouting "Impossible!"

Regarding this, Sudo Ken and Ike Kanji were equally confused.

"Wasn't this agreed upon?"

Sudo Ken couldn't understand—Iijima Ryota had clearly told him that Ryuen would definitely vote for Yamauchi Haruki, and he only needed to guide others to vote for Sakura Airi.

"Damn these lying cheaters!"

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka glanced at Sudo Ken, then at Hirata Yosuke, who appeared dazed.

First place was Yamauchi Haruki, second was Koenji Rokusuke with seven votes, and third was Shinohara Satsuki with four votes.

This result was terrifying—it meant that Sudo and Ike, who should have been in the top three, had received over twenty Praise Votes each.

With the big fish gone, only small fry like Koenji Rokusuke and Shinohara Satsuki remained.

"Did anything happen this morning?"

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka asked his deskmate, "I heard there was some commotion near the entrance."

Horikita Suzune gave him a strange look before explaining what happened that morning.

"I see."

Ayanokoji understood now.

Kaoru had intentionally revealed his cooperation with Ichinose, and Nagumo and Ryuen had received the information immediately.

In their eyes, the operation had probably been exposed.

Under these circumstances, forcing it forward would be meaningless, so Nagumo had no choice but to abandon it.

Sudo and Ike could gather some supporters, making them barely usable pawns, so it wasn't surprising that Nagumo would protect them.

However, with the newly acquired pawns exposed so quickly, it remained to be seen what plans he would make going forward.

Ayanokoji glanced inadvertently at Kushida in front of him.

It was somewhat surprising yet reasonable that she had taken first place in the Praise Vote.

Hirata Yosuke came in second, while Sakura Airi placed third.

This outcome was also unexpected—the latter had received nearly twenty votes.

Upon learning the result, Hasebe Haruka beamed with a radiant smile, while Sakura Airi was initially puzzled.

After Hasebe Haruka's explanation, she gradually understood, her cheeks instantly flushing bright red.

Chapter 566: Their Friendship Nearly Shattered

Perhaps having lost all reason, Yamauchi Haruki began attacking everyone, even claiming it was Kaoru's scheme.

He agitatedly shouted names like Karuizawa Kei, Kushida Kikyo, Sakura Airi, and Hasebe Haruka, insisting they were all Kaoru's people and that he himself was helping the class.

Immediately after, Yamauchi Haruki started cursing Ryuen and Sudo, calling them liars who had deceived his feelings.

Fortunately, Chabashira Sae forcibly escorted Yamauchi Haruki away.

It was likely the withdrawal procedures would be completed today.

As soon as the two left, Class D fell into an awkward atmosphere where everyone exchanged uneasy glances.

With no further arrangements, theoretically, they could leave the classroom after the exam ended, so some began to move.

Seeing people exit the classroom, others gradually stood up as well.

Some girls glanced at Hirata Yosuke, who looked utterly gloomy and exuded a low-pressure aura, ultimately deciding not to approach him.

"Eighteen Praise Votes, hehe~ Airi is in third place!"

Hasebe Haruka giggled as she hugged Sakura Airi, taking advantage of the latter's flustered state to poke her blushing cheek.

"I knew he'd find out about Airi. It actually makes me a little jealous."

Perhaps because they were in the classroom, Sakura Airi's face turned crimson, but she didn't dare break free from the embrace, whispering.

"I... I don't know. He must care about you too."

"Ahaha, just kidding~ Thanks for comforting me, Airi. It warms my heart, hiks..."

Hasebe Haruka ruffled her hair, wondering why she insisted on this plain appearance when she was actually an Internet Idol.

'Wait, Internet Idol...'

It suddenly dawned on Hasebe Haruka—no wonder he took a liking to Sakura Airi.

Was it the producer's old habit acting up again?

However, seeing Sakura Airi's alluring figure, she had to admit the producer had a sharp eye—a Big breasts innocent beautiful girl idol, coupled with her extremely timid personality.

Hasebe Haruka gritted her teeth.

Sooner or later, she'd throw a punch at that flirtatious pervert!

Just as Airi felt at a loss, Kushida and Karuizawa locked eyes across the room.

"Ahaha, I accidentally got first place~ Thank you, everyone, for voting for me."

The little angel spoke words of gratitude with an adorable smile, making her appear gentle, considerate, and even slightly flustered—the epitome of a good girl.

However, Karuizawa understood the underlying meaning.

Because Kushida had received thirty-eight Praise Votes.

Karuizawa was certain the little angel couldn't possibly have such terrifying influence.

Although she was well-liked, it was only in the sense that everyone saw her as a nice girl, not as their best friend.

It might sound hard to understand, but that's how friendships among girls work.

For instance, Karuizawa's past relationship with her was merely that of casual playmates—they could hang out sometimes, but she was just a common good friend to everyone.

Most of the time, Karuizawa was well aware that Kushida didn't belong to her inner circle, so she wouldn't involve Kushida in certain matters.

Thus, Karuizawa believed Hirata Yosuke would likely have more influence than Kushida—at least the girls were willing to give their Praise Votes to Hirata.

Yet now, the top spot wasn't Hirata's but Kushida's, indicating the latter had received Praise Votes from outside Class D.

Karuizawa suddenly felt a sour sting of jealousy.

She didn't understand why she was feeling this way—there was no reason for such envy, yet she couldn't help it.

Not just Kushida, but what was with Airi earlier? How could someone so invisible get so many votes?

Karuizawa felt utterly bitter.

She told herself she shouldn't be this way, but the more she sternly reprimanded herself, the more aggrieved she felt.

Kushida, who had been exchanging pleasantries with those around her, noticed Kei's troubled expression and immediately understood.

She quickly made an excuse and led Kei out of the classroom.

"First of all, I had no idea—it wasn't me," Kushida promptly distanced herself from someone.

"I know," Karuizawa replied dejectedly.

Her situation was identical to Kushida's; there was no way that person wouldn't know.

"You've always been more popular than me. It's no surprise everyone voted for you."

Kushida felt troubled. If Kei held a grudge against her, how would they play "It Takes Two" together in the future? Though she had felt a little smug initially.

"Never mind, let's go find him tonight," Kushida said. "Your birthday is the day after tomorrow. If he doesn't give a proper explanation, I'll help you beat him up."

"Who are you planning to beat up?" Horikita Suzune happened to step out at that moment.

"Horikita, perfect timing. Join us tonight," Kushida enthusiastically invited her.

In an instant, Horikita saw through her scheme.

It was always like this—Kushida was especially eager to see others make peace signs.

"I'm on my period," Horikita stated expressionlessly, without a hint of embarrassment.

Kushida was momentarily stunned, then snapped indignantly, "Who said it was that kind of thing? You're such a pervert, always thinking about lewd stuff!"

Horikita's eyes widened in disbelief.

How could Kushida say such a thing? Everyone knew the biggest perverts were her and Kaoru.

Then she heard Kushida muttering under her breath, "Horikita's on her period... so mine will probably be next week. Annoying..."

Karuizawa couldn't take it anymore, her face slightly flushed. "Can you two please stop talking about this?"

With their bickering, Karuizawa's gloomy mood had largely dissipated.

"Do whatever you want. I won't disturb you tonight," Horikita said before leaving the hallway.

She was heading to the first floor—the school always posted exam results on the bulletin board there.

"Don't mind her. If that pervert calls her, she'll come obediently," Kushida remarked, fully understanding Horikita's personality.

It was hard to get her to take initiative—even if you pulled her hair, she'd calmly keep reading and ask.

"Are you done?"

"Honestly, every time you act like this, I start questioning my life." Karuizawa quipped, "When the little angel turns into a little devil, it would shatter some people's dreams if they saw it."

Kushida giggled, "But you're in a better mood now, aren't you?"

Karuizawa froze for a moment, then broke into a smile.

Back when they were both wearing masks, she had felt that Kushida isn't on her side.

But now, with the masks off, she couldn't help but see Kushida as one of her own.

Thus, the two began discussing how to squeeze... no, teach Kaoru a lesson tonight.

When they reached the first floor, they noticed a group of people gathered around the bulletin board, including Ichinose Honami.

"Hey there, Honami!"

Ichinose Honami, who had been reading the bulletin board, turned around and saw Karuizawa and Kushida standing behind her.

She immediately smiled.

"Hey, Kei, Kikyo!"

After greeting them, Ichinose introduced the people beside her, "These are my good friends from class, little Chihiro and Mako."

Shiranami Chihiro looked at the two somewhat timidly, while Amikura Mako stared intently at Karuizawa, thinking, 'Why does this person look a bit like me?'

"Ahaha, nice to meet you. But we've actually met before, right, Shiranami-san, Amikura-san?"

Kushida radiated an angelic aura from head to toe, overwhelmingly bright—especially effective on Shiranami Chihiro.

"We've met a few times. Kushida-san left quite an impression on me," Amikura Mako replied, feeling immense pressure.

'Is this the kind of company my Honami usually keeps to maintain her position as the main girl?'

"Amikura-san left a deep impression on me too. It's rare to see girls at the gym," Kushida said as she walked up to the bulletin board and casually glanced up, noticing a few lines of text.

The results of the first-year class voting are as follows:

Class A: None.

Class B: None.

Class C: Komiya Kogo (Expelled)

Class D: Yamauchi Haruki (Expelled)

...

"It's the first time someone has been expelled," Ichinose Honami sighed softly. "Even though we passed this exam, I'm not sure if it's a good thing."

But that wasn't what Kushida Kikyo was concerned about.

She spotted Ichinose Honami's name, with an astonishing sixty-eight Praise Votes.

In comparison, her own results seemed insignificant.

Class A had Sakayanagi Arisu, and Class C had Ryuen.

'What? His name isn't here?' This left Kushida Kikyo utterly puzzled.

She had even voted for him!

Could it be that too many people in Class A dislike him?

Kushida's speculation wasn't unfounded.

After all, she understood how boys thought.

Discovering a Harem Overlord in their midst—it was a miracle they hadn't dragged him out and burned him.

Chapter 567: I'm Ahead Too

"Where are you going?"

The sound of a cane accompanied the question, but Kaoru felt no ripple of emotion, even though Sakayanagi Arisu had been following him all along.

"Enjoying a brief vacation."

"Hehe, please let me join your vacation. Before our final showdown, I'd like to play a game of chess with you."

"No, I don't have time for that."

"Is it because of Karuizawa-san's birthday?"

"Are you coming?"

Sakayanagi Arisu noticed he was becoming increasingly blunt with her.

'Perhaps I shouldn't have worn the ring on my finger back then.'

'I thought it would at least unsettle his women, but who knew they wouldn't care?'

"Nagumo-kun has been approaching me lately."

The girl followed behind him, struggling somewhat due to her poor physical condition, like a daughter desperately chasing after her father.

"You messed him up completely, and now he's giving me more benefits than before."

Just as she expected, Kaoru slightly slowed his pace, but his response differed from what she had imagined.

"Why didn't you continue cooperating with him back then?"

Sakayanagi Arisu first fell silent, then smiled faintly: "Did you think I was considering your feelings?"

"You, Ryuen, and Nagumo working together would indeed be troublesome for me."

Kaoru honestly expressed his feelings, "Nagumo has enough points, Ryuen has courage and people, and you have schemes, knowing how to manipulate others. Even if you couldn't get me expelled, disrupting my plans would probably be easy."

Though it was nearly noon, Sakayanagi Arisu didn't feel much of the scorching heat.

A breeze carrying a slightly warm springtime air brushed through her hair, slightly lifting her skirt and revealing a small portion of her pale thigh.

Beside her, the school's specially planted shrubs were already faintly sprouting flower buds.

These immature buds would gradually bloom with the unique scent of spring around graduation time, but for now, there was only a faint, fragile fragrance.

Perhaps elsewhere, some flower buds had already quietly bloomed, delicate and gentle, intoxicating those who admired them.

Some called such flowers "sneaky cats that stole a march."

"You're too full of yourself, Kaoru-kun."

Sakayanagi Arisu gripped her cane, "Do I need to join forces with them to defeat you? Is my power that weak?"

"I never said that."

Kaoru stopped and turned to look at the girl.

Her pride was deeply ingrained in her bones; she believed she was the queen who should control everything, disdaining to bow to anyone.

"Yes, I admit your methods are remarkable. Because I wanted to understand your capabilities, I initially didn't restrict your actions."

Sakayanagi Arisu said, "But thinking about it now, you were always a monster. I shouldn't have underestimated you."

Where had he provoked the girl?

"No, you're just afraid of me."

Kaoru said, "Because you believed those rumors. You think I have magic, you think I have superpowers."

Sakayanagi Arisu bit her lip, rolled up her sleeve, and showed him her pale arm.

"What did you do to me back then? I asked my father to take me for an examination, and your magic simply can't be explained by existing scientific means."

Kaoru was certain she had been unconscious at the time; she must have noticed the needle mark on her arm afterward.

"Fine, I do have miraculous magic."

He spread his hands, "And I'm going to use magic to help you. What can you do about it?"

Helping someone with a congenital heart condition recover their health was itself unbelievable and impossible to hide, so Kaoru only wanted to delay the exposure.

Sakayanagi Arisu fell silent for a moment: "Did you come here just to play dating sims?"

"Actually, I've already been conquered by all of you."

Kaoru said without blushing or his heart racing, "Originally, I planned to get as much as I could. If things went wrong, I could always just move on to another place."

"Do you have to be so lustful?" Sakayanagi Arisu felt somewhat speechless.

She couldn't understand Kaoru's way of thinking.

If she had such abilities, she wouldn't care about a few women at all.

"Besides being lustful, do you have anything else to say to me?" Kaoru changed the subject.

Sakayanagi Arisu hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"Are you really going to help me?"

"I'm already working on it." Kaoru replied, "Besides, haven't you noticed your body has become slightly healthier than before?"

Sakayanagi Arisu nodded, then asked: "Is there no cost?"

"Are you offering yourself to me?" Kaoru retorted.

"That's not what I meant. Is there no price for helping me?"

Sakayanagi Arisu said, "If you can use it without restrictions..."

She trailed off without finishing.

Kaoru understood what she meant - without limitations, wouldn't that make him a true god?

"There is, but I can't tell you."

Kaoru sighed, "Also, I've only told you about this matter. No one else knows, so please don't spread it around."

Sakayanagi Arisu looked at him for a while, then suddenly laughed.

"Hehe, it seems I have a chance to take the lead too. Kaoru-kun, your words sound quite delightful."

"Enough already, I have things to do."

Kaoru said with a dark expression, shooing Sakayanagi Arisu away like swatting a fly, "Please stop following me."

When he turned around, Sakayanagi Arisu followed him again.

"Where are you going?"

'This fly was really thick-skinned.'

Kaoru finally understood Kamuro's enjoyment.

"I cast 30 Praise Votes for Airi, but she only received 18 Praise Votes."

Kaoru suddenly said, "This means at least 12 or more people gave her Criticism Votes, which makes me somewhat angry."

Sakayanagi Arisu was very familiar with his network.

He was talking about Class D's Sakura Airi, who usually had little presence but was actually a minor idol who debuted during middle school.

Combined with his previous identity, Sakayanagi Arisu was actually quite concerned about Sakura Airi.

"Yamauchi-kun has already withdrawn from school. Are you planning to make Sudou-kun and the others withdraw next?"

"If the opportunity arises, maybe. I'm not considering it now."

"Nagumo-kun then?"

"Since the reporting until today, the turmoil hasn't stopped, yet the school has shown no response. I think I should meet with the acting chairman."

Sakayanagi Arisu slightly frowned.

Actually, she didn't approve of Kaoru's behavior.

Private matters between students shouldn't involve the school, especially since he planned to deal with Nagumo using methods outside the rules.

To be honest, the essence of this behavior was destroying the school's traditions.

What she couldn't understand was why her father had agreed to it twice, even adjusting the rules for Kaoru.

Although it was patching and fixing bugs, it still felt incomprehensible.

"Kaoru-kun."

"I'm here."

"Are you planning to leave the school?"

Kaoru looked at Sakayanagi Arisu, finding the latter completely calm, as if asking casually - a question without beginning or end.

It seemed Kamuro was more sensitive than he imagined, having directly told Sakayanagi Arisu to deal with him.

Chapter 568: Smelling the Producer's Scent

Typically, the chairman's office is located in the school's administration building, which has the broadest view and the quietest environment.

At the same time, the school kept inconvenient secrets here that students weren't meant to see, such as the monitoring room, servers, and so on.

For ordinary students, even going to the teachers' office required mustering courage, let alone disturbing the chairman's work.

On his first day parachuting into ANHS, Tsukishiro Kazunari reviewed the backups from the past week in the monitoring room, as the system only retained data for one week.

Although it was just one week's worth of data, the unit was terabytes—enough to cause trouble and headaches for most.

However, Tsukishiro Kazunari obtained what he wanted within a few hours.

First-Year Class D, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

An utterly ordinary student with almost no memorable traits or characteristics.

He attended classes punctually every day, maintained a simple and understandable social network with only a few acquaintances to talk to, didn't join any clubs, had no particular hobbies, and no romantic interests.

Moreover, in his records of activities over the past year, Tsukishiro Kazunari found almost no highlights.

Even his homeroom teacher, Chabashira Sae, had to offer a tactful comment—if this student could be more proactive, he would surely impress others.

Such results were far from satisfactory, especially to his father.

In places no one had noticed, Tsukishiro Kazunari uncovered the irregularities on the uninhabited island.

Someone had disrupted Ayanokoji Kiyotaka's plans, forcing him to cautiously halt all actions, leading to the current outcome.

First-Year Class A, Kaoru Mitoma.

This was a name that felt eerily familiar to him, as if it were vividly imprinted in his mind.

His employer had mentioned this name before; this student was also one of his targets.

Though it was just a name, it sent a chill down Tsukishiro Kazunari's spine.

He had killed people, witnessed many hellish scenes, including the ugliness and distortion of human nature, and thought nothing could unsettle him anymore.

Now, Tsukishiro Kazunari once considered abandoning this commission.

His employer convinced him, arguing that they were merely two similar individuals, at most the other's illegitimate child.

This reasoning led Tsukishiro Kazunari to become the acting chairman of ANHS.

His mission was to force Ayanokoji Kiyotaka to unleash his original capabilities while eliminating the obstacle that was Kaoru Mitoma.

It might seem biased, but both his employer and Tsukishiro Kazunari believed Kaoru was too troublesome.

If he were an ordinary student, Tsukishiro Kazunari wouldn't need to intervene, but the other party was from the Shinomiya faction, one of the employer's enemies.

Moreover, Sakayanagi Seishiro had been too lenient with this student.

To prevent further interference in their plans, Tsukishiro Kazunari had to take matters into his own hands.

As if it were only natural, Tsukishiro Kazunari thought of Nagumo and decided to give him a hand.

The recent turmoil was deliberately suppressed by him.

Once the commotion died down, Tsukishiro Kazunari planned to meet with Nagumo, letting him and Kaoru fight each other, thereby avoiding disruption to his arrangements for Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

This additional exam for the first-year students was his first move.

At the school level, he eliminated Kaoru's Personal points, while he believed it would at least make Ayanokoji Kiyotaka more vigilant, as this was a forced expulsion.

Maintaining the facade of an ordinary student would no longer protect him.

Furthermore, considering Ayanokoji Kiyotaka's capabilities, aside from Kaoru, individuals like Koenji Rokusuke might potentially withstand his strength, while most others likely lack the ability to resist.

Additionally, with Tsukishiro Kazunari now serving as acting chairman, his employer appears to have conceived a more favorable plan.

Alternatively, in the next semester, his employer may provide him with the appropriate tools.

These tools could bring out Ayanokoji Kiyotaka's true abilities while also promoting the existence of the White Room.

That was how it should have been.

Until one of his targets, accompanied by a young girl, knocked on his office door today.

...

"Good afternoon, Chairman Tsukishiro."

Tsukishiro Kazunari saw two student figures.

The one who spoke was a boy with delicate features, wearing a cheerful smile.

Dressed only in his student uniform, his jacket was casually unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a youthful throat where delicate skin faintly showed traces of veins.

Though still boyish, he carried an unmistakable masculine aura—or rather, this was exactly the youthful vitality a young man should possess.

'This guy must be quite popular,' Tsukishiro thought as he noticed the girl beside him, walking closely with a cane.

She stayed near enough that her small hand could easily grasp his sleeve at any moment.

"I believe this isn't the teachers' office, is it?"

Tsukishiro Kazunari spoke calmly, "Who are you?"

"Let's be direct. I'm not here to negotiate."

The other party sat on the sofa across from him, "I've heard your agency can handle anything as long as the price is right."

Tsukishiro showed no surprise.

If he could investigate this person, naturally the other party would have the means to investigate him too.

"Of course we can."

A smile appeared on Tsukishiro's face, "But first, who are you?"

"Cut the act. You and your backers might have been able to deal with this girl's father, but that doesn't mean you can take me down."

Kaoru continued expressionlessly, "You've contacted Agency 283. You suspect I'm the real deal, don't you?"

Tsukishiro gradually withdrew his smile, staring directly at Kaoru with confusion, "What exactly are you?"

This feeling couldn't be described by just looking at a few photos and videos—it was like seeing a ghost.

The other's gaze and demeanor were completely unlike a student's.

To ordinary people, it might just look like two similar individuals, but to someone like Tsukishiro Kazunari, his intuition screamed that this was the real person.

"Secret." Kaoru said, "The Shinomiya family probably commissioned you to investigate me too, but I'm really not interested in their precious daughter. Though I am somewhat curious about her little maid."

Tsukishiro hesitated, glancing at the girl beside him.

Of course he recognized her identity—Sakayanagi Arisu, daughter of Sakayanagi Seishiro.

She was quietly listening to their conversation beside Kaoru.

"What I want to discuss with you is simple. First, keep my matters confidential. Even if someone questions you, just shake your head and say you don't know anything for now."

However, Tsukishiro shook his head, puzzling Kaoru, who then heard him say.

"Too late. When I contacted Agency 283, they were like sharks that caught the scent. They've probably already traced it to the Shinomiya Group. It's only a matter of time before they find their way here."

Kaoru fell silent, then abruptly changed the subject.

"Aside from them, you need to keep this confidential at least until Christmas this year."

As if seizing the initiative, Tsukishiro revealed a faint smile.

"I think you should give me a reason—one convincing enough to make me want to help you."

Chapter 569: Mutual Probing

Before becoming the acting chairman of ANHS, Tsukishiro Kazunari ran a jack-of-all-trades business with services ranging from personal security to intelligence gathering—nothing was beyond his capabilities.

Occasionally, at clients' requests, he would also eliminate individuals who caused trouble for employers, having performed numerous tricks akin to miracles in the past.

As for so-called resurrections from death, Tsukishiro Kazunari was merely astonished by Kaoru's exquisite skill, achieving a level of perfection even he couldn't detect any flaws in.

The reason he had been startled earlier was because Kaoru appeared genuinely young, with a natural adolescent aura that seemed impossible to fake—a miracle no drug could accomplish.

"Since you could investigate my background, you should understand what kind of person I am."

Tsukishiro Kazunari spoke up, "When employers choose me, I also choose them. I'm well aware of what can and cannot be done."

"Fine, I prefer dealing with people who claim to have principles."

Kaoru smiled with interest and asked, "Could you let me hear what your employer requires? For instance, making someone drop out?"

Tsukishiro Kazunari glanced at Sakayanagi Arisu, who sat properly beside Kaoru.

Noticing his gaze, she chuckled softly.

"It seems you know me."

"Daughter of Chairman Sakayanagi, of course I recognize you. You and your father have always been very interested in the White Room."

"No, I'm not interested in that place. You claim to have created a masterpiece, but in my view, it's merely a counterfeit."

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was the proud achievement of the White Room.

They believed their educational model had produced this monster, and if officially accepted, they could continuously manufacture more Ayanokoji Kiyotakas in the future.

Or perhaps, creations slightly inferior to Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

And these creations, once they surpassed ANHS's educational model, would immediately become achievements for Ayanokoji Atsuomi.

In fact, people in higher positions had already taken notice of the White Room.

Otherwise, Ayanokoji Atsuomi wouldn't have risen so quickly, even managing to expel Sakayanagi Seishiro and parachute Tsukishiro Kazunari into ANHS.

Her father's departure somewhat displeased Sakayanagi Arisu, intensifying her desire to destroy this so-called masterpiece.

"Quite the arrogant tone for a mere first-year high school girl, even more so than your father, Miss Sakayanagi."

Tsukishiro Kazunari smiled faintly, "I've heard you only follow this man around nowadays. Tell me, what have you actually accomplished so far?"

These provocative words clearly angered Sakayanagi Arisu.

"Heh, even if you're currently the acting chairman, I can't completely ignore that. I hope you consider the consequences of saying such things."

The girl emphasized the word ["acting"] heavily—after all, acting was temporary, and her father would undoubtedly return.

"Truly a child's temperament."

Tsukishiro Kazunari turned to Kaoru, "Are you sure it was wise to reveal your identity to her?"

"I have little patience for your roundabout probing. Your employer simply wants you to force Ayanokoji Kiyotaka to drop out. Since he refuses to leave, he'll have no choice but to fight back."

Tsukishiro Kazunari frowned.

He truly couldn't find any opening in Kaoru.

Even upon hearing that Office 283 would soon come knocking, the man remained perfectly calm.

However, upon second thought, the other party's appearance at the Shinomiya Group's shareholders meeting likely meant they had already considered the consequences.

"Ayanokoji is merely a local councilman at the moment. What use is investing in him?"

Kaoru said, "Do you believe he can leverage the White Room's network to win over politicians and conglomerates to elevate himself?"

"Sometimes, cultivating the next generation is an effective strategy. That man now has connections not only with opposition parties but also rides the coattails of numerous conglomerates."

Tsukishiro Kazunari remained calm, aware he hadn't directly answered Kaoru's question.

The next moment, Kaoru laughed as expected.

"You mean conglomerates like Kanazaki Heavy Industries?"

The young man pointed at himself, "Here stands someone from the Shinomiya Group, and I hold no fewer cards than he does."

Sakayanagi Arisu stared at Kaoru in astonishment—not shocked by the Shinomiya Group reference, but uncertain of his implication.

Was he planning to enter politics?

"Though I'm unfamiliar with the Shinomiya Group, I maintain excellent relations with two other groups, such as the Kujo."

Tsukishiro Kazunari silently calculated his words.

The Kujo clan was one of the former Five Regent Houses, and the last prime minister hailed from that family.

"My demands of you are simple: aside from confidentiality, do not interfere with my affairs involving Nagumo."

Kaoru continued, "In return, I'll give you what you want."

From his lips, Tsukishiro Kazunari heard a person's phone number, causing a slight tremor in his heart.

"Is that all?"

He sounded like a reminder, "Your existence is an obstacle. I originally planned to initiate my cleanup operation next semester."

"Did Chairman Sakayanagi instruct you to change the school's rules?" Kaoru asked.

"No, but he's not here anyway."

Tsukishiro Kazunari smiled faintly.

Sakayanagi Seishiro was far away—what could he do if Tsukishiro occasionally crossed the line?

"You're not planning to use Nagumo as your pawn, are you?"

Kaoru felt somewhat speechless.

"No, you misunderstand. I have more suitable tools."

Perhaps hearing the unexpected phone number had shifted Tsukishiro's attitude toward him.

"Although Ayanokoji was the most brutal batch from the White Room, the subsequent children also possess noteworthy capabilities. They are the finest tools."

Kaoru and Sakayanagi Arisu exchanged glances—it seemed the other party intended to deploy White Room personnel next semester.

The next moment, someone gently knocked on the main door.

Tsukishiro Kazunari frowned slightly; he hadn't scheduled any interruptions for today.

"Come in, Ayanokoji." Kaoru spoke up.

Tsukishiro looked startled, then saw Ayanokoji Kiyotaka indeed standing at the doorway, staring blankly at them like he had a frozen expression.

"Why did you call him here?"

"To give you a chance to threaten him with expulsion, of course. Or did I overthink it?"

"..."

Tsukishiro's face twisted oddly.

'So you planned to sell out Ayanokoji Kiyotaka? You should've told me earlier!'

"Ayanokoji, this is the acting chairman, Mr. Tsukishiro."

Kaoru introduced him, "His main task is to carry out your father's wish to expel you. Next semester, White Room operatives will be mixed among the first-years with the goal of forcing you to withdraw."

As the words fell, a large question mark slowly appeared above Ayanokoji Kiyotaka's head.

"Wait, did you call me here just to inform me of this bad news?"

He had just walked over when Kaoru delivered these words like a funeral announcement, nearly making him lose his composure.

Kaoru comforted him: "It's fine, I told you before that even if you get expelled, I'll take you in. Compared to the White Room you used to stay in, I can show you a much bigger world."

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka showed no particular reaction, but Tsukishiro Kazunari was inwardly startled.

If he let this guy take Ayanokoji away, Ayanokoji Atsuomi would surely go mad.

Once they left Japan, it would be obvious he wouldn't return.

Tsukishiro Kazunari instinctively wanted to refute Kaoru, but he closed his mouth.

Wouldn't saying he wouldn't allow Ayanokoji to be expelled make him look like a complete clown here?

Conversely, he couldn't actually let Ayanokoji get expelled either.

If he were expelled just like that, it would only prove that White Room students were nothing special—the ultimate masterpiece who had never been eliminated in the White Room being expelled at this high school would be utterly ridiculous.

Tsukishiro Kazunari clearly understood Ayanokoji Atsuomi's intention: Ayanokoji Kiyotaka was meant to crush these students and demonstrate the White Room's capabilities, not actually get expelled.

But now, it seemed he wasn't the only one aware of this.

Kaoru knew it too, so his solution was to give a helping hand—how about making Ayanokoji Kiyotaka get expelled?

For a moment, Tsukishiro Kazunari found himself caught between a rock and a hard place.

"Heh, Mitoma, are you and Ayanokoji friends?"

"You'll have to ask Ayanokoji about that."

"How about we change the subject? For instance, I can help you defeat Nagumo. How does that sound?"

Kaoru was indeed interested and expressed his willingness to listen attentively.

"The school has noticed the increasing number of accusations and doubts targeting Nagumo recently. After careful consideration, the school has decided to let students handle internal student council affairs independently."

Seeing Kaoru deep in thought, Tsukishiro Kazunari let out a soft chuckle.

"If the students believe Nagumo is unfit to continue as student council president, the school will respect their decision, remove Nagumo from the position, and hold a new student council election."

Procedurally, Tsukishiro Kazunari's approach had no issues.

The only criticism was the school directly interfering in student affairs.

However, given the recent turmoil, everyone could reluctantly accept the school's intervention.

"Are first-year students eligible to run in the election?"

Sakayanagi Arisu frowned.

Honestly, she didn't care for this kind of behavior.

"Aside from graduating students, all other students are naturally eligible."

Tsukishiro Kazunari maintained his smile. "What do you think of this proposal, Mitoma?"

"There are still exams coming up, and the third-years will be leaving soon. How long do you plan to drag out this election?"

Kaoru found it troublesome.

"Typically, about a month."

Tsukishiro Kazunari said, "Considering this is a special circumstance, the election period will be half a month, ending before the end of the month."

Sakayanagi Arisu sighed softly.

This was a blatant manipulation of the rules—clearly backroom dealings.

Before this guy even took office, the school had already lost its original essence.

Still, if one had to say, manipulating rules could also be considered a form of strength.

"Sounds pretty good." Kaoru thought for a moment. "I can hand Ayanokoji over to you."

"..."

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, who had been listening nearby, stared at him gloomily.

'Had he even considered how others might feel about this?'

Then Tsukishiro Kazunari turned his gaze to Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

"Do you intend to return to the White Room with me, or will you remain here, continuing to play the fool as a student?"

Perhaps having seen through something, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka replied calmly.

"There's nothing more you can teach me."

Nodding slowly, Tsukishiro Kazunari murmured "I see."

After a moment, he spoke again with a faint smile.

"I originally planned to relay a message from your father, but it seems that would be unnecessary now."

He paused briefly before continuing. "So instead, I'll offer you a piece of well-intentioned advice."

Ayanokoji Kiyotaka waited silently for his next words.

"Don't overestimate your cleverness. You know perfectly well what your failure would mean. No one can help you then."

In the world of the White Room, failure equated to death—there were no second chances.

Even their finest masterpiece wouldn't be permitted to show the slightest flaw.

If it did, they would personally destroy this masterpiece themselves.

Chapter 570: A Fan Who Wants to Devour Their Idol

After leaving Tsukishiro's office, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka glanced at Kaoru.

"Is the White Room that frightening?" Kaoru asked.

Ayanokoji shook his head.

How could he possibly be worried about a few people from the White Room?

"Even if you do get expelled, my promise to you still stands."

Kaoru patted his shoulder solemnly.

"A local assemblyman can't affect me at all. Not even mold can take me down, so don't worry."

Ayanokoji's face darkened.

This guy was making it sound like he was actually going to be expelled.

"You should worry about yourself instead. If they want to pressure me, you'll be the first target."

Regardless, Kaoru was a Class A student.

If Ayanokoji didn't want to be expelled, he would have to confront Ryuen, Ichinose Honami, and Kaoru.

"You've actually reminded me."

Kaoru stroked his chin. "If you truly make them wary, those White Room students would first consider cooperation—joining forces with us to deal with you."

After all, freshmen couldn't cross grade boundaries to directly confront Ayanokoji Kiyotaka themselves.

They would need to borrow upperclassmen's strength.

Meaning it was highly possible that White Room students might actively approach Kaoru, seeking to cooperate with him.

"Kaoru-kun."

Sakayanagi Arisu suddenly spoke. "You'd better not forget what you promised me."

Ayanokoji tactfully began to turn away, only to be stopped by the girl's voice.

"Ah, that's right, Ayanokoji-kun. You're next after I deal with this guy."

Facing Sakayanagi's threat, Ayanokoji and Kaoru exchanged glances.

This girl seemed to have swallowed gunpowder—her tone was really aggressive.

Yet Sakayanagi Arisu kept her eyes fixed intently on Kaoru's figure.

He still hadn't answered her previous question.

...

The afternoon sun was radiant, its warm rays making people drowsy.

Students gathered in small groups at the café and Keyaki Mall.

Most were first-year students who had just survived the recent crisis.

While some looked dejected, others were naturally cheerful—like the several girls currently surrounding Kaoru.

"Cheers!" Hasebe Haruka raised her coffee cup, "This toast is to our friendship and everyone's safe return! We also want to thank Kaoru-kun for his help. We've decided to reward you with our idol's selfie!"

Yamamura Miki hurriedly raised her cup, while Sakura Airi was already blushing intensely, waving her hands frantically.

"I-I never agreed to such a thing!"

Ever since she followed Kaoru's advice and shared her secret with Hasebe Haruka and Yamamura Miki, these two friends had become her fans.

Particularly Hasebe Haruka, whose gaze toward her was growing increasingly peculiar.

"What's the big deal? Didn't you say Kaoru-kun has seen your photos too?"

Hasebe clinked her cup with Yamamura Miki's and took a casual sip, "Besides, I was thinking we should take group photos together sometime."

Sakura Airi felt tempted - she had always wanted photos with her friends!

"Don't you often take pictures of us together normally?"

Kaoru drank his black coffee, remembering how Hasebe Haruka would sometimes pull out her phone to photograph desserts, or even drag Yamamura Miki and others into selfies.

"Eh, Kaoru-kun really is a boy. Girls treat digital cameras with much more respect than regular phone cameras, you know~"

Hasebe Haruka deliberately drew out her words, then pretended to be prim as she extended her small hand toward Kaoru.

"Airi says you're really good at photography. How about you take some photos for us, Mr. Photographer?"

Kaoru looked at the small hand pretending to be a microphone before him - the clean, pale wrist with nails painted in cute colors that made one want to give them a lick.

"My rates are quite expensive."

"How can you be like that, Kaoru-kun? Aren't we friends?"

"Even if we're friends, you still need to bribe me a little."

"Such a sly Kaoru-kun!"

Sakura Airi watched their playful exchange with envy.

She had something to say but didn't know how to bring it up.

"Ahem, I almost forgot the main matter."

Hasebe Haruka suddenly cleared her throat, "Kaoru-kun, we have a very serious question for you."

To be honest, ever since they called him here, Kaoru had known what they were curious about.

He said straightforwardly, "I knew this would happen days ago, so I already voted for Airi."

"Does that mean you've been watching us all along?"

Perhaps thinking of something, Hasebe Haruka's tone became strange.

Sakura Airi nearly choked on her coffee, coughing repeatedly.

"Are you okay, Airi?"

Yamamura Miki patted her back.

"I-I'm fine!"

Sakura Airi said quickly, her gaze accidentally meeting Kaoru's.

The fading blush returned to her face as she lowered her head, holding her coffee cup like a model student, as if this could calm her down.

"You've frightened our little idol again, Kaoru-kun should reflect on yourself."

Hasebe Haruka said, "That sounded just now like some stalker fan who's always following and watching their idol."

"Is that really all you think of me?"

Kaoru was utterly speechless.

Though he had followed a few idols before, the circumstances were completely different.

Hasebe Haruka, on the other hand, said with a grin, "If it were you, the perverted fan would become the hero behind the scenes. I'd actually love it if you occasionally stalked me."

How did this guy become so cringey?

Kaoru said irritably, "I don't stalk anyone. Please don't assign me strange settings based on the past."

"Is that so?"

Hasebe Haruka smiled gently, her voice softening gradually.

"I actually feel quite secure having someone by my side. When a girl is feeling down, suddenly appearing from beside the park - that behavior scores major points."

"Isn't that the prelude to a crime?"

Kaoru remained unimpressed.

"What a coincidence, I think so too."

Hasebe Haruka agreed profoundly. "When someone asked if they could become an idol, he heartlessly rejected a girl's request."

Kaoru couldn't continue the conversation.

It wasn't like having a good figure guaranteed debut success, especially since his expertise was in singing and dancing idols - he'd never handled business like Sakura Airi's.

"Are you two discussing something that Airi and I can't understand?"

Yamamura Miki tilted her head. "I feel like you're talking about things outside of school."

Hasebe Haruka said wistfully, "Have you ever followed idols?"

Yamamura Miki wanted to nod, but considering how Extroverts like Hasebe Haruka pursued celebrities, she hesitantly shook her head instead.

Thus, Hasebe Haruka laughed.

“Oh dear, let’s not talk about this then. Let’s discuss taking photos instead. I remember the graduation ceremony is in two weeks, right? Why don’t we take a group photo to celebrate moving up to second year!”

“T-taking photos... in front of everyone...?”

“Well yeah, what else would we do during spring break? We can’t go out anyway.”

“Th-that’s terrifying.”

Compared to the two Introverts, Hasebe Haruka’s smile appeared more youthful and radiant than usual - perhaps this was some kind of magical chemical reaction.

Watching the beaming Hasebe Haruka, Kaoru couldn’t help but recall encountering a middle schooler in the past who seemed to have argued with friends and was sulking alone in the park.

Compared to when she had excitedly declared she no longer needed any friendships, she seemed much more normal now.

Perhaps she even considered those memories part of her Embarrassing past now.

Kaoru suddenly felt someone gently nudge him under the table.

Looking up, he saw Hasebe Haruka resting her chin in her hands, smiling brightly at him.

‘I’m done pretending. If I keep this up, someone might steal the initiative.’

‘You couldn’t make a move on a middle schooler, but now that she’s a high school student, you should be able to, right?’

'Calling yourself a life coach while peeking at a middle schooler's chest - you haven't changed at all, you perverted old man.'

Kaoru took a sip of coffee.

He thought he had grasped Hasebe Haruka's Embarrassing past, but this woman didn't seem to care at all.

Probably from their first meeting on the cruise ship, Hasebe Haruka had already recognized him, pretending to show him a producer's photo while asking if he knew this person.

Thinking back carefully now, she might have been hinting at her identity, observing whether Kaoru remembered her.

No, perhaps even before they formally met, Hasebe Haruka had already confirmed his identity.

Kaoru felt heavy-hearted.

Given all these circumstances, how was he going to explain everything clearly to the idols who were about to come charging in?