

Cote 391

Chapter 391: What Is This Feeling?

With only a few days left until the second semester's closing ceremony, rumors about Kaoru and Ichinose had spread to almost everyone's ears.

Some suspected they might be dating, while others thought they were in that ambiguous zone between friendship and romance.

There were even those who believed Kaoru would confess to Ichinose under the legendary tree, with Santa Claus tossing down gifts of love from its branches and the jingle of reindeer bells echoing through the Keyaki Mall's dormitory rooms all night long.

Of course, some dismissed it as nonsense, while others were overjoyed, eagerly bragging to their childhood friends—only to be met with cold shoulders.

Kaoru had expected someone else to react most strongly, but he never imagined Tachibana Akane would come storming up to him in a huff.

"Are you dating Ichinose?"

Right after school ended, Kaoru ran into Tachibana at the first-floor entrance.

It seemed she had rushed over immediately after class, her forehead slightly damp with sweat, her hair still tied up in that adorable bun.

At that moment, many students passing through the entrance cast curious glances their way—after all, Kaoru had gained some notoriety lately.

"Even the third-years know?" Kaoru was surprised.

He had assumed graduates wouldn't care about first-year affairs.

"W-well, more or less," Akane stammered before growing angry again.

"I always thought we had a good relationship! You used to listen to me in the student council, and now you're sneaking around getting a girlfriend behind my back!"

Squeak—

Kaoru could practically feel the students around them perk up their ears, clearly eager for gossip.

At this rate, rumors would spread that he was cheating on Ichinose Honami with an upperclassman.

"I was just about to tell you," Kaoru said. "Besides, I don't need your permission to get a girlfriend, do I?"

Akane flared up in anger.

Was he implying she was meddling in his business?

"I never said that! I just think you and Ichinose moved too fast. Back in the student council, you were single like me!"

Kaoru sensed something off.

Why did she sound like she'd been abandoned by some scoundrel? All he'd done was say one thing, and now her eyes were welling up with tears.

Wait, had he really given her that many "rewards" for her affection to be this high?

[Tachibana Akane: Angry, hurt, dissatisfied, disappointed...]

[Recommendation: A quick kiss and the "Massage Technique" could effectively soothe the target's mood.]

Unable to make sense of it, Kaoru sighed.

"Don't cry—it's my fault. What do you want?"

"I'm not crying!" Akane touched her cheeks, finding no wetness.

Her emotions were just running high, making her eyes redden.

"I-I'm just a little frustrated."

"Frustrated?" Kaoru was even more confused.

Glancing around, he decided they needed to leave.

"Let's go somewhere else. Too many people here."

Tachibana Akane nodded and, seeing him walk ahead, quickly caught up.

Noticing he was only wearing his school uniform, she wondered if he was cold and moved closer to him.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked, tugging at the scarf around her neck and revealing a glimpse of fair skin.

"Look, I even bought a scarf! See this cute little panda? Isn't its smile adorable?"

Kaoru glanced at her scarf.

Standing just under 160 cm, the height difference between them allowed him an enticing view—though Akane remained oblivious, too busy beaming as she pointed at the little bear on her scarf.

She had spent ages picking it out!

"Well? Isn't it cute?"

"It's cute. So is my senpai."

"Guh... Don't say things like that!"

Akane belatedly remembered—he already had a girlfriend.

Her earlier actions had been too forward, lacking any restraint.

What kind of girl would sidle up to a guy just to show off her scarf?

"You should buy one soon too," she said, trying to maintain her senior demeanor.

"Don't underestimate this place just because it's remote. Winters here get heavy snow—last year, someone even caught a fever!"

Kaoru hunched his shoulders slightly.

She had a point.

Snowfall was probably just around the corner.

Akane was about to say more when she noticed the sharp line of his jaw and the prominent Adam's apple, exuding a distinctly masculine aura.

It was so close she could almost reach out and touch his chin.

She froze.

Why is he so tall?

And the distance between them—so narrow it felt like Kaoru could pull her into his arms at any moment.

In a fluster, Akane hurried ahead a few steps before stopping abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Kaoru asked, puzzled.

"N-Nothing!"

Spotting a nearby tree, her voice suddenly pitched higher.

"I just remembered—there's supposedly a legendary tree on campus!"

Kaoru had heard about this "legendary tree" more than once.

His curiosity piqued.

"The one where confessing under it guarantees success?"

"Huh, you know about it too?"

"Feels like every place has something like this."

"I-It's not a lie! I heard there's a 99% success rate for confessions made under that tree!"

"So, senpai, are you planning to confess to Horikita-senpai?"

"..."

Akane stiffened for a moment before deflating slightly.

"I... don't know if I should. But if I don't do it soon, I might never get another chance."

Kaoru nodded. "Your instincts aren't wrong. After all, senpai is a pitiful little coward."

"You're the coward!" Akane smacked his arm repeatedly in frustration. "I have my own pace—you don't get to judge! And even if I fail, it'll be your fault!"

"Why?" Kaoru was baffled. "What does your confession have to do with me?"

"Because you're dating Ichinose!" Akane declared, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Wait, what's wrong with me dating Honami?" Kaoru couldn't follow her logic.

"There must be something wrong! You were single just like me before, but now you've got a girlfriend. It's making me look bad. Even Saki and Maaya have boyfriends now. Doesn't that mean I'm the only one still single?"

Tachibana Akane seemed anxious about her situation.

She had admired Horikita Manabu for nearly three years, yet she still hadn't mustered the courage to take the first step.

Meanwhile, everyone around her was pairing up.

No matter how much she tried to deny it, she couldn't fool herself—she was envious.

"So, Senpai, you just want to get into a relationship?" Kaoru followed her train of thought.

Akane huffed twice.

She couldn't be bothered to explain, but she still spoke to Kaoru in a gentle tone.

"You have to help me. If it works out, I'll treat you to a sundae!"

"Why does it have to be me? I'm sure you have plenty of other friends who could help, right?" Kaoru already had enough troubles of his own and wasn't keen on adding more.

"Only you can help me with this. After all, you're the only one in the world who knows about my feelings."

Even now, Akane refused to believe that her feelings for Horikita had been exposed to anyone else.

She was convinced she had hidden them perfectly.

"No way. I'm new to dating too—I don't know anything about it," Kaoru denied.

"It's fine! Horikita has never been in a relationship either, and you're a guy. You should know what guys like." Akane's face flushed red.

"We can practice first—the whole dating process, even confessing. I want to try it with you."

Kaoru gave her a strange look.

Try it with him?

"I'm not Horikita-senpai. I have no idea how he'd react. I can't act that out or play along."

Akane stared at him as if he were an idiot and sighed.

"You juniors these days are so clueless. Of course I know that. If you could read Horikita's mind, why would I even need to practice with you?"

Kaoru was completely lost now.

"Relax, I'm just feeling really nervous, so I want you to keep me company." Akane averted her gaze.

"Besides, I don't want to ask other guys. You already have a girlfriend, so there won't be any rumors if we're together."

Wait, isn't being with you more likely to cause misunderstandings?

"I don't mind keeping you company for a day, but I'm busy on Christmas and Christmas Eve. Plus, I'd have to let Honami and the others know first."

"Huh?"

Akane was clearly displeased, but then she realized—if she went out with him on Christmas, wouldn't that just make things seem real?

So, she generously forgave Kaoru.

"Then let's go out the day after tomorrow, during the break!"

Suddenly, the girl brightened up again.

"Listen, there's a couples' event going on right now—sundae sets are half-price! We can share one when we go!"

"Eating sundaes in winter?" Kaoru subtly glanced at her stomach.

"What else are you supposed to eat in winter?" Akane thought this junior was a bit slow.

"In summer, it's watermelon and soda. In winter, it's sundaes and ice cream!"

"Whatever makes you happy." Kaoru figured it probably wasn't that time of the month for her—but even if it were, it wasn't his business.

"Mhm. But I don't know how to go on a date. What do I do?" Akane naturally turned to Kaoru for help.

"From what I've seen, people usually go shopping, then watch a movie, and end with a meal. Is that how it works?"

"That's the general process, but it depends on the other person's thoughts." Kaoru flashed a faint smile.

"Since you're the one who invited me on this date, it's your responsibility to plan the itinerary. If you fail to keep me happy, your confession will end in rejection."

Akane Tachibana's expression immediately darkened, and she protested indignantly.

"Isn't it usually the guy who plans everything?"

"If it were a guy, the only plan would be booking a hotel," Kaoru replied matter-of-factly.

Akane froze for a moment before her face flushed crimson.

It suddenly dawned on her—the final step of the date wasn't dinner.

It was her.

"P-pervert!" she stammered, her cheeks burning.

Still, she had no intention of canceling the date.

After all, this was her last chance to act recklessly before graduation.

Even Kaoru had a girlfriend now, which inexplicably filled her with a sense of urgency.

It felt like she, too, had to take that first step—or at the very least, avoid leaving regrets behind.

"This is just a date—no funny business! Otherwise, I'll report you to Ichinose!"

Akane had Ichinose's contact info, and she wasn't above using it as leverage.

"Fine, fine," Kaoru conceded, raising his hands in surrender. "I hope your confession goes well."

Seeing him yield again, Tachibana Akane allowed a small smirk to curl her lips, satisfaction blooming in her chest.

"Well, we'll be going our separate ways next semester anyway. Helping out my senpai a little won't hurt."

...Huh?

His words sent an abrupt stiffness through Akane's expression.

A wave of unease surged within her—more twisted and painful than the moment she'd learned he had a girlfriend.

For the first time, the sound of her own heartbeat rang with terrifying clarity in her ears.

Deep in her gut, a nauseating churn took hold, as if her stomach were convulsing—or as if a hole had been torn open inside her.

Flames seemed to scorch her from within, the agony so intense it stole her breath.

Her throat constricted, strangling her voice.

...What was this feeling?

Chapter 392: Provocation

With student council duties winding down, Kaoru had heard about Nagumo's reform proposals from Tonokawa and Mizowaki.

The school had adopted most of his suggestions.

Nagumo's ideas seemed to align with the preferences of certain higher-ups.

The school would trial the changes next semester, though the main focus would likely be the new academic year.

A new year meant new students—and a better opportunity for the school to control the reform's impact.

Even so, Kaoru was still somewhat surprised by the student council's influence.

To think they could actually sway the school's decisions—it was a cut above the student councils of other high schools.

Before the closing ceremony, Nagumo finally showed up at the student council office.

"What kind of spell did you cast on Nazuna?"

The moment they met, Nagumo hurled the accusation at him, his face ashen.

Clearly, he knew winning back Asahina wouldn't be easy—a devastating blow for someone as prideful as him.

Recognizing the tension, Tonokawa and the others tactfully excused themselves.

They'd been under Nagumo's suspicion—and cold stares—for days now.

Moreover, for some reason, a slew of rumors had recently surfaced, nearly all targeting them.

For example, Class 2-A, dissatisfied with Nagumo's methods, decided to expel him.

Or the rumor that Nagumo believed there were at least six traitors in the class and planned to randomly eliminate a few students to intimidate the rest.

All sorts of rumors spread, yet Nagumo paid no attention.

Instead, he cast suspicious glances at Tonokawa and others, his tone almost cold, making the entire class uneasy.

Moreover, the ongoing tension between Nagumo and Asahina had begun affecting the class atmosphere.

Some were already questioning whether Nagumo could continue leading them.

Kaoru felt a tinge of regret.

Though he knew about these events, not being there in person left him with a sense of loss.

Gathering his thoughts, Kaoru answered Nagumo's question.

"I asked her if she liked you. She said no. Then I kissed her. That's how it happened."

In an instant, scorching blood surged through Nagumo's veins, pounding from his heart to his brain.

Veins throbbed on his neck and forehead as his entire body trembled, his gaze locked onto Kaoru with burning intensity.

"Heh... Mitoma, you've really outdone yourself. Treating a senpai like this—I've never met someone like you before." Nagumo was seething with rage, yet he forced a strained smile, barely containing himself.

"If you're after Nazuna, then you'll have to get through me first!"

At this moment, Ichinose Honami, worried that Nagumo might escalate things with Kaoru, stepped beside Kaoru and spoke up.

"Nagumo-senpai, please calm down. Asahina-senpai has always considered you her closest friend in her heart—"

"Calm down? Why should I?" Nagumo cut her off, his voice cold.

"The one who needs to stay calm here is you, Ichinose. Your man is cheating on you, and you're just going to pretend not to see it?"

The rumors about the two had naturally reached Nagumo's ears.

At first, he was overjoyed, rushing to share the "good news" with Asahina, expecting her to be disappointed.

Yet, Asahina remained unfazed, saying she had known all along.

Nagumo's heart plunged into a frozen abyss.

She already knew?

The implication was clear—Asahina didn't care that Kaoru had other women around him.

This left Nagumo utterly baffled.

Before, she had been disappointed in him, even disgusted by his womanizing ways.

So why was she suddenly so lenient with Kaoru?

Had she been lying to him all this time?

Now that another man was involved, she was just going to change her standards?

Fury burned within Nagumo, and today, he had finally come to the office, determined to settle things with Kaoru once and for all.

Only by proving his superiority could he make Asahina see that Mitoma was beneath him!

Now, seeing Ichinose shielding Kaoru, his resentment deepened.

This woman, who had never shown him any affection, was now throwing herself at Kaoru.

Even knowing Kaoru was unfaithful, she still chose to forgive him.

The thought made Nagumo's vision redden with rage.

Yet, the angrier he became, the more he felt an inexplicable sorrow creeping in.

He knew his emotions were spiraling out of control—and he was powerless to stop it.

However, whenever he recalled his inexplicable lack of reaction toward women and witnessed Kaoru forcibly kissing his childhood friend, he felt like a cuckolded eunuch, his heart seething with unspoken frustration.

"I didn't mean it that way. Asahina-senpai's thoughts are actually—"

"Enough, Ichinose. You have no right to speak to me. You can't even control your own man—were you blackmailed by him?" Nagumo Miyabi sneered coldly.

"Did he exploit some leverage over you to bully you? Is that why you revealed your secrets to everyone—because of his mission?"

If it were Nagumo, he had a hundred ways to manipulate Ichinose.

For instance, while the girl was yielding, he could take compromising photos or videos.

Whether to continue threatening Ichinose Honami or to simply enjoy them in private—both were appealing options.

Alternatively, he could simply use Class 1-B as leverage against her.

Nagumo had a decent grasp of her personality—if he expelled a classmate right in front of her, she'd probably break down.

Thus, Nagumo assumed Kaoru had employed similar tactics.

Otherwise, it was hard to explain why Ichinose would allow him to have his way with multiple women.

Just as Ichinose was about to retort, Kaoru covered her mouth and turned to Nagumo.

"Do I need your permission to do anything with my senpai?"

"Hahaha, she and I are childhood friends—ten years of history. What right do you have to strut around here like you own the place?" Nagumo laughed in anger.

"Don't think I don't know—even Tonokawa has become your pawn. You want me expelled? Fine! Why wouldn't I dare to face you in a challenge?"

With that, Nagumo raised his eyebrows, openly provoking Kaoru.

"Let's settle this. Either I drive you out of this school, or you kick me out. Whoever stays gets to keep Nazuna!"

Kaoru regarded him calmly.

Even now, Nagumo hadn't realized the truth—that simply demonstrating his abilities and charm wouldn't make Asahina Nazuna change her mind.

No, in fact, Nagumo still saw Asahina as his possession and was now trying to snatch her back from Mitoma.

That was why he wasn't fixated on pursuing Asahina directly—he believed defeating Kaoru would resolve everything.

Unfortunately for him, his assumption was flawed.

Asahina harbored no genuine romantic feelings for him.

To her, he was just a childhood friend.

"Fine."

Kaoru accepted Nagumo's challenge.

In truth, the two were already like fire and water—even without this, they would have clashed violently.

Today merely marked the official start of their war.

Hearing this, a faint smile flickered across Nagumo's face before his eyes darkened with malice.

Expelling someone? That was his specialty.

"However, there's one thing I should warn you about," Kaoru suddenly added.

"Asahina-senpai doesn't belong to anyone right now. Even if I stay, I won't force her soul to submit to me."

Everyone had selfish desires, but Kaoru knew his limits.

If she didn't love him, there was no point demanding absolute loyalty.

Nagumo didn't grasp his meaning, though he caught the words "stay" clearly.

His face twisted into a sneer, assuming Kaoru was overconfident about winning.

"Just wait. Next semester's exams won't be so easy for you."

After speaking, Nagumo turned and left the office, not wanting to see the detestable Kaoru any longer.

Kaoru released Ichinose Honami, whose expression was now somewhat complicated as she slightly lowered her head.

"I'm sorry."

Faced with Kaoru's apology, Ichinose Honami raised her delicate face and whispered.

"There's no need to apologize, is there?"

"It was my fault for causing trouble, dragging you into helping me, especially since I cheated first." Kaoru felt quite awkward—here was his official partner standing up for him and his mistress.

"Kaoru didn't cheat." Ichinose Honami denied his words.

"We were never in a proper relationship to begin with, and you didn't hide anything from me afterward. I allowed your behavior, so you didn't cheat."

"But you're still angry, right?" Kaoru tentatively poked her cheek.

"I am a little angry..." Ichinose murmured. "If Kaoru were to cruelly abandon another girl who likes him because of me, I'd feel guilty."

Yes, Kaoru's assessment of her wasn't wrong.

The girl's sense of morality was too high.

She couldn't pursue her own happiness at the cost of others' pain, especially when it involved her friends.

Ichinose Honami had already stopped thinking about it.

She figured that if Kaoru could resolve the issues of maintaining a harem, agreeing to it wouldn't be so bad.

As long as everyone could be happy, wasn't that enough?

Kaoru suddenly embraced the girl.

At this moment, he didn't know what to say—he truly was a scumbag.

Sometimes, he even wondered if he should be even worse, so he wouldn't have to care about their feelings and could do whatever he wanted.

However, what attracted him to the girl wasn't her alluring body but her reactions, her genuine emotions.

These made Kaoru feel like he wasn't facing a talking doll but a living, breathing person.

"Don't hug me here. They'll come in soon." Ichinose blushed slightly, though she could faintly sense Kaoru's emotions, making her heart feel light.

"Then just one kiss." Kaoru lifted her chin with one hand while the other slid through her hair to cradle the back of her head, tilting her face up slightly.

Her lips were moist and flushed, tempting him to steal a kiss.

The gesture reminded Ichinose of that time, and her face flushed red.

"Mmm..."

After a while, the girl covered her face, her ears burning red.

She could feel something pressing against her lower abdomen, while Kaoru shamelessly continued holding her.

Chapter 393: Someone Peeking

On the day of the closing ceremony, light snowflakes drifted outside.

Frost clung to the tree branches, and the distant horizon was shrouded in thick pink-white hues.

The winter sun was cold yet radiant, its faint red glow mingling with the snow, scattering across the grassy fields where patches of green still peeked through the frost.

After the customary farewell speech, the principal delivered many encouraging words to the students.

Kaoru joined everyone in applause before returning to their respective classrooms.

During the homeroom meeting, Mashima Tomonari briefly outlined the precautions for winter break.

Someone asked, "Will there be a special exam during winter break?"

The last summer vacation left a deep impression on the first-year students, with even Class A worrying about whether another special exam would appear.

Or rather, it seemed to be the norm for the school to hold special exams during holidays.

Mashima neither confirmed nor denied this question.

He only mentioned that future holidays might include special exams and warned them not to think they could escape them.

Special exams were the school's way of testing the students, but they also served as opportunities for students to climb higher.

Since the school didn't allow students to stay in the school building—apparently planning to renovate some facilities—everyone left the classroom after the homeroom meeting.

Kaoru walked down the hallway, with many students sneaking glances at him along the way.

Some admired him, while others envied Ichinose Honami.

The reason was naturally simple.

"Aha, got you!"

With a cheerful voice, Kaoru suddenly felt his arm tightly hugged.

Two plump, soft marshmallows pressed deeply against him, as if his entire arm was about to sink into them.

From the softness alone, Kaoru didn't even need to turn his head to know it was Ichinose Honami.

Since deciding to make their relationship public, the two had often walked to and from school together.

Ichinose didn't feel awkward about the harem situation either; instead, she actively enjoyed being affectionate with Kaoru in front of others.

If even she couldn't be happy about it, everyone would probably find their relationship strange.

Not to mention those watching from the shadows.

"Whoa, I wanna hug Honami-chan too!" Kobashi Yume seemed envious and was about to rush over, but Amikura Mako grabbed her by the collar.

"Don't bother Honami-chan. Or are you planning to hug Mitoma-kun too?"

"Ugh..."

Watching their interaction, Kaoru tried to greet them.

Amikura averted her gaze without saying anything, but Shiranami Chihiro's stare was a little intimidating.

"Kaoru, do you have any plans for winter break?" Ichinose asked enthusiastically.

Kaoru thought to himself, Didn't you say you wanted to go on a Christmas date? But outwardly, he replied.

"Nothing much, just some small things to take care of."

"Huh? You're not planning a Christmas date?" Kobashi, still not grasping the situation, excitedly told Ichinose.

"I heard there's a legendary tree at school! If you confess under it, the girl will marry the guy and have five kids!"

Amikura, flushed red, covered Kobashi's mouth.

Even Ichinose was a little embarrassed—how could she say something like that so casually?

"Five kids?" Hirano Rin tilted her head in confusion, counting on her fingers.

"Pregnancy lasts ten months, and ovulation ends around age forty, but the older you get, the harder pregnancy is. If you have one per year, Honami-chan would—mmph!"

Amikura had no choice but to cover her mouth too.

This one was also an idiot—how could she say something like that in front of everyone?

Kaoru felt a bit awkward for them, though he couldn't help but entertain some wandering thoughts about Ichinose's seemingly childbearing-friendly figure.

"Ahaha, a Christmas date or something..." Ichinose forced a smile.

"Actually, Kaoru and I have already gone on plenty of dates before. For me, it's just an ordinary holiday."

"It's so cold out—staying in would be better," Kaoru smoothly agreed.

In an instant, Ichinose pinched his arm, her smile still perfectly intact.

"Mako-chan, what are you all planning to do?"

It didn't hurt, but the gesture alone signaled her anger, leaving Mitoma momentarily confused.

"Probably just hang out for a bit and then go to sleep," Amikura Mako replied nonchalantly, releasing Kobashi Yume and Hirano Rin. "But I'll prepare Christmas gifts for you all, so you can look forward to that."

"Eh, really?" Kobashi Yume waved her hands excitedly. "I—I'll prepare a gift too!"

"Oh no, I think I forgot about Halloween presents," Hirano Rin realized belatedly.

"Halloween's long over, dummy!"

"Isn't it next month?"

"Next month is New Year's, Rin, you idiot!"

"..."

Listening to their bickering, Amikura Mako calmly met Kaoru's gaze.

"Is that so? I'll prepare a gift for you too, Mako-chan," Ichinose said with a smile.

Finally realizing what he should say, Kaoru asked, "Do I get a gift too?"

Amikura Mako and Ichinose nearly lost their composure.

Who just bluntly calls out a girl's little schemes like that?

At least be a little more tactful!

"O-of course! After all, we're friends—yours definitely won't be lacking!" Amikura Mako stammered inexplicably.

"But don't expect too much! It's just a normal friendship gift!"

Ichinose fell silent. Don't say "friendship gift" at a time like this! It's not Valentine's Day!

Amikura Mako seemed to realize she'd misspoken, her face flushing red.

What was she supposed to do? Was this really okay?

She didn't even know if she liked Kaoru.

If she had known, she wouldn't have said that.

They might as well just confess on Christmas and claim him already.

Though the idea of two girls—best friends, no less—becoming the same guy's girlfriends was downright embarrassing to admit.

Still, Amikura Mako secretly admired Ichinose Honami more.

"So I really am getting a gift? I'm a little flattered. I'll prepare one for you too, then," Kaoru said, finally remembering them.

At the very least, he should give everyone something.

But what little rewards could he offer?

Should he go buy a few things?

Seeing his seemingly touched expression, Amikura Mako felt a small flicker of happiness.

Whether she liked him or not could wait—she did enjoy spending time with him.

Ah, right—I almost forgot about his other side!

Amikura Mako warned herself.

As an innocent girl, she still struggled to accept... licking play.

Noticing this, Kobashi Yume and Hirano Rin also started clamoring for gifts, and Kaoru readily agreed to them as well.

For some reason, the scene made Ichinose inexplicably jealous.

Even though she wanted to accept it, it still annoyed her!

"Heh, it's been a while, but you've gotten quite skilled at flirting now, haven't you?" Sakayanagi Arisu slowly appeared before the group, leaning on her cane, her pretty face adorned with a faint smile.

Despite her petite frame, she wore not only the school uniform but also a thick overcoat, though the white garter stockings beneath her skirt still revealed a glimpse of snow-white, smooth thigh.

"Is something the matter?" Ichinose Honami slightly raised her eyebrows.

She didn't exactly dislike Sakayanagi, but she wasn't fond of her either, given past events that left a bad impression.

"Yes, I just have a word for Mitoma-kun," Sakayanagi replied with a slight smile.

"I won't disturb you."

Kaoru felt a flicker of curiosity.

Initially, he thought his public relationship announcement might provoke some reaction from Sakayanagi, but she had acted as if she hadn't noticed at all.

"A few days ago, someone from the outside came in," Sakayanagi said casually, yet her gaze remained fixed on Kaoru.

Someone from the outside came in?

In an instant, waves of unease rippled through Kaoru's mind, and his expression darkened.

This was a closed-off institution—for students of ANHS, "someone from the outside" naturally meant just that.

ANHS was one of the government's key projects, tasked with nurturing elite talents.

Everything here was confidential; ordinary outsiders wouldn't know a single detail about the school's inner workings, only its existence through promotional materials.

This was also why first-year students were shocked by the school's mechanisms at the start of the term.

If Sakayanagi had gone out of her way to mention this, the outsider couldn't be an ordinary person—and ordinary people wouldn't have the qualifications to enter in the first place.

However, seeing the faint smirk on Sakayanagi's lips, Kaoru suddenly realized.

"What do you mean by 'someone from the outside'?" Kaoru's face turned grim.

He had actually been played by her.

"Oh, outside just means outside. What did you think I was referring to, Mitoma-kun?" Sakayanagi, satisfied with the reaction she'd elicited, couldn't help but feel pleased.

"A few days ago, Ayanokoji-kun went to the office. That's all."

Kaoru stared at her expressionlessly.

Next time, he'd have to spank her again!

As if sensing his thoughts, Sakayanagi instinctively moved to cover her rear, then flushed with embarrassment—she had actually developed a reflex from being spanked!

"Well, I've said what I needed to. You two can go back to your flirting." Sakayanagi didn't consider this a retreat; she had gotten the reaction she wanted, so it was time to leave.

Ichinose was utterly confused.

She had no idea what kind of riddle the two were exchanging, and was "Ayanokoji-kun" referring to Ayanokoji Kiyotaka from Class D?

"Hmph, so cute on the outside, but a completely different story behind the scenes," Kobashi Yume shook her fist at Sakayanagi's retreating figure.

"Next time, I'll grab her hand and give her a good spanking!"

Amikura Mako rapped her on the head—what kind of girl talks about spanking?

"Never mind her. Let's head back together," Ichinose said, taking Kaoru's hand.

Though Sakayanagi's words left her slightly unsettled, she decided not to dwell on it.

Overthinking would only add unnecessary stress.

Instead, she focused on the upcoming Christmas.

"How about we all go to karaoke?" Kobashi suggested cheerfully.

"It's probably packed right now. The break started too early, and everyone's just looking for something to do," Amikura pointed out.

"Alright, let's go to the Keyaki Mall. Christmas is just a few days away, and I still need to prepare gifts for everyone!"

"Are you planning to pick out gifts with us?"

"Yep!"

"Dream-chan, won't that ruin the surprise?"

"..."

In the end, Kaoru eventually parted ways with them.

Ichinose Honami held his hand and whispered, "Should I give Christmas to you and Asahina-senpai?"

"Why would you do that?" Kaoru asked in surprise. "I was planning to spend Christmas with you."

"But Asahina-senpai doesn't know you well yet. You could use Christmas to deepen your bond." Ichinose Honami felt her head spinning—how could a girl willingly hand her boyfriend over to another girl?

Yet, she thought Asahina Nazuna was also a good match.

"Don't worry, I'll manage my time. Let me handle these things—you don't need to overthink it for me." Kaoru tightened his grip on her small hand, his eyes fixed on her lovely face.

Ichinose blushed slightly.

Snowflakes continued to fall as someone walked past them under an umbrella.

Clumps of snow slid silently from the branches, the faint sound seemingly snapping Kaoru out of his thoughts.

Meeting the girl's gaze, he lowered his head.

She understood his intention and gently rose on her tiptoes, brushing her lips against his.

Ever since their first kiss, Ichinose found herself craving this feeling—her heart pounding in her chest, her blood warming, her body softening.

In the moist, passionate embrace of his lips, she could forget many things, savoring the sweet taste lingering between them.

And now, she didn't have to consider anyone else.

She could kiss him in the student council office, in the classroom, in the hallway, on the street, under the dormitory...

She felt like she had become a bad girl—a really bad one—for agreeing to his harem fantasy.

Of course, neither of them noticed someone watching this scene, frozen in place.

Chapter 394: Even Harems Have Factions

With Christmas approaching, the world outside was blanketed in white snow, the cold weather likely keeping everyone indoors except for couples and partygoers.

"Thank you, Kikyo-chan, for talking with me about all this. I... I think it's better if I take things slow."

In a cozy room, a petite and adorable girl sat across from Kushida Kikyo, her expression slightly dejected.

This was Mei yu Wang, her hair tied in twin tails, a sixteen-year-old blooming like a morning flower—tender and delicate, with emerald leaves bearing dewdrops of melancholy.

Her slightly upturned nose, cute lips, and flawless, smooth skin made her seem almost like a middle schooler, though her figure wasn't entirely underdeveloped.

Even her winter shirt couldn't completely hide the gentle curves of her modest chest.

Kushida smiled warmly at her dear friend's gratitude.

"It's no trouble. I just think confessing so soon might not work with Hirata-kun. It's better to build your feelings first."

"Y-Yeah, you're right." Mei yu Wang understood her meaning, though she couldn't help feeling somewhat dejected.

"I was too impatient. If the confession fails..."

Ever since hearing about Hirata's breakup with Karuizawa, the young girl's heart had become restless, wondering if this might be her chance.

Thus, Mei yu Wang wanted to seize the opportunity before Christmas to bravely invite Hirata out on a date, then confess her feelings under the legendary tree.

Lacking confidence, she instinctively turned to Kushida for help, seeking advice from her close friend.

Dreams are beautiful, but reality is harsh.

Kushida tactfully pointed out that Mei yu Wang's idea was somewhat naive.

Seeing Mei yu Wang's devastated expression, Kushida wasn't entirely unsympathetic.

A boy like Hirata had an overwhelming effect on young girls.

Handsome, sincere, respectful toward girls, gentle and considerate, athletically gifted, a sunny personality—and someone who knew how to care for others.

From their usual interactions, Kushida had subtly probed Mei yu Wang's thoughts.

The girl had not only never been in a relationship but also had zero experience with the opposite sex.

Previously, she had only buried herself in studies, harboring nothing but fairy-tale fantasies about love—something that left Kushida silent for a long while.

Truly befitting an international student from a certain Eastern country—what could almost be described as pure, unadulterated naivety.

Kushida suddenly recalled something and tentatively asked.

"By the way, if I may ask—why do you like Hirata-kun, Mei?"

Instantly, Mei yu Wang became flustered, her cheeks tinged pink.

After struggling for a long time, she finally managed to say, "B-Because Hirata-kun is so kind... He helped me before."

Kushida nearly facepalmed.

Of course, it was that kind of reason.

Not that she could judge—girls really had no resistance to a handsome guy's kindness.

For some reason, an image of a certain someone flashed through her mind, making her chest feel oddly warm.

"Mei, do you actually know much about Hirata-kun?" Kushida suppressed the strange feeling in her heart.

"For example—what kind of girls does he like? What does he usually do? What are his likes and dislikes?"

Mei yu Wang stared blankly at her before shaking her head and whispering.

"I-I'm sorry... I hardly ever talk to him..."

Seeing Kushida's silent expression, Mei yu Wang seemed to realize the outcome.

She lowered her head dejectedly, then clenched her fists and pressed them to her chest as if steeling her resolve.

"E-Even if I don't know now, I'll work hard to find out!"

Kushida felt complicated emotions at this.

Truthfully, she had a vague sense of what kind of person Hirata was—his kindness wasn't directed at any one person, but extended to everyone equally.

Yet Mei yu Wang couldn't discern the difference.

If the two actually started dating, she would likely gradually realize that Hirata treated her no differently from anyone else.

Love wasn't something to be shared—it was meant to be exclusive.

Suddenly, the image of Kaoru surfaced in Kushida's mind.

Unsurprisingly, he had been going on dates these past few days—utterly despicable, like some kind of public bus.

Even so, being able to drop her facade around Kaoru, seeking different thrills from him to relieve daily stress, even complaining about everyday troubles in front of him—perhaps it was precisely his candid and unrestrained nature that forced Kushida to remove her ever-smiling mask.

She wondered what he was doing today.

It seemed like he was on a date with some senior?

An inexplicable irritation flashed through Kushida's mind.

She instinctively wanted to call him but, realizing Mei yu Wang was still in front of her, forcibly held back.

"Kikyo-chan, have you ever been on a date?" Mei yu Wang suddenly asked.

"Huh? No, I haven't. I've never been in a relationship before. Boys are too troublesome, and besides, there hasn't been..."

As she spoke, Kushida froze.

She suddenly realized why she was so irritated.

Kaoru had never gone on a date with her!

Even if she wasn't his girlfriend, shouldn't he at least take his pet out to play sometimes?

Did he just see her as a convenient woman?

Kushida knew Kaoru didn't think that way—otherwise, he could have done far worse things to her.

But she was still furious.

Mischief was one thing, but dates were dates!

"Kikyo-chan?" Mei yu Wang cautiously peeked at her best friend's reaction, noticing how inexplicably gloomy she had become.

"Ahaha, it's nothing. I just thought of something unpleasant. Boys can be really dumb sometimes. As girls, we have to guide them a little, or they'll never understand what we're thinking." Kushida snapped back to reality, plastering a smile on her face.

"Mei-chan, Hirata-kun probably wouldn't reject your idea, but since it's Christmas, a lot of girls might ask him out."

"Then what should I do?" Mei yu Wang seemed aware that her chances weren't great.

Kushida thought for a moment, studying the slightly anxious girl before an idea suddenly crossed her mind.

That perverted foot fetishist probably liked this type of girl, right?

Looking closely, Mei yu Wang wasn't exceptionally beautiful, but she wasn't bad either.

Her slightly childish face and slender figure made her look like a little girl, especially with her twin tails adding to her youthful charm.

Kushida had never seen Kaoru express disgust toward any girl.

If he could even lick a girl's feet, there was probably nothing he wouldn't do—after all, he was a lecher.

Aside from Mei yu Wang, there were also Sato Maya, Onodera Kayano, Chiaki Matsushita, Hasebe Haruka, Airi Sakura, and others in their class.

Hasebe Haruka and Airi Sakura seemed to be among Kaoru's main targets.

If she could secure all of them, Kaoru probably wouldn't object, right?

Who would refuse to have an ever-growing harem?

If the harem consisted entirely of her people, wouldn't Kaoru have to obey her?

Kushida blinked—this idea seemed quite appealing.

Unless Kaoru was stubborn enough to abandon his harem entirely, with everyone on her side, what could he possibly use to oppose her?

"Ahem, Mei, do you remember Mitoma-kun from Class A?" Kushida's plan was simple.

If Mei yu Wang was receptive, she would pull her into this scheme.

Mei yu Wang was momentarily confused but nodded at Kushida.

"I heard Mitoma-kun is dating Ichinose-san."

"Exactly. Since neither of us has any dating experience, why not observe how others do it?" Kushida coaxed gently.

"We could ask him for advice. If Hirata-kun agrees to go out with you, we can follow Mitoma-kun's example for our own dates."

"Wouldn't that trouble him?" Mei yu Wang hesitated.

Though she had a favorable impression of Kaoru, they weren't close.

"Not at all. I'm on good terms with him." Kushida smiled.

Without much thought, Mei yu Wang quickly agreed to Kushida's proposal.

...

After Mei yu Wang left, Kushida finally let out a sigh of relief.

She had wanted to be more direct but held back out of consideration for Kaoru's feelings.

Because the key to controlling the harem wasn't Mitoma himself—it was the girls in it.

Kushida didn't resist the idea of a harem because she never expected to monopolize Kaoru in the first place.

Knowing she couldn't control him, she simply gave up trying.

However, others might not share her perspective.

For example—

"Kushida-san, I'd like to ask you something."

Horikita Suzune appeared before Kushida, her expression icy and her tone frigid.

"I told you I was spending time with a friend today, didn't I?" Kushida hadn't welcomed her visit, but after several minutes of relentless doorbell ringing, she had no choice but to answer.

"Your friend already left, didn't she?" Horikita sat across from her. "What's going on between Mitomakun and Ichinose-san?"

Ah, so Horikita was the last to find out.

"Why ask me instead of him?" Kushida's expression darkened.

She despised Horikita's attitude.

Perhaps realizing she needed to adjust her approach, Horikita softened her tone slightly.

"I'm afraid of what I might hear... You're different. Everyone gathers around you—you must know more than I do. Like when they started dating?"

To Horikita, this news was devastating.

All her previous assumptions had been in vain—Kaoru didn't like her at all.

His heart belonged to Ichinose Honami.

Horikita had resisted accepting this truth until she witnessed Kaoru kissing Ichinose outside the dormitory, shattering her completely.

Kushida wasn't in a good mood either.

She was dissatisfied with Kaoru's actions—at the very least, he should have reassured his harem before going public.

Now that the official girlfriend had emerged, what about their status?

The more she thought about it, the more Kushida couldn't help but recall their Christmas date.

Chapter 395: Banding Together

Horikita Suzune's thoughts were simple.

At first, she couldn't understand why Kaoru would attack her, even harbor hostility toward her, yet didn't eliminate her immediately.

Instead, he did all sorts of strange, bad things to her, sometimes even offering her emotional guidance.

After Kaoru forcibly kissed her, Horikita suddenly realized—could it be that Kaoru might actually liked her?

This thought felt like opening a door to a whole new world.

Everything she hadn't understood before now made perfect sense when framed as affection.

Why did he attack her? Why did he trick her into signing a contract? Of course, it was because he liked her.

Precisely because he liked her, someone like Kaoru would resort to any means to have her.

And also because of her, Kaoru inexplicably showed her leniency, never completely crushing her hopes.

Thinking back carefully, Horikita realized Kaoru hadn't actually demanded anything from her—aside from doing bad things, he seemed to have no other expectations.

Of course, if it were just the bad deeds, Horikita wouldn't have suspected his feelings.

But the fact that Kaoru often guided her, even recognizing her complicated emotions toward Horikita Manabu without criticizing her, struck Horikita as odd.

No lecher would go that far, right?

And so, Horikita Suzune became convinced that Kaoru liked her.

However, this was her first time facing such emotions.

She didn't know how to handle them—at first, she felt nothing but confusion, but later, she began to think it might not be so bad.

Killing Kaoru was probably impossible, which seemed to leave only one option.

Falling for someone was uncharted territory for Horikita Suzune.

She had no idea what to do, her heart filled with uncertainty.

"Why do you even need to know this?" Kushida stretched lazily.

"Didn't you say you'd never fall for him? Whether he has a girlfriend or not, what does it matter to you?"

"That's true, but both of us are under his control now. Are you really content to let him keep trampling over your body and will?" Horikita had found the perfect justification—she refused to believe Kushida could truly be resigned to this.

"Even if you say that, what can I do?" Kushida maintained her usual persona. "I've already been played with beyond repair. I lost my first time, got treated like a dog, paraded around on a leash, and even ordered to pee outside. What else do you think I can even consider?"

Horikita was shocked.

She hadn't realized Kaoru had done so many terrible things.

Compared to that, his treatment of her was downright gentle.

"Like I said before, I'll help you break free from Mitoma."

Hearing this, Kushida laughed, as if deliberately teasing Horikita.

"You're not thinking of getting rid of me so you can be with Mitoma-kun, are you?"

"No." Horikita genuinely hadn't considered that—otherwise, she wouldn't have been serving Kaoru alongside Kushida.

"I just want to help you. And I need your help too."

Kushida didn't let up. "You want to reach Class A for your brother's sake—I get that. But afterward, what then? Keep enduring Mitoma-kun forever?"

"I didn't come here to discuss this. How much do you know about Ichinose?" Horikita Suzune changed the subject.

"Even if you want to wallow in self-abandonment, do you think she could tolerate your existence?"

Surely no girlfriend could endure her boyfriend keeping little slaves around?

Even ancient empresses had their limits when it came to the emperor's harem.

"Are you sure you're not just trying to find out if Mitoma-kun likes you?" Kushida bluntly called out her hidden thoughts, smiling brightly.

"I'm just curious," Horikita replied, trying to remain calm—though she didn't realize how stiff her tone had become.

"Haha, I wouldn't know," Kushida said. "Even though I'm often with him, I really can't tell who he likes most. All I know is there are plenty of girls around him—like Ichinose, Kamuro, and the others. Honestly, he should just gather us all together and introduce us properly."

Horikita's emotions were a tangled mess.

If Kaoru didn't like her, how was she supposed to face this relationship?

How could she adjust to who she was now?

"If you want to know what Mitoma-kun is thinking, it's simple—just try asking him out," Kushida suddenly suggested.

"Even if he has other plans, he'd still take your invitation seriously."

"But don't we see each other all the time?" Horikita was confused.

She and Kaoru often did... questionable things in his room.

What was the point of this?

"I'm not telling you to do that with him. If Mitoma-kun only saw you as a convenient woman, he'd just summon you to his room—he wouldn't treat your invitation seriously," Kushida explained.

"In fact, back when you couldn't pay your 'interest,' didn't he still never force you into anything?"

Horikita thought about it—that did make sense.

"His biggest problem now is that he's not as domineering as before. He doesn't push any of us around like he used to." Kushida understood Kaoru's dilemma—with so many girls to handle, he had grown cautious, losing his forceful edge.

"If it were the old him, he probably would've pinned you to the bed the very next day. But now, he's holding back for your sake."

Horikita fell silent for a moment. "You seem to know him well."

"It's not about knowing him—I've just been around him longer, so I've seen how he's changed." Kushida suddenly smirked.

"I'll be honest with you, Horikita. What he wants now is all of us. You don't need to help me anymore—he won't let me go, and he won't let you go either."

Horikita didn't quite understand.

What did he mean by wanting all of them?

"High school is only three years. Once we graduate, would he really keep holding onto us?" The girl clung to naive hope.

"Is it because he has some leverage over you?"

Kushida looked at her like she was an idiot. "What if Mitoma-kun decides to take you to bed?"

"I... don't know. I'm not ready for that." Horikita answered truthfully, following her heart.

But Kushida only found her even more foolish.

"Not being prepared also means you wouldn't refuse him, Horikita." Kushida Kikyo said coldly.

"If it were Sudou, would you let him have his way with you?"

"Of course not..." Horikita froze, suddenly understanding Kushida's implication.

When it came to Kaoru, she only felt confusion and bewilderment—not an ounce of disgust.

But if it were Sudou Ken? Horikita Suzune shuddered at the mere thought, her skin crawling.

She'd rather bite her tongue off than agree to such a thing.

The stark contrast left her silent.

"The truth is, if Mitoma-kun wanted to take you, you wouldn't resist—at most, you'd put up token resistance." Kushida chuckled. "Given that, if he decided to make you a mother ahead of schedule, would you refuse?"

"I refuse!" Horikita flushed crimson. "That's absolutely out of the question!"

"Wrong. You'd let him finish inside." Kushida rested a hand on her own stomach.

"Neither of us uses protection. I'll probably be a mother by next year."

Horikita stared at Kushida's abdomen, stunned.

The next moment, Kushida burst into laughter.

"Just kidding. Of course we take precautions—only an idiot wouldn't."

Horikita exhaled in relief, though she'd already pictured herself with a swollen belly.

"Though sometimes we don't," Kushida added.

"Hey!" Horikita snapped. "What are you trying to say? Are you really that eager to bear his child?"

"What difference does it make?" Kushida shot back. "Once you've done it with him, could you ever do it with someone else? Or is Horikita actually that kind of loose woman?"

"Don't lump me in with you. I could never agree to something like that!" Horikita felt compelled to assert her stance.

"You can't help it. Once it happens, there's no going back. You might even end up a mother—how could you possibly escape his grasp?" Kushida scoffed.

Horikita clenched her fists, silent for a long moment.

Then, in an eerily calm voice, she asked, "Are you advising me to give up on Mitoma-kun early?"

"I never said that," Kushida denied.

"No, you want me to leave his side." Horikita refused to rise to the bait. "I always found it strange—why didn't you resist him? For someone like you, taking him down with you should've been the obvious choice."

Kushida fell silent, narrowing her eyes.

"Just as I'd never do it with Sudou-kun, you wouldn't do it with someone you dislike, right?" Horikita reasoned.

"The reason you gave up is because Mitoma-kun occasionally shows you another side of himself—one that feels new and warm. That's why you never sought mutual destruction, and instead let yourself sink deeper."

"You think I like Mitoma-kun?" Kushida countered.

Horikita shook her head.

"I don't know, but I'm aware of a condition called Stockholm Syndrome, where victims develop emotional attachment to their abusers due to occasional kindness. It's a self-preservation mechanism—admiration and submission toward the stronger party."

Kushida initially thought she'd discovered something significant, but upon hearing this, her face darkened.

"Fine, fine. If I have Stockholm Syndrome, then what about you?"

Faced with Kushida's flustered outburst, Horikita answered without hesitation.

"I'm someone he likes."

Kushida froze momentarily before letting out a cold laugh.

"If that's the case, why is he dating Ichinose instead of you?"

"I don't know. But after talking with you, I think I understand his perspective," Horikita said.

"What perspective?" Kushida snapped.

"He likes Ichinose-san too," Horikita stated firmly.

Kushida stared at her, hardly believing this was the same usually clueless Horikita.

"Mitoma-kun doesn't just like me—he also likes Ichinose-san, and he likes you too, Kushida-san. That's the only explanation for his behavior," Horikita continued.

"Otherwise, it's hard to understand why he'd be involved with you while claiming to like me."

"Hah, that's just your interpretation," Kushida retorted, unconsciously playing with her hair.

She suddenly felt thirsty and took a sip of hot water, then tugged at her collar, glancing at the snow outside.

The room felt unusually warm.

"My instincts aren't wrong. He definitely likes you," Horikita analyzed. "But your feelings for him stem from Stockholm Syndrome. The threatened party often develops misplaced..."

"Horikita!" Kushida cut her off sharply.

"If anyone has Stockholm Syndrome here, it's you! First, you claim you don't like him, then you say he likes you, and now you're probing about Ichinose—clearly, you're the one who's fallen for him!"

Horikita met her gaze, and the atmosphere between them grew tense.

Silence lingered for a while.

"Arguing about this is pointless. He's probably spending Christmas with Ichinose," Kushida suddenly waved her hand dismissively.

"If you have nothing else, you can leave."

Horikita hesitated before speaking again. "Actually, he's with a senpai right now."

Kushida stiffened.

A senpai?

"A third-year. Sudou-kun saw them leaving together downstairs. Apparently, it's the girl who sits near my brother—Tachibana Akane."

"...On a date?"

"It's hard to believe, but they seemed to be laughing and talking."

"Don't tell me you're going to say he likes this senpai too?"

"You were the one who said he wants everyone."

"Horikita."

"What's wrong with your expression?"

"You're still planning to visit his room this month, aren't you?"

"I went once already. After that, he said I could use my feet..."

"Then just step on him when the time comes."

Kushida's expression was blank.

She could barely accept yielding to Ichinose Honami or Horikita Suzune, but Tachibana Akane? What was this about?

Wasn't this going too far?

"Horikita, I'll just ask you one thing—how do you feel right now?"

Horikita was confused.

What feelings could she have? Though she'd noticed Kaoru had many girls around him, she'd never demanded anything.

She'd simply come to understand her position and accepted this relationship.

Yes, for her, this understanding was enough.

Anything more would exceed her capacity to handle.

"Heh... Let's not disturb him on Christmas. How about we give him a surprise on Christmas Eve instead?"
Kushida let out a cold laugh.

Even if he was Stellar Wrath, a master still needed to be pampered!

"A surprise?" Horikita didn't understand her meaning.

Kushida hesitated briefly, but the uneasy feeling brought by their existence drove her instinct to form alliances.

"Actually, I lied to you. Kaoru hasn't done anything with me... I'm still a virgin."

Horikita froze, but what Kushida proposed next left her even more stunned.

Chapter 396: Date

'The Midas Touch' : The words and stories you write possess a bewitching quality over readers, making them believe it's real. Effect duration depends on dissemination scope.

'Vocal Maestro' : Your vocal skills improve from "first-class" to "masterclass."

All will be moved by your artistry, and your future works will undoubtedly leave a mark in history. Side effect: Creation time extends from months to years.

'Black Formal Suit' : Once worn, the wearer's actions will align perfectly with everyone's perception of a gentleman—exemplary in etiquette and social conduct.

'Cup of Greed' : The user may forfeit current gains to double the next reward.

Effect stacks up to three times.

'Four-Star Dragon Ball', 'Blue Pill' , 'Combat Power Detector', 'Magic·Expelliarmus' , 'One Piece Luffy·Logbook' , 'Sharingan'...

Due to Kaoru's complaints about the Wish Machine, it finally made a minor adjustment.

The gacha pool was renamed the Wishing Pool.

Kaoru could now make wishes to the pool, allowing him to search for specific reward types before randomizing the draw.

The previous 〇〇 Pool and 〇〇 Pool mechanics were completely removed.

Compared to the abysmal rates before, the new Wishing Pool was far more user-friendly—so much so that even Kaoru couldn't help but applaud.

The old 〇〇 Pool and 〇〇 Pool systems were absurd, like pulling weapons from a character pool.

After two years of complaints, the Wish Machine finally conceded.

Today's 10-pull came from Kushida, Horikita Suzune, and Asahina Nazuna.

Kaoru still had a 5-pull saved, courtesy of Airi Sakura.

When Kaoru made his wish to the pool, the 10-pull could even be subdivided—each pull corresponding to a specific reward type.

This meant one 10-pull could yield both characters and weapons!

'Wait... something felt off.'

Kaoru quickly realized and scowled—wasn't this just a mixed pool in disguise?

So the Wish Machine had mixed all the rewards together—no wonder it was willing to provide a search function.

Without it, Kaoru would have thrown in the towel on the spot.

Kaoru cursed at the Wish Machine a few times, and it quickly grew agitated, manipulating a caterpillar plush on the bed to fight him.

The battle ended in a draw.

It wasn't until Tachibana Akane sent a few messages that Kaoru stopped.

Today was their date—though simulated—and Akane was thrilled.

Kaoru exchanged for the "Black Formal Suit" and put it on, examining himself in the mirror.

With every movement, an inexplicable air of elegance emanated from him.

In a place like school, it was admittedly a bit flashy.

But since he had the reward, why not flaunt it?

The dormitories for each grade were in separate buildings.

As Kaoru left the first-year dorm, he drew many gazes from passersby—mostly the sparkling eyes of female students.

If he were holding a bouquet, it might as well have been a proposal, Kaoru mused.

Arriving at the third-year dormitory, Kaoru waited patiently.

During that time, he spotted Fujimaki Hiroki who seemed surprised and greeted him.

Kaoru smiled politely in return but didn't engage further.

Yet Fujimaki inexplicably struck up a conversation, covering a range of topics.

Interestingly, even when Kaoru deliberately showed displeasure, Fujimaki failed to read the room—as if he'd suddenly lost this quintessential Japanese skill.

And so, Kaoru understood.

The effect of the "Black Formal Suit" wasn't to change the wearer but to forcibly distort others' perceptions of them.

No matter what the wearer did, everyone would see them as the perfect gentleman.

"W-what on earth are you wearing?!"

At this loud exclamation, Kaoru finally saw Akane.

The senior was no longer in her usual school uniform but wore a light-colored coat over a white sweater, a crossbody bag slung over her shoulder.

Below, a dark-hued pencil skirt cinched at the waist accentuated her slender figure—so delicate it seemed you could wrap a hand around it.

A glimpse of white stockings hugged her calves, her small, rounded jade feet tucked into little leather shoes. She looked every bit the vibrant heroine from a TV drama.

Fujimaki gave the two an ambiguous glance, bid Kaoru a "see you later," and tactfully took his leave.

"This is the most expensive outfit I have," Kaoru said. "I wanted to make sure you'd be satisfied with the date—and to live up to my admiration for Horikita-senpai—so I mustered the courage to wear this."

Akane didn't quite believe him, but as she took in his appearance, her cheeks flushed slightly.

She fidgeted before stepping closer.

"Who told you to dress like this for a date?"

The petite senior noticed his height—she had to tiptoe just to reach his nose—and puffed out her cheeks.

"It's too formal! You're making me look like an awkward duckling!"

Not only that, but the surrounding stares were so intense they left her flustered.

"Should I go change?" A faint smile played at Kaoru's lips.

Akane hesitated for a long moment.

She had to admit Kaoru looked undeniably handsome—even the passing girls were raving about his looks.

She could even see some people getting restless, as if they were about to ask for his contact information.

It was infuriating to hear—she was right here, and they still dared to try and steal him away?

"Forget it, I don't want to waste time." Tachibana Akane grabbed his hand. "There are too many people here. Let's go!"

Kaoru let her pull him along.

The girl's small hand was soft, and today, instead of her usual bun, she had styled her hair in a half-up princess look, the ends slightly fluffy.

He could faintly catch the sweet scent of pure milk from her—she had clearly showered and dressed up carefully for today's date.

"I read a lot of guides—shopping, eating, watching movies, giving gifts, and confessing under the legendary tree. What do you think?" Tachibana Akane spoke very seriously, even though her "research" was practically nonexistent.

"What if the confession fails?" Kaoru raised a critical question.

"Ahaha, failure? As if that's possible!" Tachibana Akane's voice wavered before she quickly changed the subject.

"If it fails, it's your responsibility!"

"What am I supposed to take responsibility for if you fail?"

"Of course, the responsibility for the failed confession! You're the one accompanying me on this date today. Horikita-kun clearly thinks highly of you, so if I fail, it's definitely your fault."

"That has nothing to do with how much he values me. The real question is—how does senpai want me to take responsibility?"

As he spoke, Kaoru gently stroked Tachibana Akane's small hand.

There was no roughness—just smooth, delicate warmth, like holding a piece of heated jade.

Tachibana Akane's expression froze.

She quickly yanked her hand back, but not before seeing the faint smile on his face.

Her heart pounded wildly, her ears burning.

What exactly did she want him to take responsibility for?

"W-We'll talk about that later! S-Suddenly doing something like that... it's too... too rude!"

She turned away instinctively.

'Calm down'

'I need to calm down right now. He's just a junior two years younger than me.'

'Don't panic. I have to act like a proper senpai'

'Today is just a practice date—I only invited him because I don't have any close male friends.'

Her goal was Horikita Manabu.

She had always admired and yearned for his strong yet gentle presence—not this guy who took every chance to tease her and acted so disrespectfully.

This much... this much isn't enough to shake me!

"Don't walk so fast. The path is slippery—watch your step."

At Kaoru's voice, Tachibana Akane felt a light tug on her shoulder, pulling her back.

Then, she caught a faint, dizzying scent—something distinctly masculine.

Snow-covered paths were slicker than usual, sometimes coated in a thin layer of ice.

If she wasn't careful, she really could trip over nothing.

"I-I know! I don't need you meddling!" Akane's face flushed as she stole another glance at him.

'I have to admit... he's a little good-looking. Long eyelashes, a high nose bridge, thin lips—his features are so well-proportioned there's not a single flaw.'

"You can act like this with me normally, but this is a date. Are you going to say the same thing to Horikita-senpai later?" Kaoru released her shoulder.

Akane snapped out of her thoughts but didn't find anything strange about it.

She huffed and crossed her arms. "Don't worry about that. I'd only ever act like this with you!"

Kaoru felt a sudden urge to spank this senior.

She was probably the most arrogant person in the entire student council.

"Don't butt into my date plans. Today, you're listening to me!"

Seeing his slightly deflated expression, Tachibana Akane was thoroughly satisfied.

"First destination—Keyaki Mall!"

"Are we getting parfaits?"

"Uwah, what kind of person do you take me for?!"

"Hmm, I'm just curious about your plans."

"...We're getting parfaits."

"..."

Perhaps realizing she'd slipped up, Akane quickly added with exaggerated seriousness.

"The parfait is just the first step! After that, we're picking out a gift."

"A gift?" Kaoru's face darkened as a thought struck him. "You haven't even prepared the gift yet?"

"That's why I'm dragging you along to pick one now!" Akane felt her cheeks heat up.

"Tomorrow's Christmas Eve, and the day after is Christmas. It's not too late!"

"If you're expecting me to help pick out a gift that'll impress Horikita Manabu, you're overestimating me." Kaoru didn't consider himself an expert on men's tastes—how would he know what Horikita liked?

"Obviously, I know that. You're just here to give me suggestions." Akane snorted.

That was more reasonable.

Kaoru accepted the task.

"If you make me happy today, I might even give you a Christmas gift too."

"Don't bother if you don't want to."

"What's that supposed to mean? Did I say I didn't want to?"

"You sounded reluctant."

"I wasn't! I'll definitely give you one!"

Watching Akane fluster, Kaoru remained unfazed.

He was all too familiar with handling tsunderes like her.

Chapter 397: The Senior's Gift

Tsundere or not, Akane quickly brushed off the minor quarrel.

As the two arrived at Keyaki Mall, she excitedly pointed at the giant Christmas tree in the center of the mall and demanded Kaoru take photos of her.

Kaoru held up his phone, guiding her poses while snapping plenty of pictures.

"You're really good at this," Akane said, leaning in to admire the photos.

"I should've brought you out sooner. Chiyoko and the others would've loved this too."

"The person in the photos is the pretty one." Kaoru shoved the phone back into her hands.

Though the girl hadn't exposed anything indecent, her close proximity let him catch a faint scent—enough to make his skin prickle.

'Have I been playing around too much lately?'

"At least you have some taste." Akane grinned at her phone before a sudden idea struck her.

"Wait, let's take one together!"

"You're not taking one with Horikita-senpai, but with me?" Kaoru didn't immediately agree.

"Didn't I say? Today's a practice date—you're playing Horikita right now. Of course I want a photo with him!"

With that, she grabbed Kaoru's arm, as if afraid he'd run away, and dragged him under the Christmas tree.

Even in daylight, the colorful lights shimmered brilliantly.

"Uwah, you're way too tall! Stand farther—no, no, too far! I can't reach you. Just crouch down!"

For some reason, Tachibana Akane insisted on hugging him for a group photo, as if she believed it would better capture the vibe of a young couple.

As the girl kept adjusting her pose, Kaoru could feel the soft swell of her chest pressing tightly against his arm, the slight curve rubbing against his sleeve.

If it were anyone else, Kaoru might have suspected she was trying to seduce him.

But judging by Akane's cheerful grin, she was just innocently naive and easy to fool.

"Ehehe, look, look! Does this look good?"

"Kinda like a couple madly in love."

"No way!"

"You're already this close—next thing you know, you'll be kissing me."

"You're the one who wants to kiss me!" Akane puffed up her cheeks and pointed at the photo.

"See? Doesn't this give off an intimate vibe? I heard that when people get close like this, their heartbeats speed up. Maybe Horikita will be moved!"

"Did your heartbeat speed up just now?" Kaoru asked.

"Nope." Akane crossed her arms, understanding his implication.

"Because it's you I'm with. Who'd get their heart racing over someone like you?"

"Wasn't I supposed to be Horikita-senpai today?"

Just as Akane was about to retort, Kaoru suddenly reached out, his fingers lightly brushing against her cheek and tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

The moment their eyes met, her heart betrayed her, pounding uncontrollably.

Where his fingers touched, a tingling current spread through her skin.

"Your hairstyle looks really nice today. You put a lot of effort into it, huh, senpai?"

His tone was as teasing as ever, his smile the same one she saw every day.

Yet, her heartbeat only grew faster, as if it might burst at any moment.

Akane could feel her face burning, but she could only stare dumbly at Kaoru.

It wasn't until murmurs from the surrounding crowd reached her ears that she finally snapped out of it.

"W-Who asked for your opinion?! Touching me out of nowhere is so rude!"

With that, the girl lowered her head and bolted away like a startled deer.

Kaoru chuckled, then took out his phone to message Ichinose Honami and Karuizawa Kei, reporting the day's events.

Before long, he caught up with Akane.

"The sundae combo is a couples' special. Don't try anything funny—just follow my lead."

"You're the senpai. Of course I'll listen to you."

Tachibana Akane felt quite pleased and decided not to dwell on what had just happened, as even she couldn't quite understand her own behavior earlier.

The location was a nearby café, where most of the students lining up at the counter were couples.

Even those who came alone usually squeezed into a corner seat, keeping silent.

Kaoru followed behind Akane, observing the reactions around him, occasionally smiling and nodding at passersby—an utterly ordinary gesture under normal circumstances.

However, his smile left boys stunned and girls blushing.

His charm had increased far too much.

Kaoru began calculating his next steps.

"One couple's set, please! Yes, we're a couple on a date, so I'll have a milk chocolate, and he'll have a large strawberry ice cream!"

When it was Akane's turn, she seemed unusually nervous, rambling a string of words while staring unblinkingly at the menu, even startling the girl at the counter.

After getting their order, Kaoru noticed her exhale in relief, muttering something about fearing she might be found out.

Still, Akane was in high spirits.

"Do you like sundaes?"

Seeing her sparkling eyes, Kaoru played along knowingly.

"Are you planning to swap bites?"

"Eh? You know about that rule too?" Akane was surprised—she had expected to have to remind him.

"I could tell from how you were eyeing both sundaes." Kaoru didn't find it strange.

She probably hadn't even considered the idea of an indirect kiss; she was just used to sharing with friends.

Many girls ordered different flavors so they could exchange bites and sample each other's treats.

"You're pretty sharp. But I'm not stingy—you can try mine too." Akane scooped a spoonful into her mouth before sliding her sundae toward Kaoru.

With spoons involved, it definitely didn't count as an indirect kiss.

Kaoru took a bite as well, then pushed his sundae toward her.

"How is it?"

"Pretty cold."

"No kidding. Yours is a bit too sweet for me."

"The chocolate's nice."

"Ah! I forgot to take a picture for Chiyoko and the others!"

"Did you tell anyone about today?"

"Why would I?"

"Because people are watching us."

Only then did Akane glance around, realizing quite a few people were indeed observing them—and their murmurs were audible.

"She's so cute!"

"Her boyfriend's so handsome too!"

"They're a perfect match!"

"How can someone look that good even eating a sundae?"

Akane's face flushed red.

Truthfully, she hadn't planned this "date" at all—even her confession to Horikita Manabu had been a spur-of-the-moment impulse, spurred by Kaoru's provocation.

Now, it finally dawned on her: this was a small town.

Their little act wouldn't escape anyone's notice, and they might end up making the fake relationship real.

"It's fine. You're Ichinose's boyfriend anyway—any misunderstandings will clear up soon."

Akane still believed the odds were in her favor.

Even if a few people gossiped behind her back, it shouldn't matter even if word reached Horikita's ears.

Kaoru fell into silence at her optimism.

It was hard to comprehend what went on in the mind of such a cheerful airhead.

After finishing the parfait, Tachibana Akane contentedly took him to pick out a gift.

The two arrived at the department store, faced with shelves upon shelves of dazzling goods.

Even with the most eye-catching Christmas gift banners hanging overhead, they still felt at a loss about where to begin.

Akane furrowed her brows.

If it were a gift for a girl, she'd know exactly what to choose—but what did boys like?

"What do you like?" Since she couldn't figure it out, Akane turned to Kaoru.

"Does that mean I can pick anything here?" Kaoru deliberately—or perhaps not—picked up an expensive item.

"In that case, let me think."

"Under 5,000 Personal Points." Akane wasn't about to give him the chance to fleece her.

No way would she let him pick the priciest thing.

"You want me to pick something for Horikita-senpai?" Kaoru chuckled. "How did this turn into you letting me pick my own gift?"

"I've already given Horikita Christmas gifts twice. The first time was a scarf, the second time was a pair of glasses." Akane pouted. "He didn't seem to like either. Each time, he just said 'thanks.' I don't get what you boys like."

"Different stages of a relationship call for different gifts." Kaoru paused. "When feelings are heating up, all you need is to dress up nicely, show up alone at his door with a gift and cake, smile, and say 'Merry Christmas.' That's enough."

"But you still have to pick a gift he'd like, right?" Akane frowned.

"The gift is you." Kaoru blinked. "What could be more meaningful than a girl he's interested in?"

Akane punched him a few times while grumbling, "You say that because it's a girl you like! I don't even know if Horikita likes me!"

"At least that's how it is for me."

Akane hmped.

Of course he'd be happy—what a horndog!

But then, the girl suddenly remembered something and hurried over to another shelf.

"Hey, hey, hey! What do you think of this?" Akane excitedly held up a Gundam model.

"I've heard boys in class talk about this. Do you like it?"

Kaoru fell silent.

He felt Akane might be unstoppable—if she showed up at a diehard otaku's room with a figurine, it'd be an instant win.

Too bad he wasn't an otaku, and neither was Horikita Manabu.

"Whoa, this is a collector's edition! Does that mean it's limited?"

"Probably. There's only one set left here."

"This looks so cool. The stuff you boys like isn't bad either. And this one—the colors are amazing."

"Do you know what this is called?"

"Uni... Unicorn?"

"I'm surprised you noticed the label."

"I didn't know! Can't I look? And even if I didn't know, you could've just told me! Meanie!"

Just as the two were getting into it, footsteps approached, followed by a voice filled with utter despair.

"Nooo, put that down! That's my Unicorn!!!"

Kaoru turned to see a boy with a shattered dream in his eyes, staring intently at the Gundam in Akane's hands.

"Eek!" Akane yelled, nearly dropping the model.

Unexpectedly, the boy became even more agitated and shouted loudly, "Hey hey, Tachibana, you better be careful with that! It's a limited edition Unicorn!"

Kaoru was surprised—this guy knew Tachibana Akane.

Was he a third-year student?

Chapter 398: Not a Replacement

"Ha! You're the one who yelled and startled me in the first place!"

Tachibana Akane glared at the boy with clear dissatisfaction.

Who suddenly pops out to scare someone and then blames the victim?

"I was just reminding you to be careful. This thing is super rare—it sold out instantly online. I only rushed here because I heard it was available at this store."

Hearing his explanation, Akane examined the Gundam in her hand.

Its design did seem exceptionally rare, so he probably wasn't lying.

"Too late. I've already decided to give this to Mitoma-kun." Akane's reasoning was simple: since it was an ultra-rare item, it would make the perfect gift for Kaoru.

The boy looked as if he'd been struck by lightning.

He had assumed Akane was just playing around with it, never imagining she intended to give it to a guy as a present!

No way... There actually exists a plastic model enthusiast in this world who receives gifts from girls?

And a limited-edition kit at that?

Seriously, dude?

The boy stared at Kaoru standing beside her with the hatred of a sworn enemy, practically wishing he could tear him apart limb from limb.

However, upon getting a proper look at Kaoru's appearance, he froze, an involuntary sense of inferiority creeping in—followed immediately by renewed fury.

This guy was a normie!

Definitely not a model enthusiast!

"Mitoma-kun, do you want this toy?"

Unaware of the boy's inner turmoil, Akane proudly shoved the Gundam into Kaoru's hands.

Though her tone was questioning, her actions left no room for refusal.

Kaoru glanced at the boy's expression—yep, he was furious.

"What the hell do you two think a Gundam is?! This is a limited-edition Unicorn! Do you even understand its value, Tachibana? You can't just hand something like this to some normie because you think it's fun! Don't barge into other people's worlds like this, damn it!"

Great.

A terminally chuunibyou otaku.

Kaoru was about to pull Akane away when she raised an eyebrow defiantly.

"First come, first served. I already have it, and who I give it to is none of your business, Oda-kun."

The boy—apparently named Oda—trembled all over.

Kaoru narrowed his eyes, expecting some kind of outburst, but instead, Oda suddenly pointed at him with a sneer.

"You're on a date with this guy right now, aren't you?!"

Akane's face flushed red, her eyes flickering with unease, but she forced herself to stay composed, raising her voice slightly.

"I'm just hanging out with him! It's not a date!"

"Pfft, who gives gifts when they're just 'hanging out'?" Oda scoffed. "Isn't Horikita the one you like? Why are you dating this guy? Aren't you afraid Horikita will find out?"

"W-what?!" Akane was stunned.

How did he know about her feelings for Horikita Manabu?

"You think you've been subtle? Everyone's known for ages that you're obsessed with Horikita. You're always chasing after him, constantly going on about 'President this' and 'Horikita-kun that.' Don't you find yourself pathetic?"

"Th-that's not true!"

"What's the point of denying it? Has Horikita ever even looked at you? For all you know, he probably finds you ridiculous. You're just one of his convenient underlings."

"Shut up! You're from Class B—you don't understand Horikita-kun at all!"

"Right, I can't understand your feelings toward Horikita. Because you can, that's why you're on a date with this guy, aren't you? Feeling like you've got no chance left?"

"..."

"Looking closely, your standards are pretty high—managing to land a normie like this... Wait, I think I've seen him before..."

Before Oda could finish, Kaoru pulled the bowing Akane behind him and calmly asked.

"Has she done anything wrong to warrant this from you?"

"You her boyfriend?" Oda wasn't intimidated by normies like this, though for some reason, he had a decent impression of Kaoru.

"You think you're helping her now, but maybe you're just her replacement for Horikita."

"I have no obligation to explain anything to you, and neither does she." Kaoru shook the Gundam model in his hand.

"Want this?"

Oda nodded without hesitation, then smirked.

"If you hand that over, I'll keep today's incident quiet. You're Mitoma from the first year, right? Heard you've got a girlfriend."

Whatever the relationship between Kaoru and Tachibana Akane was, Oda felt he had the upper hand.

Though he inexplicably felt a little guilty toward Kaoru.

"Apologize to her first," Kaoru said coolly. "Or I'll smash this thing."

Oda's expression froze.

Was he hearing this right? Destroy a limited-edition Unicorn Gundam right in front of him?

"Even if I break it now, I can cover the cost with points. Or would you rather watch me buy it and then smash it to pieces?"

As he spoke, Kaoru felt Tachibana Akane tug at his sleeve from behind, her voice soft and hesitant.

"Just give it to him. Let's go, Mitoma-kun."

Kaoru held her wrist firmly, his gaze unwavering as he stared at Oda.

At this moment, Oda wanted to defiantly tell him to go ahead and smash it.

But the longer he looked at Kaoru, the more an inexplicable emotion welled up inside him.

This guy... was kind of cool.

Even while threatening him, his voice remained gentle, his movements refined—so much so that Oda felt ashamed.

Here he was, spewing insults, while Mitoma merely wielded a limited-edition Unicorn as leverage.

It was too elegant.

Compared to him, Oda felt like a lowly Zeon grunt standing in the protagonist's way.

So, Oda bowed his head and offered Tachibana Akane a deep, apologetic bow.

...

Carrying the shopping bag, Kaoru reflected on what had just happened.

It seemed the effects of the Black Formal Suit were even more potent than expected.

'Anything involving warped psychology really was extreme, huh?'

With that thought, he glanced at the gloomy Tachibana Akane beside him.

"Want me to go back and teach him a lesson?"

Far from lifting her spirits, his words only made her slump further.

"I actually really like this Gundam. Thanks for being willing to give it to me, senpai." Kaoru tried again to lighten her mood.

"Is there anything you like, senpai?"

Finally, Tachibana Akane reacted.

She lifted her head, her eyes filled with sorrow as she looked at Mitoma.

"I've never seen Mitoma-kun as anyone's replacement."

Kaoru was genuinely surprised.

Of all things, this was the first thing she chose to say.

Tachibana Akane felt terrible.

She truly hadn't considered Kaoru as a replacement for Horikita Manabu.

Moreover, she never imagined everyone knew about her feelings for Horikita - she had thought she'd hidden them well, but apparently everyone had noticed.

"Will the confession really fail?"

If Horikita Manabu already knew her feelings, wouldn't that mean this confession was doomed from the start?

"Do you really like Horikita-senpai that much, senpai?" Kaoru asked.

In the past, Tachibana Akane would have nodded without hesitation.

But now, she faltered.

Her heart was clouded with doubt, her expression downcast.

She regretted her impulsive decision and even dreaded the arrival of Christmas.

"Whether you like him or not, you have special feelings for Horikita-senpai, don't you? Because they're special, you care about him. That's why you're wondering whether to confess."

"But... Horikita, he..."

"Don't worry about what he's thinking right now. The question is—what do you want to do? Will you go through with the confession?"

"If it fails..."

"If it succeeds."

Akane looked up at him in surprise, struck by the earnestness in his eyes—so deep and captivating that she quickly averted her gaze, as if hiding her emotions.

Instead, she focused on the snow clinging to the branches, the clouds drifting across the sky, and the faint shimmer of the next snowfall.

"It might not work out. And even if it does... would I really be a good girlfriend for Horikita?"

At this moment, Akane felt lost.

The future loomed before her like an empty void.

A few days ago, she had realized that she would soon graduate—that she would no longer see Kaoru.

The thought had left her utterly miserable.

"In life, there aren't many people who are truly irreplaceable. When you're young, it's easy to point at someone and say, 'It has to be them.' But before you're even in a relationship, how could you possibly know if they're the right fit?" Kaoru said.

"Don't be afraid of losing something. And don't be afraid of gaining something, either. Just remember how you feel right now. Does seeing him make you happy? Does this feeling give you the courage to say you like him? If it does... then why not confess?"

Akane stood frozen.

For the first time, she sensed something in this underclassman—something she herself lacked.

Something that, in its own way, rivaled the qualities she had always admired in Horikita Manabu.

"Whether the confession fails or whether you're suited for each other... those are things you'll only know after you confess."

Kaoru didn't dismiss Akane's feelings.

Love was never something that could be easily explained—especially when Akane had likely harbored feelings for Horikita for nearly three years.

After all, admiration was the emotion farthest from true understanding.

If he denied her now, it would only leave her with lingering regrets.

Better to let her face this head-on and let the outcome reveal the answer in her heart.

What Kaoru didn't realize, however, was how he appeared in Akane's eyes at that moment.

The effect of the Black Formal Suit transformed his every action into the most perfect image in Akane's mind—gentlemanly, elegant, intellectual, strong, kind... And his words had struck her heart with uncanny precision.

Akane stared at him blankly.

After a long pause, she finally remembered who Horikita Manabu was.

Biting her lip, she muttered, "If it fails... you'll have to take responsibility."

"Sure. I'll be responsible for handing you tissues."

"Wait—why tissues?! You just said it might succeed!"

In an instant, Akane's composure shattered.

She smacked his arm repeatedly, flustered.

"Ugh, you're so annoying!"

"Are we still continuing the date?" Kaoru looked at the gift in his hand, which contained the Gundam model she had given him—this definitely couldn't be handed over to that Oda guy from earlier.

Of course, there was also the gift she had picked out for Horikita Manabu.

According to her plan, gift-giving seemed to be the final step.

"Of course! This is my first time going on a date with a boy, after all." Tachibana Akane's mood improved quickly, a smile spreading across her face.

Soon after, the two wandered around the mall again, stopping at a claw machine at one point.

Kaoru managed to grab several plushies for her, earning excited squeals in response.

When she spotted a photo booth, Akane dragged him over and insisted on taking several sets of purikura stickers.

Having so much fun, Akane's smile never faded even during lunch at the restaurant.

It seemed that Oda's words hadn't affected this airhead too badly.

After the meal, Akane took him to see a movie.

However, at the entrance of the cinema, the girl uncharacteristically hesitated.

"Aren't we watching a rom-com?" Kaoru asked curiously.

"That one's great, but the horror movie also looks really good..." Akane was torn between choosing the rom-com to advance her romantic strategy or indulging in her personal preference for horror.

"Why not watch one today and take Horikita-senpai to see the other one the day after tomorrow? That should work, right?" Kaoru proposed a compromise.

Akane's eyes lit up—what a brilliant idea!

Kaoru watched as she immediately chose the horror film, feeling slightly annoyed.

"Is this really appropriate for a date?"

"Ohhh? Mitoma-kun, don't tell me you're scared?"

"I just think this is something only guys would do."

"What do you mean?"

"If the girl gets scared, the guy can take the chance to hold her tight, right?"

After hearing his explanation, Akane finally realized—this was an opportunity for guys to take advantage.

"But I'm not scared at all." Akane, confident in her bravery, didn't care about such trivial matters.

"Hmph, if you're scared, you can beg me for help, you coward."

Watching her dash into the theater, Kaoru bought a bucket of popcorn and two sodas before following her in.

Soon enough, Akane realized she had spoken too soon—she shouldn't have underestimated Mitomakun.

"Senpai!"

"W-Wah! Let go! This isn't even scary!"

"I can't look!"

"G-Geez, is it really that terrifying?"

"Senpai, keep your voice down..."

"It's because you won't stop touching me!"

Since Akane had said he could rely on her, Kaoru shamelessly clung to her the entire time, burying his face against her at even the slightest scary scene.

Admittedly, this junior senpai of his smelled nice and was soft to hold.

Though Akane wanted to push him away, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Flustered, she let him keep hugging her while obediently comforting him like a mother, just as he asked.

Perhaps it was the effect of the "Black Formal Suit" that made Kaoru's behavior feel inoffensive to her—or maybe she simply didn't mind him taking advantage.

After the movie, Akane adjusted her clothes with a red face.

Thankfully, she had worn a coat and sweater today—otherwise, he really would've groped everything.

"For a guy, you're such a scaredy-cat. How embarrassing!" She thought Kaoru would feel ashamed, but instead, he eyed her with suspicion.

"Senpai, I'm starting to wonder if you knew I'm scared of horror movies and are trying to take advantage of me?"

Tachibana Akane was furious.

How dare this guy turn the tables on her—who was taking advantage of whom here?!

"You're the one taking advantage!"

"I thought senpai wouldn't know how to go on a date, but it seems you're quite experienced. That's a relief."

"A relief my foot!"

Akane lunged at him, teeth bared, sending him scrambling away in panic.

The two chased each other through the mall, bathed in brilliant sunlight, their elongated shadows stretching across the polished floor.

Chapter 399: An Unexpected Guest

The silver-white snow reflected the fading glow of dusk.

Shops lined both sides of the street, their lights set to illuminate only after six.

Christmas trees, ribbons, banners, and bells stood ready for the holiday's arrival, while faint, familiar melodies drifted through the air.

Akane bought two crêpes and casually handed one to Kaoru.

They sat side by side on a bench, watching the passersby.

"Which one is the Legendary Tree?"

"No idea. They said it's over there."

"How are you planning to confess?"

"Just walk around with him, then casually steer toward the tree. Pretend you have something to give him, and when he's not paying attention—bam! Sudden confession!"

"Can you actually say it out loud?"

"Don't discourage me! If I'm going to confess, of course I can say it. But you—how did you and Ichinose start dating?"

Akane sat on the bench, her slender legs pressed together and stretched out in front of her, her feet fidgeting restlessly.

The contrast between her black Mary Janes and white knee-high socks was striking, like two little bamboo shoots.

She nibbled on her crêpe but stole glances at Kaoru's face—handsome and refined, sometimes wearing a faint smirk, other times serious.

When he wasn't talking, he was actually quite good-looking.

She had assumed he wasn't interested in girls, yet he'd quietly gotten himself a girlfriend.

The thought made her chest feel tight.

"I confessed to her first. She didn't agree at first, but later she did," Kaoru said, wondering how long the effects would last if he changed out of the Black Formal Suit.

"Did your confession fail?" Akane was instantly intrigued.

Girls were naturally curious about gossip, so her questioning didn't seem odd.

"Why did she agree later?"

"I wouldn't call it a failure. She said she needed time to think, so I slowly built a better relationship with her. Eventually, it worked out," Kaoru explained. "But we were secretly dating before. I plan to make it official on Christmas."

Akane froze.

The tightness in her chest worsened, as if something were writhing inside, making her stomach twist.

The crêpe suddenly tasted sour, and she pursed her lips unconsciously.

"Secretly dating... so you've been together for a long time?"

"Since before summer break."

"Wow, so you've basically been together from the start?!"

"Why are you so worked up about it?"

"B-Because none of you told me!" Akane tried to mask her emotions, her eyes filled with anxiety and dejection.

She felt like her stomach lining was burning through, breathing rapidly.

"I'm your senior, yet you didn't tell me anything—you're completely treating me like an outsider!"

"My bad. I'll introduce my next girlfriend to you, senpai." Kaoru studied her expression, sensing something was off.

"Hmph, let's not bother with that." Akane actually felt a little happy inside, though she didn't understand why.

Was it because she heard Kaoru wasn't as attached to Ichinose Honami as she'd imagined?

"We can't just drop it, because I really do have other girlfriends." Kaoru hesitated about whether to tell the truth—he couldn't keep letting Karuizawa Kei and the others cover for him.

"Liar. Who would agree to something like that?" Akane didn't believe him at all.

Though, even if he did have multiple girlfriends, she didn't seem to dislike the idea.

"Why wouldn't they agree?" Kaoru was curious about what bystanders like Tachibana were thinking.

"Because it's just not acceptable! Wouldn't that be cheating?" Akane gave him a strange look. "If it's your boyfriend, but he has several other women, not only is that cheating, but it's also humiliating—like you couldn't even keep your own boyfriend in check."

"What if everyone agreed?" Kaoru proposed another scenario.

Akane was momentarily speechless.

If everyone agreed, then there wouldn't be much to say. She pursed her lips.

"That's impossible. You're dreaming. Only sleazy men fantasize about things like that."

"I was thinking—what if it were you, senpai? Would you agree?" Kaoru held the crepe, feeling it grow colder in his hand.

Akane took a bite of the crepe and mumbled with her mouth full, "I'd definitely get mad... unless he was willing to coax me and make me happy..."

That's a pretty low bar.

Kaoru wondered if she was just love-struck.

"But... if they all agreed, and I didn't, we'd probably break up, right?" Akane's mood suddenly dipped.

"What else can I do besides get angry? I definitely wouldn't want to break up."

Kaoru paused, then said softly, "Like I said earlier, if it doesn't work out, just split up. It's not a big deal."

"Of course I know that." Akane huffed. "But he's the boyfriend I found myself. Don't I know what kind of person he is?"

Kaoru chuckled. "You're right. Horikita definitely isn't that kind of guy."

Akane flushed slightly—she hadn't even confessed yet.

"I had a lot of fun with you today! Even though you're just a junior, you did well!"

"You did great too, senpai. You could've taken advantage in the movie theater."

"W-Wha—?! Why are you bringing that up again? You're the one who took advantage of me!"

"I do the same when I'm on dates with Honami. It's just habit."

"O-Oh, is that so...?"

Akane could feel how stiff her expression was.

Every time she heard him mention Honami's name, her heart wrenched violently, as if a rope were slowly tightening around it.

An inexplicable, intense longing surged within her.

Yet, she didn't even know what she was yearning for.

The anxiety made her want to destroy something.

The emotions that had just begun to fade were now returning tenfold—no, a hundredfold—crashing over her in overwhelming waves.

"I'm also going on a date with Honami. If we accidentally run into each other on Christmas, I'll quickly take her away."

"Ahaha, take her away?"

"You're not thinking of having me play wingman, are you?"

"..."

Akane had already forgotten what Horikita Manabu looked like.

Her gaze was fixed intently on Kaoru, flashes of their time together flickering through her mind, followed by images of Kaoru with Ichinose, and finally their inevitable parting at next year's graduation ceremony.

A twisted darkness gradually took root in her heart, as if some voice was calling out to her, compelling her to move closer to Kaoru without conscious thought.

With every centimeter she closed the distance, the spasms in her gut eased slightly, her heartbeat quickened, her body temperature rose, and her eyes burned with desperate longing.

Just as she was about to reach out under Kaoru's puzzled gaze, the sound of approaching footsteps interrupted them.

"Hello~ Can you guess who this is, Mitoma-kun?"

The cheerful voice shattered Akane's trance.

She stared blankly at Asahina Nazuna, who had playfully covered Kaoru's eyes from behind.

"You didn't even bother to disguise your voice. How could I not recognize you?" Kaoru could feel the warmth of her gloved hands against his skin.

"I slipped up. I just wanted to see you flustered for once," Asahina Nazuna chuckled melodiously as she released her hands from covering his eyes, only to immediately wrap them around his neck instead.

The full, soft curves of her chest pressed against him through their clothes, accompanied by a faint, pleasant fragrance.

Tachibana Akane froze momentarily upon noticing Asahina Nazuna's gaze lingering on her—that knowing, half-amused look that seemed to see right through what she'd been about to do moments ago.

Flustered, she quickly put some distance between them while maintaining a composed facade.

"Popping up out of nowhere like that, Asahina-san. I'd appreciate it if you'd at least consider other people's feelings."

Asahina narrowed her eyes.

She had approached from behind the bench, so neither of them had noticed her until now.

Tightening her arms around Kaoru's head, she pulled him firmly against her chest like a possessive guard dog protecting its meal.

"My, my, how careless of me. I only noticed Mitoma-kun here—I didn't realize Tachibana-senpai was present too."

Her smile was bright, yet carried little warmth.

So they knew each other?

Kaoru was still processing this when Asahina suddenly pinched his side—hard enough to sting.

Seemed like he'd have to come clean to them soon.

Otherwise, they might start thinking he was the type to fall for anyone at the drop of a hat.

"I was just chatting with my kouhai. More importantly, since when were you two so close?" Akane's irritation was palpable.

What had started as mild discomfort now churned into something far more unpleasant at the sight of Asahina clinging to Kaoru like this.

"Hmm, how should I put this? What do you think, Mitoma-kun?" Asahina tilted her face slightly downward, her warm breath brushing against his ear as she murmured softly.

"Well? What exactly is our relationship?"

'This mischievous woman...'

Kaoru remained utterly unfazed.

Instead, he turned his head just enough to meet her gaze directly—so close that their breaths mingled.

"I'm fully prepared. The real question is—when will you agree to it, Nazuna-senpai?"

Clearly not expecting him to counter so boldly in front of Akane, Asahina Nazuna's cheeks flushed pink. She forced composure into her voice.

"Shouldn't that depend on how determined you are, Mitoma-kun?"

Her implication was clear—she wanted to know what he intended to do, whether he was ready to shoulder all the consequences.

But Kaoru simply cupped her chin without hesitation.

Asahina Nazuna was no fool.

At her age, girls already knew plenty about such matters.

In an instant, the senior's face burned crimson as she shoved him away.

Getting forcefully kissed once was bad enough—but a second time? Couldn't he at least make it romantic?

Kaoru smirked at her reaction.

Realizing she'd been played—especially with Akane still watching—Asahina gritted her teeth in belated frustration.

"Mitoma-kun?" Akane's voice wavered slightly. "What exactly were you doing just now?"

"Teaching this arrogant senpai a lesson," Kaoru replied casually. "Haven't you heard the rumors about her lately?"

Akane hesitated.

"Something about a falling out with Nagumo-kun?"

Since it was Nagumo Miyabi's humiliation, he didn't publicize it and asked their classmates to keep it secret.

Outsiders could only hear vague rumors.

"Yeah, because someone forced a decision on me, Miyabi and I are taking some time apart right now," Asahina admitted openly. "So I'm alone for now, and I'll be spending Christmas alone too."

Kaoru felt like she was being sarcastic about something, but he had no proof.

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"Quite a few people in class must be blaming you now. Suddenly falling out with Nagumo has made him irritable with them too."

"Are you saying I should deal with it?"

"No, just worried about how things are for you in class."

"What can they do to me? I don't need to get along with the whole class. Having Tomomi and the others is enough, and I can hang out with people from other classes too."

As she spoke, Asahina sat down beside Kaoru.

The girl was wearing a light gray open-front knitted cardigan today, draped loosely over her shoulders, revealing her smooth, delicate skin.

Beneath it was a white off-shoulder dress, her fair and pretty neck wrapped in a scarf.

Even so, the curve of her chest was faintly visible, appearing full and rounded.

The cinched waist accentuated her hips, and though she wasn't doing anything, the bodycon skirt outlined a mature charm.

From the side, the plump, rounded curves tightly hugged her perky bottom, the hem falling to her calves, giving off an air of sophistication.

Unlike the slightly inexperienced Tachibana Akane, she had even put on high heels.

Because of this, Akane was immediately wary of Asahina's sudden appearance.

Who would dress up so nicely for no reason?

"Are you free tonight?" Asahina giggled, poking Kaoru's cheek, knowing full well he had been sneaking glances at her.

But then, wasn't the whole point of dressing up for him to look?

"Aren't you afraid I'll eat you up tonight?" Kaoru grabbed her mischievous hand.

"And what are you doing here?"

Seeing that he wasn't taking the bait, Asahina Nazuna replied.

"I was out with friends and happened to see you and Akane-senpai here, so I came to say hi."

Akane was skeptical.

Was it really necessary to come over just to greet them? Their relationship seemed closer than she had estimated, and the earlier interaction weighed even heavier on her mind.

"What were you two talking about?" Asahina glanced at Tachibana Akane, her peripheral vision catching the stuffed animal and shopping bags between them.

"Tachibana-senpai, are you alone today?"

Akane met her gaze and admitted openly.

"No, I came out with Mitoma-kun."

The two stared at each other for a moment before Asahina Nazuna suddenly smiled.

"You two seem close. I thought you'd be with Horikita-senpai."

"I also didn't expect Asahina-san to be in a cold war with Nagumo-kun. Last winter, you two spent it together, didn't you?" Akane countered just as sharply, sensing something off between Asahina and Kaoru.

"Well, we were childhood friends, and we had other friends around too. Celebrating holidays together was normal." Asahina smiled faintly. "But times change. The past is the past, the present is the present. Childhood friends are childhood friends, but the one you truly love is the one you truly love."

Akane froze for a moment, a dangerously ominous thought flashing through her mind before she dismissed it as absurd, instinctively suppressing her suspicions.

"I won't disturb you two any longer."

Asahina stood up, her gaze lingering on Kaoru as she gave him a thorough once-over.

Muttering something inaudible, she instinctively reached out to straighten his clothes.

"This outfit looks good on you. Did you buy it yourself?"

"Just arrived today. Custom-made."

"No wonder the quality is so good. But isn't it a bit cold?"

Before Kaoru could respond, Asahina undid her own scarf and wrapped it around his neck, wearing a faint smile.

"Mmm, that's much better. Consider it an early Christmas present from me."

Seeing her smile, Kaoru immediately understood her intention.

He'd never seen her display such possessive behavior before—openly marking her territory right in front of others felt unsettling.

"Thanks. I'll return the favor with a gift for you the day after tomorrow," Kaoru said, fingers brushing the scarf that still carried the girl's lingering fragrance.

"My, my. I'll look forward to it," Asahina replied, glancing at Akane's expression with satisfaction.

As Akane watched her leave, she puffed her cheeks in displeasure.

She couldn't explain this irritated feeling, but it definitely annoyed her.

"Are you two close friends?"

"About the same as with you."

"That... kind of pisses me off."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just feel like I'm getting angry."

Kaoru gave her a strange look.

Even her anger was tentative?

Seeing his expression only worsened Akane's mood.

Though she couldn't articulate the sensation, she'd distinctly sensed subtle hostility from Asahina—a quiet exclusion directed at her.

Yet it also felt like... showing off something that belonged to her.

Akane picked up the shopping bag containing the Gundam model and thrust it toward Kaoru with solemnity.

"This is my Christmas gift to you. Merry Christmas!"

Kaoru accepted it with equal gravity. "Thank you for the gift, senpai."

"Was I the first to give you a Christmas present?" Akane asked, her face stern with seriousness.

"You were," Kaoru nodded.

Akane felt satisfied.

No matter what scarf-giving meant, she'd been the first to give a gift.

...

The next morning.

Kaoru powered off his phone, left it in his room, and departed the student dormitory.

In a blind spot of surveillance cameras, he donned the Black Formal Suit and Black-framed Glasses, his entire demeanor transforming into someone else entirely.

He moved unimpeded through campus, only delayed briefly at the guarded main gate where he passed the facial recognition system after a tense moment.

Boarding a nearly empty bus populated only by a few office workers and shop clerks discussing recent news, Kaoru drew curious glances.

But constrained by Japanese social norms, no one approached the conspicuously gentlemanly figure who appeared far too mature to be a student.

As the bus made its stops, Kaoru eventually transferred to the subway system, changing lines until reaching Seiseki-Sakuragaoka Station.

The night before had brought snow, leaving the ground covered in a sparkling white layer.

The midday sun reflected off the frosty puddles where the snow had melted, and beside the familiar building stood a small snowman—its arms made of twigs, its nose a stub of a carrot, its appearance somewhat resembling him.

If left any longer, this snowman would either melt or be cleared away by someone, given that this was a public street.

"Sometimes, I really want to punch you, Wish Machine," Kaoru said calmly as he gazed at the small building.

Though a larger office had been established later, this place was where it all began.

[I never said anything about transferring you to another world. Your task was only to collect wishes.]

Returning to this place, it seemed nothing had changed—even the familiar paparazzi were still lurking around, though no figures could be seen moving inside.

Kaoru touched the envelope in his pocket.

Coming back from the dead was terrifying—he wasn't sure if they could accept it.

The first floor still housed the familiar pet shop, bookstore, and laundromat.

Kaoru even spotted the bookstore owner chatting with a customer. It seemed no one had noticed him.

With practiced ease, Kaoru pried open the mailbox and, as expected, found numerous fan letters inside.

He habitually opened a few and couldn't help but sneer—those perverts were back to their delusions.

He took all their letters out and replaced them with his own envelope.

Creak—

The sound of footsteps on the stairs reached Kaoru's ears.

He turned to leave, only to hear a girl's voice call out.

"Wait for me, Hana."

That plain, unremarkable voice reminded Kaoru of the girl's puppy-like vow—I'll stay by your side for the rest of my life.

Suppressing the urge to turn back, Kaoru stepped onto the squeaking snow and merged into the crowd.

He still had things to do—he couldn't look back now.

But precisely because he didn't look back, he failed to see the girl staring intently at his retreating figure.

"Hana?"

Rinze Morino looked puzzled at Suzuki Hana, who had suddenly frozen in place, her gaze fixed on someone.

"Ah... I just felt like I saw him," Hana murmured, snapping out of her daze.

The figure had already vanished from sight.

"How strange... my heart suddenly started racing."

Mention of him plunged Rinze into silence.

"Sorry, I brought up something I shouldn't have."

"N-no, it's fine. Actually, I've been trying to move on lately..."

"Ah, no wonder you haven't been clutching his photo recently."

Ever since his death, everyone had been acting a little strange.

Rinze often talked to herself while holding his picture.

Because he had left behind so few belongings, there had even been fights over them at first.

Some people spent their days watching old recordings, as if that could bring back the past.

Hana forced a smile, as she always did.

Even though it had been two full years without him, life had to go on—otherwise...

Otherwise, the agency he left behind would surely collapse.

Too many people had already left. No matter what, she had to protect this place.

Hana looked up at the sky.

Should I have been gentler with him back then? Did my absolute obedience also put too much pressure on him?

"Strange... the mailbox looks like it's been pried open," Rinze remarked, having noticed Kaoru's handiwork.

"Ah, another weirdo, huh..."

Before she could finish speaking, Suzuki Hana spotted a lone envelope lying inside the mailbox, and her heart involuntarily skipped a beat.

Rinze Morino took out the envelope.

There was no postmark or stamp—only a single line of text.

In an instant, even her usually gentle temper flared up.

How dare someone forge the producer's handwriting? This person... this person was unforgivable!

"Rinze, let me see it." Suzuki Hana's smile had completely vanished.

Whoever was behind this, it wasn't funny in the slightest.

Rinze handed her the envelope, and out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the pile of envelopes Kaoru had just thrown into the trash.

She became even more convinced that someone was playing a cruel joke on them.

Yet, Suzuki Hana remained frozen in place.

"Hana, what does it say?" Rinze suppressed her anger, keeping her voice gentle as she leaned closer to Suzuki Hana—only to immediately see the contents of the letter.

Her pupils constricted.

There was no mistaking it—it was unmistakably the producer's handwriting.

"Heh heh heh... Merry Christmas, see you next year?"

Suzuki Hana suddenly laughed, her eyes flashing with a dangerously sharp glint.

This kind of malicious prank—no matter where this person was hiding, she would find them.