

Cote 741

Chapter 741: Airi intel

Kaoru received Sakura Airi's tip-off.

Although the girls' nighttime discussion had been a little unexpected, it was also perfectly reasonable.

No girlfriend could remain completely indifferent toward her boyfriend's exes, especially when there were more than ten of them.

Because persuading Sakayanagi Narumori had taken quite a bit of time, Kaoru ended up taking one more day off than originally planned.

By the time he returned, the girls pinned him down on the bed without giving him any chance to explain.

Perhaps it was the frustration of not seeing him for two days, or perhaps it was the stimulation brought by the agency topic.

In any case, all Kaoru remembered was that the "battle" had been intense.

White socks, black socks, tights, bare legs—everything blurred together into one chaotic memory.

The wish machine, in particular, spent the whole night angrily rinsing its mouth while muttering "peh, peh," and perhaps only it knew exactly how many times Kaoru had been pushed to his limit.

By the time Kaoru woke from his daze, it was already the next morning.

But the moment his consciousness returned, Kaoru sleepily realized he could not feel his right hand. He moved it a few times, only to accidentally touch something soft and springy, like a warm, delicate cushion. His fingers sank in slightly, and for a moment, he did not really want to pull them back.

Because the feeling was so comfortable, Kaoru instinctively started kneading it.

That movement also made him aware of something even softer pressed against his chest, lightly rubbing against him through the thin blanket and slowly stirring up a buried impulse.

At that moment, a familiar cool voice sounded beside his ear.

"You're finally awake, pervert-kun?"

Kaoru opened his eyes and immediately met Horikita Suzune's slightly cold gaze.

The two of them were very close. Their breaths almost mingled together.

Not only that, but Kaoru could see Suzune's shoulder exposed outside the blanket, her smooth pale skin looking far too tempting in the morning light. Under the thin blanket, the soft outline of her body pressed lightly against him, rising and falling with her breathing. He could even feel the faint rhythm of her heartbeat.

So the thing in his arms was Suzune.

Realizing that, Kaoru unconsciously gave another squeeze. The place he had touched earlier was probably the girl's hip.

Although Suzune usually looked cold and untouchable, her body was far softer than her personality. Once his hand rested there, it was surprisingly hard to let go.

"Good morning, Suzune."

Kaoru smiled faintly. Maybe he had used the girl as a pillow last night, because his right arm was still trapped beneath her and had gone numb.

"Pervert."

Suzune glared at him. He was clearly awake, yet he still kept touching her. "We still have class today. How long are you planning to stay in bed?"

"Where are Kikyō and the others?"

Kaoru noticed that only Suzune was still on the bed and found it strange.

"They were afraid you'd get revenge in the morning. Honami and Airi ran off during the night, while Kei and Kikyō escaped just now."

Suzune's face was expressionless.

In truth, she had woken up much earlier. But Kaoru had been holding her like a pillow, so she could only endure until now and let him keep hugging her.

Kaoru took a deep breath.

The room was quiet, with only the sound of his and Suzune's breathing and heartbeats. The air still carried a faint trace of the previous night.

"Suzune, how many times did I tease you last night?"

The instant Kaoru asked, a thin blush appeared on Suzune's face, and her eyes filled with embarrassment and anger.

"H-how would I remember something like that?"

Seeing her face turn red, Kaoru smiled at first. Then he kissed her hair, her nose, and finally touched his forehead lightly against hers.

"I just suddenly remembered that ever since the first time, we basically haven't been very careful. Suzune might already have a baby."

Suzune's cheeks became even hotter.

Of course she was aware of that. That was exactly why she had felt so embarrassed when Kaoru asked her just now.

"P-probably not..."

Suzune whispered, even though her period this month was already a few days late.

"Actually, I don't really want any of you to become mothers this soon. Putting school aside for now, do you remember the agency I mentioned last time?"

"I remember."

"Does Suzune want to meet them?"

The topic changed so suddenly that Suzune could not immediately keep up. She looked at Kaoru in confusion, as if asking what that had to do with her, a mere "cup."

"I know I still have so many exes and that the matter hasn't been properly resolved. If I carelessly let Suzune end up with a baby before that, it would be too much."

Kaoru touched her cheek. "So I was thinking that, at the very least, you should meet them. Suzune has the right to know my past."

This was his hint.

No, it was practically an explicit statement.

However, Suzune slightly turned her gaze away and whispered, "You should say these things clearly to Honami and Kei, not me. I'm only..."

"Only my cup?"

Kaoru smiled. "How strange. When I forced you back then, you looked completely unwilling. But after Kikyō explained what that meant to you, you accepted it so quickly."

For no reason, Suzune felt heat rush through her. It was like trying to be a good student, only for a classmate to discover an embarrassing secret video of her. Along with guilt, there was also a wave of anger and shame.

"It's... it's different. I was forced by you... and the role of a cup is like that..."

For the first time, Kaoru realized there really was someone in this world who could identify with an object this strongly.

It was almost funny.

Perhaps in Suzune's eyes, she had only been forced by Kaoru, and a cup was precisely something meant to be used. It fit her identity perfectly.

As for liking him, Suzune would never say that so easily.

Even though she had already said it once before.

"Even if Suzune is my cup, I still want to share my past with you."

Kaoru pinched her nose. She clearly cared deep down, yet pretended she did not care at all. "If you refuse, I really will treat you like a cup and keep you with me all day."

Suzune pushed him away with a flushed face.

Why were this man's threats always so shameless?

...

Although Kaoru had returned from leave, Arisu had not yet come back. After all, her body had undergone a complete transformation, so she needed a little time to cover things up properly.

The moment Kaoru returned, Kamuro Masumi looked him up and down with a deeply suspicious gaze.

"Masumi, your eyes are kind of scary."

"Tch. Lolicon."

"If I were a lolicon, I wouldn't like you this much, Masumi."

"That's even more disgusting."

For some reason, after being insulted by her a few times, Kaoru felt a strange reaction and began worrying about his own preferences.

At that moment, Masumi poked his arm with the cap of her pen.

"What happened to Sakayanagi?"

So she did not know what had happened.

Kaoru had thought Arisu would have told her.

"Her illness can be cured now. In a few days, you may see an entirely new white-haired little tyrant."

Kaoru felt that the sight would shock many people. In truth, even he was somewhat looking forward to seeing what Arisu would be like without needing her cane.

"You're not lying to me?"

Masumi found it hard to believe. She suspected that Kaoru might have pushed Arisu too far and gotten her hospitalized instead.

"Masumi is this cute. How could I lie to you?"

Kaoru did not know what she was suspecting. "If you're worried, you can call Arisu. She's probably very free right now."

Seeing how confident he was, Masumi believed him halfway.

The reason she did not fully believe him was because she had never imagined Arisu's heart disease could actually be cured one day.

"How do you know?"

The girl asked naturally. "Did you go to the hospital with her?"

Kaoru looked toward the girl's legs. Beneath the hem of her skirt was a stretch of smooth, delicate skin, while her calves were wrapped in black knee-high socks. Whether it was the socks themselves or the absolute territory above them, they were especially eye-catching right now.

"Perverved lolicon."

Masumi coldly spat out the words.

She understood Kaoru's reaction too well.

He had not even bothered changing the subject. He was only staring at her legs, which meant he had practically admitted it.

Masumi did not need to think about the details. If Arisu's body could endure it, the two of them had probably already done what they wanted. There was no point expecting Arisu to resist either. She was probably more than willing to tempt Kaoru.

Assuming Kaoru was not lying and Arisu really had recovered, without her physical limitations, what else could they do?

Obviously, they would get carried away.

That was why Masumi had suddenly insulted him.

Kaoru did not refute it.

After all, it was true.

Soon, it was lunchtime, and Komiya Kaho came over with a bento.

"Hello, Kamuro-senpai! I'll be borrowing Onii-chan for a bit again today!"

Compared to Kaho, who was like a bright little bundle of energy, Masumi clearly did not know how to respond. She simply turned her gaze away.

"Mm. Hurry up and take this lolicon away. I don't want to see him today."

Kaho blinked.

Lolicon?

What a familiar accusation.

Before she could exchange a few words with Masumi, Kaoru had already taken her and left the Class 2-A classroom.

"Kamuro-senpai seems angry. What did Onii-chan do this time?"

Kaho giggled and bumped Kaoru's shoulder with her own.

Ah, lolicon.

What a nostalgic word.

"Kaho can even tell that now?"

Kaoru rubbed her hair.

"Uwaa, don't mess up my hair! I worked hard to fix it!"

Kaho puffed up her cheeks. "It must be because Onii-chan likes younger-looking girls, so Kamuro-senpai got angry."

As she said that, she sighed to herself.

"Honestly, Onii-chan is hopeless. From back then until now, your weird preferences haven't changed at all. You like girls' feet, you like girls scolding you, and you even like elementary school—"

Toward the end, Kaho suddenly could not continue and felt embarrassed.

Because everyone back then had always liked saying Kaoru was a lolicon, and she had been the elementary schooler at that time.

Did that not basically mean they were saying Kaoru liked her?

"Don't talk nonsense. I have never had any thoughts about elementary schoolers."

Kaoru mercilessly interrupted her embarrassment. "Even if I liked cute younger types, I would only like mature ones."

"What? That kind of younger type is fake! Onii-chan is the one talking nonsense!"

Kaho was unconvinced. "Back when I did photo shoots, Onii-chan was always staring at me!"

"I was only... surprised that Kaho's figure was... slightly more mature than girls your age."

Kaoru shifted his gaze away. "At the time, I was checking whether Kaho could handle the photo shoot properly. I didn't have any strange thoughts. Otherwise, how could I shoot MVs for you later?"

At the mention of MVs, Kaho's face suddenly turned red, and her small hands gripped the hem of her skirt.

"As expected! Onii-chan really wants to shoot a naughty MV with me! Onii-chan, you super pervert!"

Kaoru froze, then suddenly remembered a certain MV he had filmed with the girls before and hurriedly said, "Wait, I meant a proper MV. That kind of MV—I definitely wouldn't force you all to shoot one again!"

"Uuu, I don't believe you. Onii-chan said the same thing to Chiyuki-senpai, but in the end, you were the director, cameraman, and male lead. It was so indecent!"

"I didn't release it. Later, I still filmed a normal MV with Chiyuki and the others."

"Uuu, everyone knows. Onii-chan secretly filmed a private version to keep for himself, then filmed a normal version afterward... Onii-chan really does want to shoot a naughty MV with me. I guess there's no helping it. I can only agree to Onii-chan's request..."

"No, I only did that once. Only Chiyuki and a few of them should have known. Why do even you know about it?"

"..."

"Kaho?"

"Ahaha. Kaho doesn't know anything. Kaho doesn't understand a thing. Kaho only knows Onii-chan said he wants to shoot an MV with Kaho. I'm so happy."

Realizing that she had gotten carried away and accidentally exposed everyone's secret, Kaho immediately played dumb.

The corner of Kaoru's mouth twitched.

He finally understood why, later on, those girls had kept indirectly asking him to shoot MVs with them.

"Kaho."

Kaoru flicked her forehead. "That's punishment. If you do this again, Onii-chan will smack you."

"Uu!"

Kaho was very upset.

She also wanted to shoot a shameless MV with Kaoru. Kissing the person she liked in front of a camera was surely an idol's lifelong dream.

"That MV wasn't leaked, right?"

Kaoru remembered destroying it. It was possible they had secretly kept a copy.

"Of course not!"

Kaho huffed. A video that shameless could never be leaked. Aside from Kaoru, only the people inside the agency could watch it.

Kaoru relaxed.

After all, that MV had been the result of him completing a wish back then. The footage was far too embarrassing and could not be shown to anyone outside the agency.

As the two walked, Kaoru suddenly noticed a somewhat familiar figure.

A first-year student.

Tsubaki Sakurako.

Because there were quite a few wishes connected to her, she stood out especially clearly in the crowd. She also had a lollipop in her mouth.

Kaho noticed Kaoru's gaze and looked over in confusion.

"Onii-chan knows Tsubaki-san?"

"You can tell who I'm looking at from this far away?"

"Because Onii-chan is easy to read. You just have to see who the cutest girl nearby is."

Kaho spoke with complete confidence. "Although Tsubaki-san's figure isn't that indecent, she's very cute. She's the cool, distant type, and it's hard to tell what she's thinking. Onii-chan definitely likes that."

"Kaho, I don't have any special desires toward Madoka."

"Oh my, oh my. I didn't even say Madoka-senpai's name. Why did Onii-chan think I was talking about Madoka-senpai?"

"..."

Kaoru was momentarily speechless.

It was because they always suspected there was something special between him and Higuchi Madoka, forcing him to explain every single time.

"How strange. If Onii-chan wants a cute girl to scold him, there's one right here!"

Kaho raised her hand as if eagerly signing up for some limited-time event. "Kaho has always wanted to scold Onii-chan a few times like Madoka-senpai does."

Kaoru was just about to tell her not to mess around when he noticed that Sakurako was looking this way.

Their eyes met.

Sakurako held the lollipop in her mouth, expressionless.

Chapter 742: Do you have any plans next month?

After only one glance, Kaoru quickly steadied himself.

Right now, he did not have any strong desire for rewards.

If he could get one, great. If he could not, then so be it. There was no need to force himself to collect every reward like before, only for it to somehow turn into collecting beautiful girls every single time.

He already had enough headaches at the moment. For now, Kaoru did not want to provoke Tsubaki Sakurako.

"Onii-chan, aren't you going to say hello?"

Komiya Kaho encouraged him from the side. "She's been looking over here this whole time. Should I go say hi?"

"I really don't have any special relationship with her. At most, we've met a few times and exchanged a few words. You were there last time too."

Kaoru withdrew his gaze from Sakurako's white-socked legs. White socks placed even higher demands on the shape of a girl's legs than black socks did, and this underclassman really was quite pretty.

However, Kaho had already waved her small hand toward Sakurako and trotted over to greet her.

"Tsubaki-san, good afternoon!"

"You're... Komiya-san?"

"Correct! Eh, wait, no! We've met several times already!"

"I don't really remember students from other classes."

"That's okay! I'll definitely make you remember me!"

Looking at the enthusiastic Kaho, Sakurako clearly looked confused, unable to understand what she was thinking.

Was she trying to become friends with her?

"Kaho, lower your voice a little."

Kaoru had no choice but to walk over. Kaho had always been loud, and once she got going, she could chatter endlessly. One full combo from her would probably leave Sakurako completely stunned.

"Eh? Was I being loud?"

Kaho quickly shut her mouth and looked around before turning back to Sakurako. "Sorry. I just thought Tsubaki-san was kind of cute, so I couldn't help wanting to be friends with you."

If a boy said something like that, it would sound frivolous enough to make Sakurako turn around and leave.

But coming from Kaho, it felt strangely sincere, leaving Sakurako even more confused.

"Friends?"

"Yeah, yeah! Onii-chan thinks Tsubaki-san is cute too, right?"

Kaho nodded like a pecking chick while not forgetting to look at Kaoru beside her. "She's cute, right?"

Kaoru did not know why she had to emphasize it twice.

He looked at Sakurako. She was indeed cute, with delicate features and a cool, unapproachable air. Perhaps because she barely showed any expression, even when confused, she only furrowed her brows slightly, making it hard to guess what she was thinking.

"She's cute."

Kaoru had no awareness that his gaze might be taken the wrong way. He glanced at Sakurako, then smiled. "Long time no see, Tsubaki-san."

When the two of them first met, Sakurako had once asked who had left the deepest impression on him. Back then, Kaoru had teased her a little by deliberately saying Kōenji Rokusuke.

After that, the two had rarely met.

Kaoru had once suspected that she might be a White Room student, but Amasawa Ichika and Yagami Takuya had both tried to make moves, while Sakurako stayed completely still. That made it unlikely that she was from the White Room.

Later, after checking her background, he had been able to completely rule out that suspicion.

"Long time no see, Mitoma-senpai."

Sakurako suddenly took the lollipop out of her mouth, a faint shine of moisture flashing over it. "Are you two looking for somewhere to spend lunch?"

She had already noticed the bento in Kaho's hand. It was a two-person lunch, and Kaho made absolutely no effort to hide her affection for Kaoru.

In her heart, Sakurako had basically confirmed that Kaoru was the legendary harem demon king.

"Ehehe, Tsubaki-san found us out."

Kaho bashfully hugged Kaoru's arm, pressing close to him. "Onii-chan has to eat my bento every day. Honestly, he's so much trouble. Sometimes I even have to feed him myself. It's like taking care of a little kid. Onii-chan really is too spoiled with me."

As she spoke, Kaho leaned into Kaoru with a shy, sweet expression.

Kaoru's face immediately darkened.

He finally understood why Kaho had gone out of her way to greet Sakurako.

She was showing off.

Even if she had to make things up, she wanted to declare ownership early and kill off Sakurako as a potential harem member before anything could happen.

Sure enough, Sakurako very obviously shifted her gaze away.

"If I remember correctly, Komiya-san is a famous idol, right?"

"Mm, I'm not that famous. Without Onii-chan, I never would've become an idol at all. And there are senpai at the agency who are much more amazing than me. I'm just an idol who exists for Onii-chan, to satisfy Onii-chan's—ah!"

Seeing Kaho getting more and more excited, Kaoru calmly reached out and pinched her from behind.

Because she was standing so close, Sakurako's line of sight was blocked, so she could not see what he was doing.

"Sorry. Kaho got a little too excited."

Kaoru smiled lightly while silently warning the girl beside him. "I heard someone in your class withdrew. Is Utsunomiya-kun doing all right?"

Utsunomiya Riku was one of the first-year students who had wanted to join the Student Council. However, he had come with a friend, and after that friend withdrew, his decision to join the Student Council had wavered.

"He's doing fairly well. If you want him to join the Student Council, I can help persuade him when I go back."

Sakurako put the lollipop back into her mouth. Her gaze could not help lingering on Kaho for another moment.

Kaho's face was bright red, and she was making small muffled sounds, which looked rather strange.

"Then I'll leave it to you."

Kaoru was very polite.

Although everyone suspected that he wanted to turn the Student Council into his harem group, he personally had no such intention.

After all, the Student Council was only one of his tools. He had no plans to ruin it.

After that, Kaoru left Sakurako's sight with Kaho.

"Uuu, Producer-san is such a big pervert. Teasing a girl in front of Tsubaki-san is too much!"

Only after they entered the Student Council office did Kaho cover herself with teary eyes and accuse Kaoru of his terrible behavior earlier.

"I haven't even punished you for making up stories yet. When exactly did I act spoiled with you?"

Kaoru said irritably, though the way she pouted made him feel a little tempted to tease her again.

"It definitely happened! Anyway, no hitting. You can't just hit a girl like that!"

Kaho turned away from him with a red face.

She was already a high school student. How could he still treat her like a kid? That was too embarrassing.

"As long as you understand that. Next time, I won't be so polite."

Kaoru habitually threatened her, only to see Kaho's cheeks turn even redder as she instinctively pressed down on her skirt.

He paused.

The girl in front of him was no longer the elementary schooler from before.

The uniform skirt, the black knee-high socks, and the soft contrast of her legs made her look far more grown-up than the Kaho in his memories. When he recalled the feeling from earlier, even Kaoru felt his heartbeat quicken slightly.

"Ahem. I'll gratefully accept the bento Kaho prepared."

Kaoru calmly sat in his chair and opened today's lunch box.

Seeing that, Kaho blinked, then very naturally ran over to Kaoru's side. Like usual, she sat beside him and leaned close, almost as if this was where she belonged.

Kaoru wanted to say something but stopped.

This girl definitely knew how charming she was now and was boldly tempting her Producer.

Still, Kaoru had excellent patience.

The two of them finished lunch with their usual tacit understanding.

"Producer-san, is there anything you want to eat tomorrow?"

"I'm not picky. But if Kaho keeps feeding me like this, I might turn into a big fatty."

"That's fine. Even if Producer-san becomes a big fatty, Kaho will still take care of you."

"Kaho is so good to me. By the way, who taught you how to cook?"

"Mm, everyone taught me a little. Kanna-senpai, Kogane-senpai, Hiori-senpai..."

For some reason, as Kaho counted, she suddenly puffed out her chest proudly.

"I've gathered everyone's power inside me. The current Kaho is Super Kaho, with one million times the strength. I definitely won't lose to anyone!"

Kaoru nodded with relief.

No wonder Kaho had suddenly released such a strong motherly glow earlier. It made him want to cling to her and rest.

However, he suspected it was not only cooking. Those girls had probably taught Kaho many other strange things too.

"Producer-san?"

Kaho gently tugged at his sleeve, speaking hesitantly. "Do you have any plans next month?"

"Next month?"

Kaoru froze slightly, then suddenly remembered his birthday.

Last year, Arisu and Masumi had given him birthday wishes.

Now it was already June. His birthday was very close.

"Mm. Next month... the senpai seem to be preparing something..."

Kaho carefully watched his expression.

She had already brought information back to the agency, and now everyone cared even more about his birthday.

"If Producer-san goes back, everyone will be happy too."

Kaoru fell silent.

He had not expected that even his birthday would become such a difficult choice.

"It's okay even if you don't go back!"

Kaho hurriedly hid her disappointment and showed him her usual smile. "Kaho will always stay by Producer-san's side. Next month, I'll make Producer-san a super delicious big cake!"

Kaoru patted her head.

A child this thoughtful made his heart ache for some reason.

"I'll go back."

For the first time, Kaoru expressed his intention to her so firmly. "No matter what happens, I'll go back."

Kaho froze for a long time.

Only when hot tears slid down her cheeks did she finally choke out, "I thought... I thought you wouldn't choose us."

"Didn't I say it last time?"

Kaoru smiled. "Don't underestimate your Producer. With this many beautiful girls around, I won't let a single one go."

Kaho turned and buried her face in his chest, feeling deeply embarrassed that she had cried in front of Producer-san again.

Kaoru patiently stroked her back.

Last time had only treated the symptoms, not the root cause. If Kaho did not see him actually taking action, she would keep tormenting herself internally.

"All right, all right. Don't cry anymore. Kaho, have you thought about where you want to go during summer vacation?"

Kaoru comforted her while redirecting her attention. "Summer vacation here is a little different. Kaho will probably be surprised when the time comes."

"S-summer vacation?"

Although Kaho's voice was still choked, her attention had successfully been caught.

"That's right. Around late July or early August, the school should arrange a summer vacation activity for us according to tradition."

Kaoru smiled.

In truth, he had more or less guessed what kind of exam the school was preparing.

Recently, the school had asked him what he thought of last year's uninhabited island exam and told him to submit a report, saying they would carefully reference his opinions in the future.

It sounded strange, but the Student Council did indeed have that right. As the president, Kaoru was qualified to submit reports to the school regarding special exams.

In fact, when Horikita Manabu and Nagumo Miyabi served as Student Council presidents, the school had also seriously considered their opinions and evaluations, constantly adjusting the details of future exams based on feedback from teachers and students.

The problem was that a whole year had already passed since the last uninhabited island exam.

For the school to suddenly ask Kaoru about his thoughts on it clearly meant they were telling him that the next special exam would be another uninhabited island exam.

When Kaoru told Kaho about the uninhabited island exam he had experienced before, she suddenly became excited for some reason.

"So that means I can live together with Producer-san for a whole week on a deserted island full of summer vibes!?"

"I'm not sure whether the first-years will be going too..."

"No, I have to prepare a cute swimsuit! The school swimsuit is too plain. Then I can take walks on the beach with Producer-san, chat around a campfire at night, and look at the stars together. When we get tired, we can sleep in the same tent and wake up together!"

"Wait, Kaho. The uninhabited island isn't for playing around..."

"Don't worry. My swimsuit will only be for Producer-san to see. I'll prepare two sets, one special one and one normal one!"

"No, that isn't what I mean. The school will probably make us survive on the island."

"A survival game is even better! I can secretly act together with Producer-san. No matter what we do, nobody will know. Ehehe!"

"..."

"Oh, right, right! Is there really a cruise ship too? I really want to enjoy summer vacation on a cruise ship with Producer-san! We can take lots of photos and make Rinze and the others super jealous!"

Kaoru realized he could not argue with Kaho at all.

Once she started talking, she could keep going endlessly. Her eyes sparkled, and there was no trace of the sadness from earlier.

Just learning about the uninhabited island was enough to make Kaho incredibly excited. Even her body became restless as she shifted happily beside him.

It seemed he did not need to comfort her anymore.

This girl was looking forward to summer vacation even more than most boys would. She even started shopping for swimsuits online while sitting near Kaoru.

Seeing her this excited, Kaoru grew a little worried.

If the first-years did not participate in the uninhabited island exam, she might actually look like she wanted to kill someone.

Fortunately, Kaoru's worry did not last long.

Less than a week later, the school announced the summer vacation arrangements.

All year levels would participate in the next uninhabited island exam.

Chapter 743: Shocking

Two things shook the entirety of Class 2-A today.

The first was Sakayanagi Arisu's return.

When she appeared at the entrance of the Class 2-A classroom again after a week away, the entire room fell into dead silence.

She was not using her cane.

She was clearly wearing the same school uniform as usual, with her beret on her head, white stockings beneath her skirt, and even that faint, barely-there smile at the corner of her lips had not changed at all.

And yet, the sight of her now gave everyone an intense sense of wrongness.

Watching Arisu walk steadily into the classroom, everyone felt as if each step she took landed directly on their hearts.

A few girls reacted the fastest. They stammered as they hurried up to ask Arisu where her usual cane was.

In response, Arisu smiled beautifully and told them that she no longer needed it. Her physical condition had become the same as an ordinary person's, and the reason she had taken leave these past few days was to receive treatment and recover.

The news was like dropping a piece of sodium into water.

The entire classroom instantly erupted.

The girls almost rushed forward all at once, surrounding Arisu in a noisy, excited circle. Some asked what miracle medicine she had taken, while others sincerely congratulated her.

Even the boys became strangely excited when they witnessed this scene. Even Totsuka Yahiko, who usually disliked the Sakayanagi faction, looked genuinely happy.

Great.

Their class no longer had someone dragging them down.

If another event like the Sports Festival happened, even Arisu could now be useful.

Kaoru noticed that not many people were suspicious of Arisu's recovery. Most of them were simply happy to see it. It seemed everyone accepted the news rather easily, perhaps because they had never fully understood the details of Arisu's illness in the first place.

Kamuro Masumi, on the other hand, kept glancing at him suspiciously from time to time, her eyes carrying the faint look of someone staring at an alien.

After Arisu finally escaped the circle of girls and returned to Kaoru's side, she stood in front of him.

Her silver-white hair shone brightly in the morning sunlight. Without her cane, even the same uniform somehow gave her a completely different impression.

"During the days I was away, did Mitoma-kun feel lonely?"

Arisu looked like a young maiden in love, her eyes shy as she lightly bit her lip. Anyone who saw her like this would probably feel their heart stir.

"A little. But luckily, Masumi was by my side."

Kaoru nodded with deep agreement.

In truth, he could feel quite a few gazes from around the classroom turning toward them. Even in Class 2-A, full of excellent students, gossip was still something everyone loved.

"Hey, don't drag me into this!"

Masumi's face darkened.

Being involved with this guy really was the worst luck of her life.

"That's fine. Kamuro-san is very cute, after all."

Arisu smiled lightly at first, then her tone gained a faint trace of reproach. "And?"

Kaoru thought for a moment before saying, "Welcome back, Arisu."

"You didn't miss me?"

Arisu was not letting him go that easily. "There isn't even the slightest surprise in your eyes. Have you already gotten tired of me?"

Kaoru felt as if several murderous gazes had landed on him. Even Masumi, sitting beside him, shrank back slightly with a look that said, 'You're on your own.'

"Of course I missed you. Your hair, your ears, your eyes, your nose, and your mouth—I missed all of them."

Kaoru pulled her into his arms and deliberately lowered his voice. "Let me see whether you've grown a little too."

Arisu froze for a moment, then her face flushed as she quickly slipped out of his embrace. Immediately after, she saw the amused look on his face.

Sure enough, when it came to shameless teasing, she could not beat this pervert.

Flirting had no effect on Kaoru at all. He really would make a move if given the chance.

After just returning, Arisu experienced the rare taste of defeat.

Dealing with a shameless pervert like this seemed impossible.

No.

Of course she still had methods.

"Mitoma-kun, let's talk about it tonight."

Arisu blinked and deliberately let everyone nearby hear her. "I don't know where I put the engagement ring you gave me. Can you help me look for it in my room?"

Kaoru looked at her finger.

Sure enough, she was not wearing the ring.

However, the surrounding classroom immediately exploded with excitement. Arisu's ring was finally confirmed. As expected, Kaoru had given it to her!

Masumi curled her lips.

She also had a ring. She had simply never worn it.

Only an idiot would believe Arisu was actually looking for a ring. She was probably trying to call Kaoru to her room so they could do whatever couples did.

...

The excitement caused by Arisu did not last too long.

Soon, another matter drew the entire class's attention.

The second uninhabited island exam.

During today's homeroom, Mashima Tomonari introduced the upcoming special exam to everyone through a PowerPoint presentation.

"I believe none of you have forgotten what you experienced during last year's summer vacation. Although it is still somewhat early, the school has already prepared to hold the second uninhabited island exam."

Mashima used the pointer to indicate the screen on the blackboard, which displayed a massive luxury cruise ship.

In an instant, the students of Class 2-A exchanged glances.

This cruise ship was even larger than the one from last time. It was very possible that it would not be carrying only their year.

"First, from August 4th to August 11th, for eight days and seven nights, you will spend this part of your summer vacation aboard this luxury cruise ship. As with last time, all facilities on the ship will be freely available to you. In addition, no special exam will be conducted aboard the ship."

Hearing the last sentence, most people let out a sigh of relief.

Last time, they had only enjoyed themselves for a few days before the VIP exam began, ruining everyone's mood.

"Yosh! The school finally learned how to treat good students like us properly!"

Totsuka Yahiko proudly whistled. "Mashima-sensei, hurry up and tell us what the special exam is this time."

Mashima looked around the classroom.

Most students were already eager to begin, and it was not hard to understand why. Back then, Class A had relied on the uninhabited island exam to surpass the entire year.

For them, although the uninhabited island had involved hardship, it had also been their first major victory.

Mashima likely thought of his own fellow teacher too. Chabashira Sae was probably explaining the exam content to her class at this very moment, though nobody knew what mood she would be in.

In the next moment, Mashima restrained his unnecessary thoughts and continued speaking in his usual cool tone.

"This exam's theme is uninhabited island survival. You should still remember last year's uninhabited island exam, but this year's format is different from last year's. It will be harsher and more brutal. You should prepare yourselves mentally."

At the same time, Mashima switched the PowerPoint to a detailed schedule.

"This is the timetable announced by the school. It will also be sent to your phones, so you can check it whenever you wish. There is no need to take notes."

According to the school's arrangement, the students would depart on July 19th, leaving the school by bus before transferring to the cruise ship at the harbor.

The exam would officially begin the next day, July 20th. At that time, the school would explain the exam content, hand over supplies, and complete all necessary procedures.

After that, the exam would continue until August 3rd. The rankings and results would then be announced aboard the cruise ship, and corresponding rewards or penalties would be issued.

Afterward would be free activity time. The cruise ship would return to the harbor on August 11th, matching the eight days and seven nights of cruise ship life that had just been mentioned.

According to this schedule, the closing ceremony for the first semester would be held on July 16th. They would need to prepare for departure immediately after the ceremony, so the timing was rather tight.

In addition, the second uninhabited island exam would last longer than the previous one. The participating students would have to survive on the uninhabited island for two full weeks.

Given the school's usual style, the exam format would definitely not be simple outdoor survival.

This uninhabited island exam would be a joint exam involving all year levels. Students would not only compete against others in the same year, but also against students from different years.

For this exam, the school had specially changed to a different uninhabited island. The island used for last year's exam was too small and could not accommodate a larger number of students.

Yes.

The school apparently owned several uninhabited islands. If necessary, they could even request access to certain government-controlled remote islands, though those were only islands that were rarely used.

"Because the exam is still some time away, only part of the rules will be announced today."

Mashima switched to the next slide. "First are the team formation rules. You may form large groups with a maximum of six people. If the students are from the same year level, they may form a large group regardless of class."

Kaoru was not surprised.

Every time the school wanted students to cooperate with other classes, it was clearly trying to prevent them from closing off communication too much.

"From today until before the closing ceremony, you will have one month to choose your teammates. Among second-year students, you may choose up to two others, forming a small group with a maximum of three people. Remember, you may not form a small group with first-year or third-year students."

As Mashima explained, everyone saw the restrictions displayed on the slide.

First-year students could form small groups of up to four people. However, second-year and third-year students could only form small groups of up to three people.

These were clearly different restrictions aimed at different year levels.

In addition, the school had placed special limits on gender ratios. For mixed-gender groups, girls had to make up at least two-thirds of the group.

In other words, if a boy wanted to form a group with girls, the format could only be one boy and two girls.

Otherwise, he would either have to act alone or team up with other boys.

"Although this exam allows students to act alone, each small group may still form a large group. Whether you are a solo group or a two-person group, as long as the total number in the large group does not exceed six, you may team up and act together."

Mashima emphasized the importance of forming teams.

The risk of acting alone was too high. If someone was accidentally eliminated, the consequences would be tragic.

Because the theme of this exam was outdoor survival, and because it would last a full two weeks, a single person would struggle to handle unexpected situations alone.

However, Mashima only emphasized it once. He believed his class would not have any idiots.

"The rewards for this exam will be issued by group. The number of members in the group will not affect the class point reward. The school will distribute the reward equally according to the number of classes represented in the group."

As his words fell, the reward screen appeared on the PowerPoint.

First place: 300 class points, 1,000,000 private points, and 1 protection point.

Second place: 200 class points and 500,000 private points.

Third place: 100 class points and 250,000 private points.

In addition, groups ranked in the top 50% would receive 50,000 private points, while groups ranked in the top 70% would receive 10,000 private points.

"Please note that the bottom three groups in this exam will be responsible for paying the class points awarded to the top three groups. For example, if the bottom-ranked group belongs to a second-year class, the school will collect the class points for the first-place reward equally from the second-year classes. Each class will have to pay the corresponding amount of class points."

Everyone's expressions changed.

Mashima's words were undoubtedly telling them that the other years were enemies.

Even if Class 2-A took first place, if all three bottom groups were second-year groups, their class points would still be mercilessly collected by the school to serve as exam rewards.

Perhaps seeing everyone's expressions, Mashima added, "If the top three and bottom three groups are from the same year level, then the class of the bottom-ranked group only needs to pay 100 class points. The second-lowest class will pay 66 class points, and the third-lowest class will pay 33 class points."

Not only that, if a mixed group made up of students from all four classes ended up in the bottom ranks, then the bottom group would pay 75 points, the second-bottom group would pay 50 points, and the third-bottom group would pay 25 points. The four classes would share the penalty together.

Even if the class points collected did not reach the full reward amount, the school would fill in the remaining amount. This rule applied equally to all year levels.

Everyone's expressions had just eased slightly when Mashima announced the final penalty.

"In addition to the class point penalties, the bottom five groups in this exam will have all members expelled."

At that moment, Kaoru felt as if he could hear the entire class inhale sharply at once.

Slytherin should really recruit here.

"A-all members will be expelled?"

Katsuragi Kōhei was shocked. Right now, their class could save one person at most.

"That is correct. All members will be expelled, even if they are students from Class A."

Mashima's voice made everyone feel as though they had fallen into an ice cellar. But his next words were like warm sunlight.

"However, there is no need to be overly nervous. This exam also has a relief measure."

"What is the relief measure?"

Kōhei immediately asked.

"Six million private points."

Mashima stated it directly. "If each group can pay six million private points, then all members can avoid expulsion. In other words, each person in a six-member group would need to pay one million private points."

Kōhei subconsciously let out a sigh of relief.

Six million was somewhat painful for Class 2-A, but it was not impossible. If things reached a true emergency, and everyone emptied their savings, they should at least be able to save around four groups.

"If it is a solo group, is the relief measure still six million private points?"

Arisu suddenly spoke.

Her eyes were shining. It was clear that her recovered physical condition had given her a certain confidence toward this uninhabited island exam.

"Yes. The relief measure is uniformly six million and is applied by group. A solo group must pay six million alone. A three-person group would require each person to pay two million."

Mashima added, "If someone cannot afford their share of private points, their teammates may help pay."

"What about people other than teammates?"

Arisu asked calmly.

"Only the individual and their teammates may pay. No outsiders are permitted to assist."

Mashima replied evenly. "Therefore, the more people in your group, the better. The burden of private points can be shared equally."

Kōhei felt deeply regretful.

Class 2-A's greatest advantage was Morishita Ai.

More accurately, it was the massive amount of private points she possessed.

Although they had already used a relief measure once before, Ai still had more than ten million private points. If they squeezed everyone else's pockets as well, gathering over twenty million private points would not be a problem.

Kōhei had originally thought that having Ai would be enough. He had not expected that only teammates could help pay.

With that restriction, the situation became much more complicated.

Chapter 744: New Exam

"What if the person can't pay, and their teammates can't afford the burden either?"

"Unfortunately, that person can only be expelled."

"Can other people transfer points to them?"

"I'm sorry, Katsuragi-kun, but transfers are only allowed before the exam begins. Once the exam starts, the school will no longer permit any transfers. The only people who can help you are yourself and your teammates."

"I understand."

After receiving a clear answer from Mashima, Katsuragi Kōhei sighed inwardly.

It seemed relying on Morishita Ai alone would not work.

A strange atmosphere filled the classroom, but there was none of the panic over expulsions that had appeared last time.

"Relax, Katsuragi-kun. This exam will definitely be our victory too!"

Totsuka Yahiko confidently patted his chest. "Everyone just needs to form groups within the class. First, second, third place—we'll take all of them!"

This time, nobody stepped forward to crush Yahiko's confidence. In fact, quite a few people seemed even more motivated than him.

"Hehehe, it's time to let them know the god of the uninhabited island is descending again!"

"Even if we don't get first place, we won't fall to last, right? I'm more worried about whether those other guys will drag everyone down."

"Will the expelled students this time be from Class D again?"

"Our enemy is the first-years... no, our enemy is only the third-years. We can win this."

It was not just the boys. Even the girls did not seem especially afraid. Most of them were simply complaining about how troublesome the uninhabited island would be, what to do about sunscreen, how exhausting it sounded, and things like that.

Kōhei was confused at first, but then he realized that Class A's advantage right now was truly enormous.

The other classes might not even be able to scrape together ten million private points, while they could easily gather twenty million.

Even if Class 2-A were completely wiped out in this uninhabited island exam and lost 600 class points at once, it would take two devastating defeats like that before Class 2-B could even hope to catch up.

Since enrollment, their worst loss had only been around one hundred class points.

Even with this exam's expulsion penalty, the current Class 2-A could save four groups if they emptied all their pockets. And the exam was still next month.

In other words, they still had one more month of private points coming in. Every month, nearly ten million private points flowed into Class A's accounts.

Morishita Ai intercepted half of that every month, roughly four million, as an emergency reserve for the class.

It was terrifying.

As soon as one realized this, a sense of superiority was unavoidable. This was a dragon flying straight at someone's face. With eighty thousand against sixty thousand, how could they possibly lose to the lower classes?

They could crush other classes with private points alone.

No wonder everyone was so enthusiastic about this uninhabited island exam. Besides, expulsion was based on groups across the entire school. Just how terrible would someone have to be to fall into the bottom five groups in the whole school?

The previous mixed-pair exam had at least caused some fear because nobody knew whether their partner would be normal or whether they would drag them down. This time, they had no similar concerns.

Yahiko believed they could simply form groups entirely within their class. All teammates would be their own people, so there would be no need to worry about someone dragging them down or causing trouble.

Unlike last year's uninhabited island exam, Arisu, who should have been absent, would very likely participate this time.

Class 2-A had suffered no loss in fighting strength.

And so, Kōhei saw that almost everyone was smiling.

For some reason, he felt uneasy.

It was good that everyone had confidence, but if they were too confident, he could not help worrying about what might happen if something unexpected occurred.

Thinking of Kaoru's earlier evaluation of the class, Kōhei subconsciously looked toward him, only to find Kaoru holding Masumi's small hand and apparently saying something to her.

Masumi was lying face-down on the desk, her face red as she glared at him.

In that instant, Kōhei suddenly felt extremely tired.

Should he just hand his position over to Kaoru and Arisu?

As long as Kaoru was in the class, he probably would not let Arisu act completely recklessly.

"If you want to discuss, wait until I'm finished."

Mashima's voice interrupted Kōhei's thoughts of retirement. "There is one final explanation regarding this uninhabited island exam. That is the existence of item cards."

As his words fell, everyone's gaze turned toward the PowerPoint slide.

Displayed on it were eight different cards.

Normal Card: Initiative

At the start of the exam, the cardholder can use 1.5 times the normal points.

Normal Card: Double

At the end of the exam, the cardholder's private point reward is doubled.

Normal Card: Halve

When receiving an exam penalty, the cardholder only needs to pay half the private points. This applies only to the cardholder.

Normal Card: Free Ride

At the start of the exam, the cardholder may designate any group. After the exam ends, the cardholder receives half of that group's reward. If the cardholder joins the designated group, the effect is invalid.

Normal Card: Insurance

During the exam, if the cardholder is disqualified due to poor physical condition, they will be given one day of rest. This does not apply to those disqualified for cheating.

Special Card: Additional Member

The cardholder can exist as the seventh member of a group. This takes effect after the exam begins and is not restricted by the gender ratio.

Special Card: Invalid

When the cardholder receives an exam penalty, the cardholder does not need to pay any private points.

Special Card: Trial

The cardholder receives 1.5 times the class points from the reward. The extra reward will be supplied by the school. However, if the group does not place in the top 30%, the group will receive a penalty.

...

Looking at the descriptions of these cards, many students showed confusion and disbelief.

"Is... is this a game?"

Someone whispered.

Although they had already spent a year at this school, the school's methods still felt so strange that even if it suddenly pulled out summoned beasts one day, it somehow would not feel surprising.

"You can roughly understand it that way. These item cards are also part of the exam rules. Each person will randomly receive one of them, and they will be distributed tomorrow morning."

As he spoke, Mashima added the rules regarding item cards.

"Before the exam officially begins, you may freely exchange item cards, but only with students in the same year level. You may not exchange cards with classmates from your own class. Once the cardholder changes, the item card will be permanently bound."

The rules for item cards were simple.

Before the exam, they could be exchanged freely. Whether normal cards or special cards, each card could only be exchanged once. Once the holder changed, it could not be changed again.

The exchange target had to be a student from the same year level. Cross-year exchanges were not allowed, and internal exchanges within the same class were also prohibited. They had to exchange with students from other classes in the same year.

"Also, even if you obtain two identical item cards, their effects will not stack. The same effect can only activate once."

Kōhei's mind stirred slightly.

Then he heard Arisu's meaningful voice.

"In other words, each of us can hold multiple item cards at the same time?"

"You may understand it that way."

Mashima nodded slightly before adding, "Each type of special card exists only once per year level. Since item cards are distributed randomly, it is possible for all three special cards to end up in the same class."

There was nothing to question about that.

Everyone was working hard to digest what Mashima had said.

The appearance of item cards made the uninhabited island exam extremely complicated. For example, someone who would originally be expelled might be able to avoid the expulsion penalty by holding an Invalid card or a Halve card.

"Mashima-sensei, do the effects of item cards apply only to the cardholder?"

"Yes. Only to the cardholder."

Mashima asked, "Any other questions?"

Arisu smiled faintly. "No, thank you for answering, Mashima-sensei."

Mashima withdrew his gaze and said calmly, "I will send the explanatory materials for this exam to you later. If there is anything you do not understand, you may ask me at any time."

He was not worried about Class A's ability.

Since enrollment, Arisu, Kōhei, and Kaoru had already proven their level. Even if he left them to handle things themselves, there would be no problem.

With Mashima's departure, today's homeroom was basically over.

Everyone looked at one another.

"What do we do now?"

The first person to speak was Matoba Shinji. Compared to Yahiko and the others, who were optimistic and confident, he seemed much calmer.

"Simple. Let Katsuragi-kun handle it!"

Yahiko was full of confidence. "We'll get dozens of Double cards and Free Ride cards, then stack them all on Katsuragi-kun. Maybe we can earn tens of millions of private points and hundreds of class points."

Shinji had originally thought Yahiko would spout nonsense again, but after hearing that, he froze.

This method actually sounded possible.

"You want to exchange for that many item cards? The other classes aren't stupid. Putting aside whether they're willing to trade, if they realize what we're doing, they'll focus entirely on Katsuragi-kun's group. Can Katsuragi-kun handle that?"

Hashimoto Masayoshi leaned back with his hands behind his head, looking at Yahiko with a somewhat careless air.

Seeing his opinion opposed, Yahiko became a little dissatisfied. "Why wouldn't they exchange? We have private points, and we can protect Katsuragi-kun too!"

Masayoshi shook his head.

If they wanted to protect Katsuragi-kun, they would probably have to sacrifice others.

He admitted Yahiko's idea was not bad, but it needed adjustment.

With so many strong cards like Kaoru, Arisu, and Kōhei, Class A did not need to adopt such an extreme method.

"Totsuka-kun, is your goal first place?"

Arisu asked.

"Isn't aiming for first place obvious?"

Yahiko was momentarily confused.

"If we want first place, then it's better not to be so direct."

Perhaps because she was in a good mood, Arisu spoke very gently right now. "As Hashimoto-kun said, buying up a large number of item cards will make our intentions very obvious. Every action Class A takes will be watched. The more we want first place, the calmer we must be."

Yahiko had originally wanted to refute her, but in the end, he awkwardly said, "Fine. Then what other method do you have?"

After saying that, he suddenly felt something was wrong.

He was part of the Katsuragi faction. Why was he being so polite to Arisu?

Yahiko's expression became very interesting, making Masayoshi chuckle quietly.

"Although Mashima-sensei explained quite a few rules, we still know almost nothing about the uninhabited island exam itself. How we should act on the island, how we should survive outdoors, and how the exam will actually proceed—the school has not told us any of that yet. Everyone here should understand that better than I do."

As she said this, Arisu's voice carried a trace of apology.

After all, she had not followed everyone to last year's uninhabited island exam. She had purely watched from the sidelines.

"If it's outdoor survival, then it probably won't be too different from last year's uninhabited island exam."

Kōhei spoke. "Last time, there were leaders and base points. This time, there are groups and item cards. The rules are different, but I don't think the core will change much."

"How so?"

Arisu looked interested.

"I think the core is cooperation."

Kōhei said, "The groups themselves are a representation of cooperation. Everyone needs to learn how to survive outdoors together and participate in the exam."

Arisu nodded slightly, then asked, "What do you plan to do?"

"Our preparations should focus on learning outdoor survival knowledge as quickly as possible. After that comes team formation. The item cards can be set aside for now."

Although the effects of the item cards were tempting, the premise was that Class A could rank near the top. Otherwise, they would be of limited use to Class A.

"I agree. Our competitors aren't only students from our own year. There are first-years and third-years too. We can't expect Ryūen-kun to hand us a batch of supplies like last time."

Shinji strongly agreed with Kōhei's suggestion.

"Outdoor survival is important, but team formation is key too, right?"

Yahiko said. "We have forty people now. There's no need to team up with outsiders."

After all, teaming up with other classes would split the rewards. Yahiko was not very willing to do that.

"If we team up only with classmates, won't we be restricted by the gender ratio?"

Someone asked in confusion.

Yahiko had already calculated it and immediately said, "That's fine. We'll first form same-gender small groups, then combine them into larger groups. As long as the gender ratio works in the large group, we won't break any rules!"

Apparently, this guy was not especially stupid.

Masayoshi realized that he might have misjudged him.

"So Totsuka-kun's suggestion is to form groups within the class as much as possible, then have elite students like Katsuragi-kun lead certain groups to take first place."

Arisu smiled and looked toward Kōhei. "What do you think, Katsuragi-kun?"

Kōhei actually thought this idea was not bad.

Because they would all be classmates, it could maximize Class A's greatest advantage.

However, the nature of team formation would become somewhat compulsory. Kōhei was not sure how to handle that, so he simply said, "If everyone has no objections, then I have no objections either."

Yahiko was overjoyed.

He felt that his method could raise Kōhei's popularity even further.

Arisu looked around and saw that nobody objected. Some did not care, while others seemed to think they could finally slack off.

Let Kōhei and Arisu take first place while the rest of them lay back.

That had already become the unspoken understanding of quite a few students.

"It seems nobody objects."

Arisu sighed lightly, then smiled faintly. "Very well. However, I think it would be too heavy a burden to leave this task to Katsuragi-kun alone. Let me and Mitoma-kun serve as insurance as well."

The moment she said that, everyone's expressions became a little strange.

She wanted to team up with Kaoru?

Could that have been her real goal from the start?

A lone boy and girl, on an uninhabited island, sleeping in the same tent at night...

Hmm.

Chapter 745: I'm Very Fair

The discussion ended quickly.

Totsuka Yahiko's suggestion received the class's silent approval, and the task of aiming for first place was handed over to Mitoma Kaoru, Katsuragi Kōhei, Sakayanagi Arisu, and the others.

"Has Mitoma-kun already decided who he wants to team up with?"

Arisu turned around and leaned back against her chair, smiling so sweetly that one could almost imagine a fox tail swaying behind her.

The gazes around them became even stranger. Everyone pretended not to hear, but plenty of people had probably already placed Arisu, Kamuro Masumi, and Kaoru into the same group in their minds.

Two girls and one boy.

It perfectly fit the school's team requirements, and all three were strong. There was no real reason to object.

"I'm still thinking about it."

Kaoru gave a vague answer.

He felt like this was a deadly multiple-choice question. Setting aside Ichinose Honami, Karuizawa Kei definitely wanted to team up with him.

"So I'm not Mitoma-kun's first choice?"

Arisu looked at him for a moment, then at Masumi, before showing a faint expression of realization.
"Are you considering Kamuro-san?"

"What? I don't want to team up with this guy."

Masumi sounded slightly annoyed, completely unaware that everyone else had already mentally assigned her to Kaoru's group. "And you too. You only just recovered, and you're already planning to participate in the uninhabited island exam? What if something happens to you on the island?"

In her eyes, Arisu was still a newly recovered patient.

If things became too intense, the heart disease that had finally been cured might relapse again.

"Thank you for worrying so much about my body, Kamuro-san. I may end up troubling you then."

"Do you not understand what I'm saying?"

"I've always regretted missing the uninhabited island. Because of my physical condition, I lost the chance to fight alongside everyone. Luckily, Mitoma-kun helped me. Otherwise, I would have been lonely on the ship."

"..."

This girl really only said whatever she wanted.

Masumi became even more annoyed and decided to simply toss this troublesome woman over to Kaoru. She had no intention of dealing with her.

"Hehe. What is Mitoma-kun's answer?"

Arisu propped her chin up with both hands, the faint smile at the corner of her lips never leaving. "I can sleep in the same tent as you."

Kaoru admitted that he was somewhat tempted.

However, he had no intention of deciding his team so quickly.

"Teaming up only with classmates is too conservative. It doesn't seem like your style. Why did you agree?"

"Is Mitoma-kun planning to cooperate with other classes?"

"Emotionally speaking, forming groups within the same class does maximize our benefits. But doing so is equivalent to rejecting communication with the other classes. That kind of distrust and hostility will inevitably cause the other classes to band together against Class A."

"That is true. Especially since Mitoma-kun has provoked Nagumo-kun. If everyone joins hands, Class A may end up surrounded by enemies."

"You want to act together with me?"

"Hehe. Someone clearly understands everything, yet didn't say it out loud earlier."

"Fine. It's all my fault."

"It's all right. I forgive Mitoma-kun. After all, being surrounded by enemies also makes my heart race. The more dangerous the situation, the more it can display my ability."

Kaoru was momentarily speechless.

Looking at the smile spreading across Arisu's face, he saw the eager light in her eyes.

Originally, she would have missed this uninhabited island exam as well and could only watch from the sidelines. But now, her body was no longer a burden. Naturally, all sorts of thoughts began stirring in her heart.

Just as she said, the harder this uninhabited island exam was, the more she wanted to conquer it.

That was why Arisu had, for once, not opposed Yahiko. The suggestion of having several elite groups aim for the top three was practically tailor-made for her.

"In that case, why do you want to team up with me?"

Kaoru said, "If you team up with me, even if you go all out, everyone will think I deserve part of the credit."

If Arisu wanted to prove herself, she could not team up with Kaoru.

Unless she simply wanted to have a honeymoon trip with him on the uninhabited island, nobody would fully recognize her ability if they were in the same group.

"Eh? I never said I wanted to team up with Mitoma-kun."

Arisu looked at him in surprise, then showed a faintly hurt expression. "I simply didn't expect that I wasn't someone Mitoma-kun was considering. That hurt me a little. As expected, I can't let you have Kamuro-san."

Who exactly was that pitiful act supposed to fool?

Kaoru was speechless.

This silver-haired girl was playing with people's feelings again.

"Oh my. Mitoma-kun looks so disappointed. Did I say something wrong?"

Arisu smiled wickedly. "I think plenty of people would want to team up with you, so it doesn't matter if you don't consider me or Kamuro-san."

At this point, it was hard to tell whether she was teasing Kaoru or roundaboutly acting jealous.

"I didn't consider teaming up with you, but I also haven't considered teaming up with anyone else."

Seeing Arisu pause slightly, Kaoru continued, "For this uninhabited island exam, I'll act alone."

"You're going to act alone?!"

Masumi immediately lost her composure, reacting far more strongly than expected.

"It's more efficient alone."

Perhaps feeling that the reason was not convincing enough, Kaoru added, "And I can't team up with you."

"I wasn't planning to team up with you anyway!"

Masumi seemed a little angry. "Team up with whoever you want. Who cares?"

Apparently, she thought Kaoru meant he wanted to team up with Honami and the others, which was why he said that.

"Wait, Kamuro-san."

Arisu put on a gentle smile. "Let Mitoma-kun finish explaining. I want to hear his reason."

Masumi gave a cold snort and said nothing more.

"The reason is simple. If I team up with Arisu, I'll get in her way. She should still be bothered by what happened during our last competition, right?"

Kaoru said softly, "Now that such a good opportunity has appeared, I think Arisu wants to compete with me again."

"How terrible. I can't seem to refute that."

Arisu's smile became even richer and more alluring. "Compared to teaming up with Mitoma-kun, I really am more interested in defeating you."

The last uninhabited island exam had left her rather unwilling to accept the result.

If only she had taken Kaoru more seriously back then.

Even now, Arisu still believed she had underestimated Kaoru too much at the time. She had treated the entire situation like a cat playing with a mouse, watching Kaoru move without properly interfering. As a result, she had never been able to regain control of the situation afterward.

If she could do it again, she would definitely go all out.

"So this time, I'll act alone."

Kaoru smiled. "Whoever ranks higher wins."

In other words, Kaoru's group would contain only himself.

He would face Arisu alone, while her group might have as many as six people. The ratio was heavily skewed.

However, everyone understood Arisu's physical condition. If she had to face Kaoru in a direct one-on-one match, she would definitely lose.

Recovering her health was one thing. Having weak stamina was another.

Being free of heart disease did not mean her physical endurance could suddenly surpass ordinary people's, let alone Kaoru's. At most, she had gone from being unable to exercise to barely being able to run four hundred meters. She was still physically weak.

If the two of them really competed one-on-one, Kaoru would simply be bullying Arisu. Letting her lead a group was the only way she could properly display her strength.

Arisu naturally understood that he was taking her condition into consideration, so she immediately said, "I won't form a large group. My members will only be Kamuro-san and Hashimoto-kun."

Masumi could help at her side, and Hashimoto Masayoshi's ability was not bad either. He could contact others, monitor targets, and serve many other purposes.

Those two would be enough.

Arisu had her own pride. If she still could not beat Kaoru under those conditions, she might as well remain his maid for the rest of her life.

"And if you lose?"

"Hehe. I'll obey your arrangements together with Kamuro-san. Whatever you want to do to us—mmph!"

"What do you mean, together with me?!"

Masumi angrily covered Arisu's mouth, stopping her from continuing. "At least ask for my opinion first! He's a pervert, and you're still throwing yourself at him!"

"Ahem, Masumi."

Kaoru cleared his throat. "I accept this condition."

"What are you accepting? I haven't agreed!"

Masumi was both embarrassed and angry.

Because she genuinely felt that Arisu might lose. When that happened, she and Arisu would probably end up placed together in front of Kaoru, obediently waiting for him to do whatever he wanted.

"Even without this condition, I'd still be thinking about it."

Kaoru admitted his thoughts openly. "I think Masumi should discuss this properly with Arisu. If you lose, I really won't be polite."

Masumi's face turned bright red.

Her first time had been taken by this man right in front of Arisu.

If he dared to say something like this, then he definitely dared to do it. There was no need to doubt that at all.

"Hehehe, Kamuro-san, there's no need to be so nervous. It's only a competition."

At some point, Arisu had removed Masumi's hand and spoke as though nothing had happened. "The worst result is simply that he gets to tease us a little. It's not much different from usual."

Masumi froze, then became even angrier.

How could it not be different?

Had this girl already been trained into an idiot?

"Enough, enough! Being around the two of you makes me feel like I'm turning stupid too!"

Masumi glared irritably at Kaoru. "What if you lose?"

"I'll do as you wish."

Kaoru spread his hands.

He was very fair.

Whoever won could command the loser.

Masumi began to sneer.

She had already thought of how to punish Kaoru. For example, making him hold back for an entire month and forbidding him from touching anyone.

If she really made that demand, Kaoru would definitely obey.

Then, once the abstinence period ended, he would immediately vent everything on her.

Of course, Masumi did not think that far.

She simply wanted to teach Kaoru a lesson.

...

After class ended, Kaoru did not leave the classroom. Instead, he found Morishita Ai.

"Morishita-san, how many private points do we have right now?"

Seeing that it was Kaoru, Ai, who had originally planned to leave, stopped and took out her phone.

"Including this month, 28.82 million."

Kaoru was not very surprised. It was within his expectations.

Kōhei, who had been trying to approach from the side, was startled.

"The reserve has already recovered to its previous level this quickly?"

Kōhei's surprise was genuine.

His impression of the class reserve was still stuck at the expulsion exam in March. Back then, they had paid twenty million private points and only had a little over ten million remaining.

"Mm. We used 1.5 million private points earlier to buy over first-year honor students. Otherwise, we would have passed thirty million this month."

Ai looked at Kōhei strangely.

They received nearly 4.6 million private points every month now. Was it really that surprising for the reserve to be high?

Kōhei felt a little awkward.

It seemed he had been worrying too much. With Class A's current level, there was no need to fear someone being expelled.

"What an astonishing number. How do you plan to use those private points?"

At that moment, Arisu also came over.

"Buy some item cards."

Kaoru said, "Since we've already decided to form groups within the class, we don't need to consider students from other second-year classes. We can use private points to cooperate with first-years and third-years."

"Buying over a group of people like before?"

Arisu spoke with interest. "Since we have an existing basis for cooperation, I think getting them to agree to help won't be a problem."

"No. Buying some item cards is enough."

Kaoru shook his head. "If the cooperation is too deep, it will expose our reserve funds. In the future, they'll raise their prices."

Everyone was not stupid.

If they saw Class 2-A casually spending millions of private points and then connected that to their class points, anyone would realize that they were a bunch of deep-pocketed whales.

"However, we can't pretend to be poor either. Our class points are right there. Anyone who does a little calculation will understand."

Kaoru thought for a moment. "If we're going to buy, we should buy openly and generously. Let them take the initiative to flatter us and want to cooperate with us, not make it look like we're begging them."

Although both were cooperation, there was a difference.

Right now, they were the sponsor with money.

The others were the ones who should be lining up for a meal.

"What item cards does Mitoma-kun want to buy?"

Arisu sounded slightly regretful.

"Useful ones. Cards like Double and Free Ride."

Kaoru added, "It would be best if we can get them before certain people start buying."

The "certain people" he mentioned was probably Nagumo Miyabi.

The only person with the ability to purchase item cards on a large scale was Miyabi.

"Leave it to me."

For some reason, Arisu agreed before Kōhei could.

This action surprised Kōhei.

Then Arisu looked at him. "Katsuragi-kun is worried that some students may fail to keep up with the group and get expelled, right?"

Kōhei nodded. "Some students don't have very good stamina. They may not adapt well to outdoor survival."

"Can we pick those people out?"

Arisu said, "Have them form a large group together, then give them private points. That way, we'll have no worries."

Kōhei froze.

What she meant was equivalent to giving up on the classmates who could not keep up.

It sounded a little uncomfortable, but it was the best choice. Because they had a large amount of private points, even if those students were abandoned by the class's main strategy, they would not be expelled.

"I think twelve million should be enough. It's simpler than giving one million to everyone, and the remaining private points can still be used."

Arisu smiled lightly, then turned toward Kaoru. "Is that all right?"

"I have no objections."

Kaoru answered.

"That's good. Aside from buying item cards, does Mitoma-kun have any other ideas?"

Arisu cared a lot about Kaoru's thoughts, as if she would help no matter what request he made.

"Buying item cards is enough."

Kaoru only wanted to prevent Miyabi from making a comeback.

The existence of item cards could possibly allow Miyabi to recover completely, so Kaoru had to suppress that possibility in advance.

Arisu seemed surprised. She looked at Kaoru for a while before smiling.

"I almost forgot. I found my ring, so there's no need to trouble Mitoma-kun tonight."

Kaoru knew what she meant.

If he had proposed cooperating with other classes, Arisu would have helped persuade Kōhei, Ai, and the others.

Because in this uninhabited island exam, Kei and the others did not have enough private points to avoid expulsion.

If Miyabi attacked them like before, someone could be expelled because of it.

Even knowing that, Kaoru had no intention of using the class reserve.

Those private points belonged to everyone. They were not his personal wallet.

Buying item cards was a normal class usage. Even if Miyabi did not buy them, he still would. But protecting specific individuals was a private matter and could not be mixed together with class interests.

The praise votes from before had to be used no matter what. It had not mattered who they were given to, so everyone had basically been indifferent. That was why Kaoru could borrow that force.

But using the class reserve was a different matter. Some people would definitely feel dissatisfied. Even if Kaoru did not care, that dissatisfaction would eventually be directed toward Honami and the others.

Kaoru did not have a hypnosis app.

He naturally had to consider the class's opinions.

Besides, if he needed to use the class reserve to deal with a weakened Miyabi, then Kaoru would feel like he had been a clown all this time.

With so many good cards in his hand, even including magic, if he still could not protect Kei and the others, he might as well surrender directly.

Chapter 746: Ryuen Scheme

Although Kaoru did not say it out loud, Arisu understood what he was thinking, so she smiled and sent him on his way.

When he returned to the dormitory, just as expected, Karuizawa Kei and Kushida Kikyō were waiting for him.

"W-wait, what do you mean you want to act alone? Wouldn't it be better if we formed a group together?"

Kei could not understand Kaoru's plan at all, and her expression was especially stunned.

"If you group with me, the pressure on you will be even greater."

Kaoru explained, "This exam isn't only about the rankings on the surface. Nagumo, Ryūen, and other people will all have their eyes on me. If Kei is in another group, you'll actually face fewer problems."

"Mm... but doesn't that mean you need help even more?"

Kei looked unwilling to accept it.

"Kei grouping with the others is already helping me."

Kaoru patted her head.

In truth, the biggest issue right now was how to trick Nagumo Miyabi into focusing all of his attention on Kaoru.

"Fine, fine. If you put it that way..."

Kei muttered, cheeks puffed out. "I still feel... kind of frustrated. We could've been in the same group."

Kaoru could only pretend he had not heard that. Then he met Kikyō's gaze, which had become rather meaningful.

"If you don't group with us, how are you planning to protect us?"

Sure enough, Kikyō asked exactly that. Kei also became a little uneasy at once.

"Kei wants to group with you because she's worried Nagumo might do something to us again. If it gets bad enough to cause expulsions, that'd be terrible."

Kaoru thought for a moment. "He doesn't know how many private points I still have. The only visible amount right now is Class A's private points. He'll probably suspect that I can freely use those points."

"How many private points does your class have?" Kei asked innocently.

"In an extreme situation, we could probably squeeze out around thirty-five to forty million private points."

Kaoru spoke an astonishing number, leaving Kei stunned.

"Good grief. You people are filthy rich!"

Kikyō normally did not care much about private points, but even she became indignant now. "Why is Horikita even fighting you? At this rate, you could probably buy her over as your maid!"

With that many private points, Class 2-A could tempt plenty of students into betraying their own classes. That was a real transfer-ticket fund—enough to move two students into Class A in one go.

"Wow. With that many private points, this uninhabited island exam is definitely Kaoru's win!"

Kei looked delighted. "Now I feel relieved. We don't need to worry about Nagumo at all!"

However, Kaoru immediately poured cold water over her excitement.

"I can't use those private points. Using them for class purposes is fine, but using them for private matters will cause complaints."

Kei immediately wilted, looking up at Kaoru pitifully.

Seeing her like that, Kaoru could not help smiling. "But the fact that even you think I can use Class A's reserve means Nagumo will probably react the same way."

After learning that Class 2-A possessed a massive amount of private points, Nagumo's first reaction would probably be that he could not fight a war of attrition.

A strategy like last time, attacking Kei, Airi, and the others, would most likely not work.

"He'll still try to attack you this time, but he won't go all out. He'll only want to force me to feel pressured and make me distribute private points to you."

Kaoru said softly, "In other words, it's a feint. You don't need to be too nervous."

Whether during the previous training camp exam or the last voting expulsion exam, Kaoru had gradually created the impression in Nagumo's mind that he fiercely protected his own people.

As long as someone was his, he would protect them.

Based on that, it was very natural for Nagumo to try using Kei and the others to apply pressure on him.

On the other hand, because Nagumo did not know how many private points Kaoru could actually use, he could only use this method to force Kaoru to burn through resources.

One group required six million private points.

Five groups would require thirty million.

Even then, Nagumo would not know whether that was enough to exhaust Kaoru's resources.

Because of that, Kaoru instead needed to reveal a little bait on his own initiative.

"Next, Kei should group with Kikyō. It would be best if you can bring Airi and the others in too."

Kaoru said, "If you form a large group, Nagumo will think you have six million private points on you."

"Eh? Is that enough?"

Kei was a little uneasy.

"Silly. This is called using his plan against him."

Kikyō explained, "In Nagumo's eyes, if we're all gathered together, there are too many high-value targets in one place. He'll actually think that the perverted foot-lover is protecting us. Otherwise, it'd be too easy for him to wipe us out in one move."

Their grouping together would be an important signal. It would show that they were guarding against Nagumo attacking them again. After all, Nagumo could not see the pages on their phones, so he could only assume Kaoru had given them enough private points.

"Exactly."

Kaoru nodded. "Even if he doesn't take the bait, I'll still be nearby watching over you."

In truth, the chance of expulsion was not that high. The bottom five groups across the entire school would be expelled. If only six-person large groups were counted, there would be nearly eighty groups in total.

The only thing Kaoru needed to guard against was whether Nagumo would resort to underhanded methods. Looking only at the visible rules, there was no way Nagumo could make Kei and the others drop to expulsion level.

It was precisely because he was worried about that possibility that Kaoru felt acting alone would be better.

It would give him more freedom, and it would also make it easier to secretly deal with Nagumo.

Strangely, after hearing his words, Kikyō suddenly giggled.

"So you'll be nearby watching over us. No wonder you want to act alone."

Kikyō winked at Kaoru with a bright smile. "No problem. Master's grand arrival will be welcome at any time."

Kaoru felt that she had probably misunderstood something.

After thinking about it, he chose not to explain.

"Eh? What secret code are you two using? I want to know too!"

Kei was dumbfounded.

Were they secretly matching brainwaves again behind her back?

"Ahem. Master's meaning is very simple."

Kikyō held back her laughter. "Although we can't group together, that doesn't mean we can't act together, rest together, or sleep nearby, right?"

Kei froze.

Then a blush quickly spread across her cheeks.

"Master wants to act alone because he can sleep near our tent tonight, then near little Honami's tent tomorrow, then go over to Sakayanagi's side the day after that."

As she spoke, even Kikyō felt that her master truly was an impressive pervert. To think he could come up with a method like this—he really was amazing.

"Besides, the school will probably check personal belongings, so we might not be able to bring protection. Is Master planning to—mmph!"

Seeing that she was getting more and more ridiculous, Kaoru simply pressed her down onto the bed.

He had not finished teaching her a lesson last night, and she had run off this morning.

"How strange. It looks like the little angel is broken. I'll repair her again today."

"W-wait... uuu... I'm sorry... I shouldn't have exposed Master's plan..."

"What plan? You're clearly doing this on purpose to make me think about it!"

After a few firm warning smacks, the little angel could only lie on the bed and whimper.

...

The next day, the school distributed the item cards as scheduled.

Since the information was public, everyone could check each other's item cards on the OAA.

Kaoru drew an Insurance card. Its effect was that if the cardholder became unwell, they could receive one day of rest.

In a sense, it was a slacking-off card.

Kaoru glanced over the list and found that the special card holders were all familiar faces.

The Additional Member card was in his own class.

The Invalid card was held by Shiranami Chihiro.

And the Trial card's owner was Ryūen Kakeru.

Suzune and the others were somewhat unlucky. None of them had drawn a special card, though it did not have too much impact.

Kaoru then looked at the third-year situation. Nagumo Miyabi's class had received the Additional Member card, while the Invalid card and Trial card were both in Class 3-C's hands.

So Kaoru sent a message to Kiriya Ikuto and the others. No matter what, the Invalid card must not be allowed to fall into Nagumo's hands. Even if Nagumo obtained the Additional Member card and Trial card, that would not matter.

Ikuto quickly replied that he would keep an eye on the Invalid card.

Although he did not express too much excitement, his response speed said plenty.

The Invalid card's effect was to avoid expulsion. Kaoru's intention in forbidding Nagumo from obtaining this one special card was very obvious, so Ikuto was naturally delighted.

Kaoru did not have much time to keep wasting here. He planned to deal with Nagumo in one go during the uninhabited island exam and save himself future trouble.

Even if Nagumo really got the Invalid card, it would only be somewhat troublesome.

A single Invalid card could not stop Kaoru's actions, and Nagumo would understand that as well.

Because of that, while Kaoru was giving instructions, someone else had also begun to move.

That afternoon, Ryūen Kakeru suddenly invited Ichinose Honami and Horikita Suzune to a café in Keyaki Mall.

"I didn't think you'd actually come. Ibuki said I wasn't popular, hahaha. Looks like she was wrong."

Suzune looked at Ryūen sitting casually in the chair opposite them. She did not see Ibuki Mio, who was always cold-faced whenever Suzune saw her.

"What do you want to say to us?"

The one who spoke was Kanzaki Ryūji. He had followed behind Honami, probably because he was worried Ryūen might do something to his class leader.

Suzune glanced beside her.

She also had a small follower with her: Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, the boy with almost no presence in class.

Because he seemed to be hiding his strength, and because he usually obeyed her instructions, Suzune had simply let Kiyotaka continue following her.

Regarding what happened with Class 1-D last time, Suzune sometimes suspected Kiyotaka might have been involved.

"Don't be so tense. Everyone sit down and have a chat."

Ryūen waved a hand. "Order whatever you want. It's on me."

Ryūji frowned, not knowing what this man was scheming. But before he could speak, Honami had already sat down naturally.

"Hehe, then I won't hold back."

Seeing his class leader really preparing to order, Ryūji felt helpless. It would be terrible if someone saw them getting too close to Ryūen.

However, even students from Class C had come, so people would probably be even more confused about why they had gathered here.

"Can I really order?"

"Hehehe, drink seven or eight cups if you want. I may not be as rich as those Class A whales, but a few drinks and desserts are nothing."

"So Ryūen-kun has quite a lot of private points too?"

"Interpret it however you like."

"Oh, so Ryūen-kun has saved up quite a bit."

Facing Honami's small probe, Ryūen did not continue denying it. Instead, he turned toward Suzune.

"Horikita, how does it feel to rise to Class C?"

"As expected."

"You talk pretty big too. More interesting than Hirata. That guy shut down just because someone was expelled. No backbone at all."

"I don't know what you're planning, but you brought several classes together, and there's nobody from Class A here. Are you planning to form an alliance?"

At this, Ryūen's originally grinning expression finally faded. He looked Suzune over again.

"You came straight in with something heavy. Do you really want to climb to Class A that badly?"

"I won't waste time chatting with you. If the topic has nothing to do with Class A, don't involve me."

Suzune looked at Ryūen calmly.

"Hahaha, you really are interesting."

Ryūen laughed for a while, then suddenly said, "Someone said you and Mitoma are working together, that you're that guy's woman. But I'm not so sure."

Suzune's heart skipped slightly, though her expression did not change.

Not many people knew about her relationship with Kaoru. If she could hide it for one more day, she would.

"Ryūen-kun, are you talking about me?"

Honami cut in. "Kaoru is my boyfriend, but that doesn't mean I'll go easy on Class A. Fair competition is my life principle."

"Fair competition?"

Ryūen snorted. "There's no such thing as fair competition in this world. If you want to beat your boyfriend, saying it with your mouth isn't enough. Class A approached you today, didn't they?"

Seeing the topic shift elsewhere, Suzune gradually relaxed and said, "You mean Class A wanting to buy item cards?"

The item cards had only just been distributed today, yet Class 2-A had already spread the word that they were willing to purchase everyone's item cards with private points. No matter how many there were, they would buy them, showing a posture of having absolutely no shortage of money.

That was exactly why Suzune had agreed to Ryūen's invitation.

She genuinely feared that Kaoru might use money to crush them without any reason.

"Did anyone from your classes sell?"

Ryūen smiled as he looked at Suzune and Honami.

"How could we sell them? If we sell cards like Free Ride or Trial to them, wouldn't it become even more troublesome?"

As she spoke, Suzune especially emphasized the Trial card, her gaze fixed on Ryūen.

That special card was in his hands.

However, Ryūen shook his head.

"The reason I called you here this time is cooperation. If individual classes sell item cards on their own, they'll suffer losses. If someone deliberately messes around and ruins the market, that'd be bad."

Suzune was stunned for a moment.

Did he mean they were not only going to avoid stopping the sales, but actively sell to Class 2-A?

"I see. You want everyone to sell item cards at a unified price?"

Ryūji thought for a moment. "Item cards don't offer us that many benefits. If we can exchange them for private points, that isn't bad."

Cards like Double and Free Ride were more useful the higher one ranked. If a class was too far behind, they were more like dead weight. Selling some of them would not be a bad choice.

"Heh. How about one hundred thousand per card?"

Ryūen smiled. "Class A's whales aren't short on money anyway. We might as well slaughter them together. If they pay enough, we can even sell special cards to them."

Suzune instinctively wanted to refute him.

In her eyes, wouldn't this be funding the enemy?

But in the next moment, she calmed down.

Although Ryūen's method went against instinct, it did make sense. Most item cards existed to earn private points.

A group ranked in the top 50% would only receive ten thousand private points per person. If an item card could be sold for one hundred thousand private points, then they would be the ones profiting.

Of course, Class 2-A was aiming for the top three rewards, which was why they wanted to buy item cards.

"That's too expensive. If we all set the price that high together, Class A will quickly realize we've joined hands."

Honami reminded them, "Also, Class A may not need that many item cards."

"Then we sell as many as we can before they stop buying."

Ryūen did not care. "Ichinose, Horikita, your classes are short on private points right now. If you don't sell, someone might get expelled."

To protect their students, Class 2-B had basically spent all its private points during the March exam.

Class 2-C had only recently advanced and had no reserves at all.

"We can do it ourselves. We don't necessarily have to cooperate with Class D."

Ryūji said calmly, "As for your credibility, I don't think you can be trusted."

Ryūen had proposed an alliance between three classes. It could not be only about selling item cards. He was probably planning to form cooperative groups during the upcoming uninhabited island exam as well.

"I feel the same. What Class D did to Yamauchi-kun before isn't something we can forget with a few words."

Suzune had learned the details from Sudō Ken, and she had already been wary of Ryūen. The look she gave him was full of suspicion.

"Looks like you've got a lot of resentment. Does Ichinose feel the same?"

"Sorry. After what happened to Mako-chan, it's very hard for me to trust Ryūen-kun. Of course, I'm grateful that you're treating me to a drink."

"What if I kneel?"

The moment those words fell, everyone froze at the same time.

"I don't like it, but if kneeling helps me beat Mitoma, then I don't care."

A fearless smile appeared on Ryūen's face. "Whether you want me to kneel here or kneel to Amikura, I'll do it. That should be enough to get rid of your resentment, right?"

For the first time, Suzune stared at this man in a daze.

Honami also looked utterly disbelieving.

"You... you're not joking, are you?"

"Why would I be in the mood to joke? If I want to beat Mitoma, then I need the resolve to pay any price. How about it, Ichinose? Is this enough for you to trust me?"

"W-wait! You're really going to kneel?!"

Ryūen was not joking.

If Honami had not hurriedly stopped him in a panic, the man really would have prostrated himself right there.

Watching this scene, Suzune clenched her fists.

Even Ryūen had this level of resolve.

Then what kind of mindset should she have if she wanted to defeat Mitoma Kaoru?

Was the only way to overcome Class A now to unite the strength of three classes?

Chapter 747: Cooperation

Nobody could have predicted that Ryūen Kakeru would be willing to kneel and apologize.

This man usually gave off the impression of someone proud and arrogant. Even when he did something wrong, he never seemed to feel guilty about it.

Horikita Suzune had originally thought this meeting would end without results. After all, Ryūen had pulled tricks on all of them before, and that alone made it hard to accept him.

But seeing Ryūen move without hesitation, as if he truly intended to kneel, completely overturned Suzune's previous impression of him.

"Ryūen-kun, there's no need for you to kneel."

Ichinose Honami's mind was still a little blank. She had stopped Ryūen instinctively earlier, and now that she had come back to herself, her expression became serious. "If you want to apologize, you can apologize to Mako-chan."

If Ryūen knelt here, it would probably become huge news.

"Fine. Is this sincerity enough for you to believe me?"

Ryūen did not care at all. "Or do you want me to give you some compensation too?"

"No, no, that's enough. I'll tell everyone about your attitude."

Honami hurriedly refused. She was not the type of girl to aggressively corner others in the first place. Since Ryūen had shown a willingness to apologize, she could not really keep pushing him.

To be honest, the atmosphere had become very strange.

After Ryūen said those words, it became difficult to criticize him. The things they had been about to say earlier suddenly would not come out.

Because Ryūen had indeed shown an attitude of wanting to cooperate, and he was even willing to kneel for it. That sincerity was something neither Honami nor Suzune could ignore.

"So you don't resent me anymore?"

Ryūen suddenly smiled. "Even if you want to come over and hit me a few times, I won't fight back. What do you think, Horikita?"

Suzune immediately understood.

No wonder he had not brought Ishizaki Daichi and the others today. He had probably wanted her and Honami to focus all their attention on him.

If Ishizaki and the others were here, and even their leader had to kneel, then those underlings would have to kneel too.

"I have no interest in fighting. Besides, the person directly involved is no longer here, so I don't have much right to pursue it further."

Suzune lightly brushed over the matter of Yamauchi Haruki's past. "But if you're willing to go as far as kneeling, then I'm willing to hear your plan against Class A."

"Not bad. Your goal really is direct, Horikita. You always go straight to the point."

Ryūen praised her, then continued, "Although Class A has an enormous amount of private points, those points can only be used to buy item cards and ensure nobody gets expelled. Once the exam starts, their starting point isn't that different from ours."

"He can buy over a group of people. Even if our people don't agree, the first-years and third-years are areas we can't control."

Suzune's tone was cool.

"Hehehe, you're right. Mitoma is too strong. He's the Student Council president, and he has connections with the third-years. As long as he's willing to offer enough private points, there will be people in both the first and third years who follow him."

It sounded exaggerated, but everyone knew Ryūen was not fearmongering.

Because it was true.

"Horikita, that's exactly why we need to cooperate."

Ryūen's voice lowered. "Class A's class points are higher than all of ours combined. If we let them take the top three spots, do you really think we'll still have a chance to catch up?"

At present, Class 2-A had shown no intention of forming cross-class groups. They were clearly preparing to keep the rewards to themselves.

The rewards for the top three added up to a full six hundred class points, equal to the combined total of Class 2-C and Class 2-D.

If Class 2-A swallowed that reward too, there would truly be no way to defeat them.

"Class A has no intention of grouping with us. Aside from worrying that we might deliberately drag them down, there's also the issue of reward distribution."

Kanzaki Ryūji spoke up. "Even if we manage to seize the top three, each class would receive at most around two hundred points."

"That concern is pointless, Kanzaki."

Ryūen snorted. "What time do you think this is? You're still worrying about how to split rewards? Are you planning to leave all those rewards for Mitoma?"

"I'm only reminding you that there's a difference between aiming for the top three and simply sniping Class A's groups."

Ryūji replied calmly, "Those are two different goals. I don't believe we can monopolize the top three."

"Don't be so gloomy. Are you saying the combined strength of our 118 students can't handle Class A?"

Ryūen smiled faintly. "Your class has Shibata, Ichinose, and you. Class C has Hirata, Kōenji, and Sudō. I don't think our people are necessarily that much worse than Class A's."

For such words to come from Ryūen's mouth made Honami look away in slight embarrassment.

"It's rare to hear praise from you. How surprising."

Suzune's expression did not change. "Are you planning to use us to form an all-elite group?"

"My plan is to place capable people where they're needed."

Ryūen spoke directly. "Instead of fighting among ourselves, we should unite against the outside. As long as Class A remains undefeated, all of us are just spinning in place. The labels Class B and Class C are nothing but decorations."

Suzune fell into thought.

In truth, she had also considered whether they should cooperate with other classes.

Forming groups entirely within one's own class could certainly maximize benefits, but that only mattered if they could actually secure those benefits.

Having three classes work together to form elite groups, letting the best students lead the fight against Class 2-A, was indeed the best option currently available.

Continuing to fight alone would only leave them going in circles.

Ryūen's meaning was clear.

They would first work together to crush Class A, then compete against one another afterward. Otherwise, none of them would ever catch up.

"I can understand the proposal, but what about the weaker students?"

Honami's thinking was simpler.

If they pulled out the best students, the weaker students in their classes would have an even harder time.

"You're still planning to care about those people at a time like this?"

Ryūen looked baffled and said speechlessly, "Don't tell me you don't even have six million. Just make those people form one group, give them private points, and let them fend for themselves."

Honami awkwardly scratched her cheek.

Of course, her class had six million in reserve, but that was basically all they had.

"Since we're cooperating anyway, aside from all-elite groups, we can also help each other as much as possible to avoid expulsions."

Suzune proposed, "We don't need to do the best. We just need to do better than the first-year and third-year groups."

Honami looked surprised.

She had not expected Suzune to say something like that.

"Do whatever you want."

Ryūen smiled strangely. "Hehehe. Maybe the item cards you sell will end up saving people too."

If each card sold for one hundred thousand, then selling ten cards would equal one million.

That was enough to save one student from expulsion in a six-person group.

Suzune pretended not to hear.

In truth, her class's current situation was awkward. At most, they could barely gather around two million private points, and even then, not everyone would be willing to hand over their savings.

When she had asked them to prepare a reserve, many had reluctantly handed over only half, thinking that such a small amount of private points would not be useful anyway and might as well be spent for fun.

Then yesterday, they had finally started panicking and regretting how freely they had spent money. Quite a few of them acted as if the end of the world had arrived.

The reason Suzune suggested mutual assistance was because she had realized that, without it, her class's morale would be the first to collapse.

She had heard that quite a few students had contacted Class 2-A, trying to slip into Class 2-A's groups. Many had even sold their item cards already.

Putting those matters aside for now, since they had agreed to join forces, all that remained was selecting names and building an all-elite group capable of fighting Class 2-A.

And so, today's meeting ended quickly.

Just as Suzune walked out of the café, Honami naturally patted her shoulder.

"Hehe, looks like we'll be working together again, Suzune."

Fortunately, Kikyō was not here.

If she had said that line, Suzune would definitely have suspected she was talking about the times they had "cooperated" in bed.

"I didn't expect Ryūen-kun to go that far. Suzune can now take care of her classmates too. It feels like the only person who hasn't improved is me."

For some reason, Honami's voice suddenly became much quieter.

Suzune did not know what she was thinking.

Had she taken care of her classmates?

Still, she could tell that Honami's mood had become somewhat negative.

"Ryūen-kun is simply someone who will use any means necessary to achieve his goal."

Suzune said, "If kneeling benefits him, then he'll kneel without hesitation. The atmosphere earlier was completely controlled by him, and we were the ones startled by his actions. Although cooperation is beneficial for us as well."

As she spoke, Suzune suddenly thought of Kaoru.

How would he have reacted?

He probably would have actually made Ryūen kneel.

After all, Kaoru had no shame at all. No one was more of a rogue than him.

Thinking of that, the corner of Suzune's lips curved slightly in a smile even she barely noticed.

Honami looked at her with slight surprise, then smiled gently. "Suzune really is amazing. No wonder he likes you so much."

Suzune's face remained expressionless.

She did not know what Honami was talking about, nor did she know which "he" Honami meant.

"Actually, Suzune was already planning to cooperate with us, right?"

Honami said softly. "The reason you didn't come to me right away was because you were worried I might not be able to act against Class A."

It was not just that.

Suzune felt that Kaoru would not act against Class 2-B either.

However, having her thoughts directly pointed out like this made Suzune feel a little embarrassed.

"I... I hadn't decided yet. Class C is different from your class. I don't have that much control over them. They'll only listen to me when I can bring them benefits."

In truth, the situation was even more serious.

For example, Kōenji Rokusuke would never listen to her.

Suzune simply did not say that part.

"Is that so? Ayanokōji-kun and Sudō-kun have always listened to you, haven't they?"

"...Those two are hard to explain."

"And Kikyō and Kei too. Suzune is already very impressive now. Don't look down on yourself."

After Honami reminded her, Suzune suddenly realized that her relationships had indeed changed greatly.

Hirata Yōsuke, Kushida Kikyō, Karuizawa Kei, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, Sudō Ken, and even the nearly invisible Sakura Airi could now exchange a few words with her.

Without realizing it, she was no longer the solitary flower of her class.

In the past, she had always thought about how to solve problems alone.

Now, things seemed different.

At the very least, with help from Kei and the others, Suzune could control roughly half of the class's strength. Add Sudō and his side, and she could win over quite a few boys too.

She was already the leader of Class 2-C.

And everyone thought so.

"Don't look at how Kaoru and I usually joke around. Once exams are involved, I also want to make him suffer a little."

Honami winked. "Let's work hard together and give him a hard time, okay, Suzune?"

"Since you've put it that way, I can only respectfully accept."

Suzune finally showed a faint smile.

Honami smiled as well, but Suzune did not notice the shadow that flashed through her eyes.

'As expected. Everyone is working hard. I'm the only one still spinning in place.'

...

After they left, Nagumo Miyabi finally stepped out from the corner where he had been hiding.

"Looks like your discussion went smoothly."

"I only gave them a way down. Everyone knows that if they don't cooperate now, they can only sit back and watch Mitoma keep ruling the entire year."

"You're not worried Ichinose will help Mitoma?"

"I'd love it if that woman were that stupid. If she dares do that, it means Class 2-B is already finished."

"Heh. Maybe she really will. Women in love are idiots."

Ryūen looked at Miyabi, whose face was full of cold mockery.

Had this guy been mentally broken by being humiliated?

That resentment was practically pouring off him.

"Now that they're in the game, who are you planning to expel?"

"What if I name Ichinose?"

"That's possible. Flat rate, ten million."

"You're still thinking about money at a time like this?"

Miyabi snorted in dissatisfaction.

He had already spent more than ten million on Ryūen, yet nothing had truly been accomplished. "Can you take out Karuizawa and Kushida?"

"Depends on the situation. Four million for one. Eight million for both."

Ryūen did not even blink.

"Four million. Take out whoever you can."

Miyabi said coldly. Anyone could hear that he was running low on money. "I'll give you one million upfront. The rest comes when there are results."

"Deal."

Ryūen answered indifferently.

Miyabi did not care about that and asked, "How are you planning to deal with Mitoma?"

"Class A has too many private points. It's hard to get him expelled in one exam."

"As long as you can get in his way. Don't tell me you want to see him take the top three."

"That part is simple. Even you're joining the field this time. If we still can't do it, I won't need to go after him anymore. I might as well retire from life."

That was right.

This snipe against Kaoru included Miyabi's forces as well. He intended to gamble everything he had left and knock Kaoru down in one strike.

"Tell me all of Class A's information before the exam, especially their groups."

After leaving that sentence behind, Miyabi left the café.

Ryūen drank the last mouthful of coffee.

In his eyes, Miyabi was nothing more than an old tree about to rot away. He should hurry up and squeeze out the last batch of coins while he still could. Next time, he might not even get to see Miyabi anymore.

The only pity was that this old man's coin supply had shrunk.

It looked like four million, roughly the same as before, but in reality, Miyabi could only stingily take out one million for now.

Ryūen had no doubt that if he dared to ask for even one more point, Miyabi would start bargaining.

Today's meeting would soon reach Kaoru's ears.

Ryūen was very curious what reaction that man would have.

Chapter 748: I Want Your First Kiss

At the same time, Nanase Tsubasa received a Double card.

Its effect was better than nothing.

The first-years were at a slight disadvantage in this joint exam.

They had never been to the uninhabited island before, and whether in terms of information or private points, the upper years were stronger than them.

The school had forbidden cross-year grouping and item-card exchanges, clearly to protect the first-year students. After all, item cards were not the only things private points could buy.

Because of what happened last time, Hōsen Kazuomi was now very interested in Kaoru and wanted to defeat him in this uninhabited island exam.

After spending these days around him, Tsubasa understood very well what kind of danger that man posed.

In Hōsen's eyes, most things could be solved with fists.

Because of that, Tsubasa planned to discuss things with Kaoru.

In this all-year joint exam, she should finally be useful, right?

The girl used that as an excuse for herself, trying her best not to recall the scene from a few days ago as she went to the Student Council office like usual.

Immediately after, she saw Kaoru coming out of the office.

A flicker of panic flashed through her eyes, but she quickly regained her composure.

"President, are you going somewhere?"

Tsubasa watched him lock the door. Since nobody else came out, she felt a little puzzled.

"Nanase-san. Shiina-san didn't come here, so she should be in the library. I have something to discuss with her."

Kaoru put away his key.

The Student Council keys were only held by the president, vice president, and secretary. "There's nothing much today. Nanase-san can go back early."

Tsubasa remembered who this Shiina-san was.

The first time she saw that small senpai, the girl had been sitting in the office with both hands holding a copy of *The Greek Coffin Mystery*. The evening shadows had fallen over her soft face, and her loose blue hair had seemed to glow.

Later, Tsubasa learned that she had been rereading Ellery Queen's mystery novels because she wanted to write a mystery novel of her own.

Tsubasa occasionally saw Shiina Hiyori in the office, and she only knew that Hiyori was a girl who loved literature. The two of them had not really interacted much.

"Is this about the forum writing contest?"

After a slight hesitation, Tsubasa asked.

"That's part of it... She thinks I'm lying to her now. With you and Kaho around, the Student Council doesn't look short-handed at all."

Kaoru looked somewhat embarrassed.

Tsubasa was very capable. Ever since she became familiar with Student Council work, she had practically taken over most of the paperwork.

Everyone felt that once the upper-year officers retired, Tsubasa would definitely hold an important position, such as secretary. Even Kaho believed Tsubasa was better suited for it.

"Can I go with you?"

As soon as Tsubasa said it, she instinctively added, "I want to discuss the uninhabited island exam with you. But I won't interrupt you and Shiina-senpai. It's fine if I wait until you're done talking."

Tsubasa did not know what Kaoru would think, but she felt a little nervous.

The scene she had been trying so hard to forget was being dragged back into her mind by his gaze.

She was wearing black knee-high socks today as well.

Although they were not the same pair from that time, the feeling Kaoru had left on her calves and feet still seemed to linger.

It was the first time an opposite-sex student had touched her feet like that.

Her foot had felt light enough to rest in his palm, yet at the same time like some rare treasure being carefully handled.

The strange sensation of his fingers brushing over the fabric and her ankle was something she could still remember even now.

Not to mention, she had been forced to play along at the time, trying her best to act the way Kaoru liked while carefully pressing down her skirt to keep herself from being exposed.

She had endured her embarrassment with a red face while stepping against his chest and touching his chin with the tip of her foot.

Even she had felt that it was incredibly strange. She had no idea how Kaoru could handle it so calmly.

Was he remembering that scene now too?

As that thought flashed through her mind, Tsubasa remembered Hiyori as well.

That senpai would definitely have a deep impression of her now.

Even Tsubasa, who considered herself a tool, could not help the faint blush spreading across her cheeks.

"Sure. I also have something to talk to you about."

Kaoru accepted her excuse.

Tsubasa immediately started overthinking.

What did Kaoru want to talk to her about?

Was he planning to make her do something strange again?

Seeing Kaoru start walking, Tsubasa could only suppress her doubts and follow beside him. She adjusted her pace to match his, falling a little behind bit by bit, then hurriedly catching up again like a duckling chasing after its mother.

Kaoru noticed her small movements and consciously adjusted his own walking speed.

When Tsubasa realized that, her heart began beating a little faster, and her cheeks felt warm.

...

The two soon reached the library.

Hiyori was reading seriously.

Beside her, a stack of novels had been piled on the table, with scattered notes laid out in a slightly messy fashion. She seemed to be recording something, and her handwriting was neat and dense.

It was only after Kaoru greeted her that Hiyori finally lifted her pretty face. She hurriedly tidied the table in front of her and made space for Kaoru to sit beside her.

Tsubasa greeted Hiyori as well, but she did not disturb Kaoru and Hiyori's conversation.

She only listened quietly from the side.

They were talking about the forum writing contest. Kaoru wanted Hiyori to come back to work, and he also wanted to read the novel Hiyori had written.

Tsubasa was surprised, especially when Hiyori really took a manuscript out of her schoolbag. Her curiosity toward this senpai deepened.

After that, the two of them started discussing the manuscript.

Terms like "orthodox mystery" and "social mystery" came up, and Tsubasa did not fully understand them.

She only knew that Hiyori wanted to write a mystery novel.

Even so, Hiyori seemed very negative about it.

She felt she could not write one properly and that she did not have the talent.

In her view, she was only clumsily imitating the great writers who came before her.

"What I want to see isn't something written by those so-called great writers."

Kaoru said, "I want to see the plot Shiina-san designed herself."

Then he asked, "If I wrote a novel, would Shiina-san want to read it?"

"I would."

Hiyori answered without thinking.

"You want to read mine, and I want to read yours. We're friends, not editors or critics. Don't be so harsh on yourself."

Kaoru smiled. "If you want to read something from me, I'll write one for you when I get back."

Seeing him smile, Hiyori smiled shyly as well, perhaps because she felt much more relaxed.

For her, trying to create a mystery novel of her own was also a brand-new experience. It was no less exciting than discovering a groundbreaking mystery novel.

The two then continued discussing novels, sharing reading lists and thoughts with each other. Tsubasa found it increasingly novel.

She had not expected Kaoru to have such a book-loving side. He looked nothing like the version of him who usually harassed girls.

In addition, Tsubasa did not hear them bring up classes or exams at all. They were simply sharing books.

This made things a little troublesome.

How was she supposed to open the topic?

Tsubasa felt slightly troubled.

Then she saw Kaoru stand and walk toward a bookshelf not far away, so she followed him.

The school library was extremely spacious. Row after row of shelves stretched out almost endlessly, making it feel less like a high school library and more like a university one.

At first, a few students could still be seen passing by. But after a while, the surroundings became silent.

Tsubasa watched Kaoru stop in front of a row of shelves. He extended his slender, well-defined right hand and pulled a book from the shelf.

The cover looked a little strange. She could not clearly see the title, which made her curious.

Also, why was he not saying anything?

What did he want to discuss with her?

Was she supposed to speak first?

But what should she say?

Maybe she should look at a book?

Tsubasa's breathing faltered slightly.

As if trying to hide her emotions, she turned her face and let her gaze fall on the shelf in front of her.

She had originally planned to casually pick out a book, but the moment she saw the covers on this shelf, her face suddenly turned red.

"This area is popular literature. Light novels are categorized here too."

Kaoru said, "This whole shelf is full of them. I suspect someone in the library is using public funds to feed their personal hobbies."

"Isn't the library managed by the teachers?"

Tsubasa tried to remain calm.

Just now, she had seen a light novel cover with a swimsuit girl on it, drawn with an exaggeratedly glamorous figure.

"Sometimes they ask the Student Council to help with moving books, registering them, shelving them, and so on."

Kaoru guessed, "Maybe someone convinced the teacher in charge of purchasing to buy them."

After all, the teacher responsible for purchasing might not understand these things. If students liked reading them, buying a batch probably seemed harmless.

Tsubasa accepted that explanation.

However, looking at the light novel in Kaoru's hand still made her cheeks heat up, because the title on the cover was something like Reincarnated in Another World: Building a Beast-Girl Harem with All My Heart.

Kaoru naturally noticed her gaze. He handed the book to her and said, "This isn't anything indecent. Aside from the title and illustrations, there's nothing really extreme inside."

Tsubasa had never read a light novel before. Doubtfully, she accepted the book from him and happened to open it to the page Kaoru had just been reading.

In the next instant, the girl's ears turned red.

"President!"

Kaoru froze slightly.

He only saw Tsubasa slam the book shut with a bright red face, glaring at him in embarrassment and anger.

"Please don't show this kind of thing to other people. Next time, enjoy it by yourself!"

She had finally thought he had a side that was somewhat acceptable, only for him to immediately take out something like this.

The fact that she had actually believed him for a moment made Tsubasa regret it deeply.

Kaoru, however, was even more confused.

"What's wrong with it?"

"The fact that you can so naturally show a girl this kind of thing is already a huge problem!"

"Is it because of the harem part?"

"Please don't play dumb. This... this is obviously indecent!"

"What part is indecent?"

"Guh... T-this part. Read it yourself..."

As soon as she said that, Tsubasa saw Kaoru lean in.

Their faces suddenly became very close, and his presence made her forget how to breathe.

Perhaps because he wanted to steady the book in her hands to read it properly, Kaoru held her wrist and leaned near her shoulder. His face was almost touching hers, and her body stiffened at once. She could only hear her heart pounding wildly.

"This is a pretty normal scene. There's nothing wrong with it. You're the one reading it with dirty thoughts."

Kaoru lowered his head.

His warm breath brushed past the girl's hair and neck, and he could see the exposed skin there turning faintly pink.

Her chest rose and fell unevenly.

"What dirty thoughts? Read it yourself!"

Tsubasa was both embarrassed and angry, no longer caring about his gaze. "The protagonist is helping the beast-girl character clean up after an accident, and the narration keeps describing how cute and soft she is, and how lucky he feels..."

Perhaps feeling that this was not enough, Tsubasa continued.

"And then it keeps talking about bubbles and her blushing and how happy he is to help her, like the whole scene is written just to make people imagine strange things..."

As she read, Tsubasa herself became increasingly embarrassed.

What was she doing?

At a time like this, she should have shoved the book back onto the shelf.

So she huffed angrily and was about to see what explanation Kaoru could possibly give, only to turn her head and almost bump into his face.

Her heart skipped.

Then she became even angrier.

Because Kaoru was smiling.

This guy had tricked her into reading it out loud on purpose!

"President!!!"

"All right, all right. Sometimes there are one or two novels that skirt the line a little. But there really isn't the kind of content you're imagining later."

"Please stop explaining. I know very well what kind of person you are, President. Even if you read this sort of thing, I won't look down on you. After all, you're already a pervert."

"Why does that somehow sound like praise?"

Tsubasa felt as though her blood pressure was rising.

This was the first time she had encountered a target like this.

And to think she had just been wondering how to gain Kaoru's trust and learn what type he liked.

"Fine, let's put the idle talk aside for now. What did you want to tell me?"

Kaoru took the light novel back from her hand. "Are you planning to form an illegal team with me?"

The topic changed so quickly that Tsubasa almost failed to keep up.

After slightly organizing her emotions, she said, "If you need me, I'll be waiting for your instructions at any time."

"Illegal team-ups may not succeed. The school must have considered whether we might act together. They'll probably scatter all the groups, such as having one group complete tasks in one area while another group handles tasks elsewhere."

"I'll exchange information with you during rest time."

"What information?"

"The information you want."

Tsubasa noticed Kaoru frown.

That was not the reaction she had expected.

After a while, Kaoru suddenly asked, "Have you ever kissed anyone?"

Although she did not understand why he was suddenly asking this, Tsubasa still answered.

"No."

"You liked your childhood friend, but you never kissed him?"

"I... I never dated him..."

A shadow flashed through Tsubasa's eyes.

Forget dating.

As a tool, she should not have any private feelings. They would affect the completion of her mission. Otherwise, she would forever be an unqualified tool.

"Then Nanase-san still has her first kiss."

Kaoru smiled. "What if I said the information I wanted was your first kiss?"

Tsubasa froze in place.

In truth, she had imagined similar situations before.

Acting Director Tsukishiro had given her this kind of order, and Kaoru was a lustful man. Sooner or later, she would probably encounter something like this.

In Tsukishiro Tokinari's eyes, a qualified tool should feel honored no matter what kind of task it was given, even if it meant giving up something precious.

A tool should simply work hard to complete the mission bestowed upon it.

Tsubasa had seen plenty of such qualified tools.

Even so, a faint, naive fantasy still remained in her heart.

At that moment, Kaoru lifted her chin.

Their eyes met.