

Cote 481

Chapter 481: Trouble.

Such thoughts could only remain in his mind.

Kaoru didn't voice them out, instead picking up his phone.

[How do you plan to handle Muto?]

This was a message from Horikita Manabu. Kaoru had previously told him he would arrange things properly.

[I'll give them some Personal Points. As for Muto-senpai, let me handle that personally.]

Since he needed to go out anyway, Kaoru could settle these matters along the way—not just for Muto Hiromichi, but also for people like Sato Keisaku.

Soon after, Tonokawa Sosuke also messaged him, cautiously probing his thoughts about Class 2-A's actions.

From Tonokawa's perspective, Horikita Manabu and Muto Hiromichi's actions likely had Kaoru's covert planning behind them, which violated their previous agreement.

[It wasn't me. Muto-senpai and the others had grievances against you.]

[I apologize, I know that. But I want to know, Mitoma-kun, what's your stance on our previous agreement?]

[Occasional collateral damage is inevitable until I confirm Nagumo has lost all ability to resist.]

[...]

The conversation fell into silence afterward. Kaoru could guess what he was thinking, but what was the point?

Now, Class 2-A only had two choices: either fully side with him or go all-in on Nagumo Miyabi, betting that Nagumo would continue winning.

There was no room for fence-sitting.

Currently, Kaoru clearly held the advantage.

If he provoked the lower classes of the second year a little, many might adopt the mindset of 'If I'm suffering, you shouldn't have it easy either' and drag Class 2-A down with them.

Nagumo had already realized this, which was why he coldly abandoned any rescue efforts, even giving up contracts with lower classes.

Now, Class 2-A had to protect itself.

Protecting themselves required sufficient points and means to suppress the entire year.

With points in hand, Nagumo could continue his usual strategy of allying with some while attacking others.

But for people like Tonokawa Sosuke, this overly cold and calculated approach was too cruel.

If even being in Class A couldn't guarantee their safety, they would still face expulsion—wouldn't that make them no different from the lower classes?

Moreover, most Personal Points were concentrated in Nagumo's hands, leaving their fates controlled by him—an unsettling thought.

Tonokawa Sosuke's original plan was to use Class Points to keep Nagumo in check, since avoiding expulsion required not just Personal Points but Class Points as well.

But with Kaoru continuing to attack Class 2-A like this, Tonokawa seriously doubted whether they could withstand it.

Kaoru didn't wait for his reply.

This exam had shattered their illusions, and it would take time for them to sort through their thoughts.

However, the fact that Nagumo didn't use any points left Kaoru somewhat disheartened.

On second thought, it precisely indicated Nagumo's growing distrust toward Class 2-A.

Therefore, Nagumo's current strategy was likely to conserve points, intending to drag him down together.

With this realization, Kaoru felt slightly more at ease.

Checking his girlfriend's messages, he chatted idly on his way back.

Then, he received utterly dreadful news, his expression involuntarily shifting.

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January 23rd, February 15th, February 20th, March 8th, March 12th—and most crucially, Valentine's Day on February 14th.

Kaoru exhaled deeply, staring at the circles he'd drawn on the calendar, his scalp tingling with dread.

This semester was far busier than he'd anticipated.

First was Kushida's birthday, for which the little angel had specifically messaged him, reminding him not to forget.

How awful—Christmas had barely passed a month ago, and now he had to prepare another gift.

Kaoru found himself in a tight spot.

He hadn't expected to return to school last night only to face this dilemma the very next day.

To make matters worse, Kushida's birthday was tomorrow.

"Eh? Kikyo's birthday is coming up?"

Ichinose's voice came through the phone, sounding genuinely surprised.

"I just remembered it myself, so I'm a bit at a loss."

With no other options, Kaoru turned to his girlfriend for help.

"What do you think I should get her?"

Last Christmas had been perfect—the timing, the mood, the confession.

The Wedding Ring had been the ultimate surprise.

But a birthday was an entirely different matter.

Kaoru couldn't just pull out another Wedding Ring, nor could he casually gift just any reward.

"Maybe something she's been wanting? Have you noticed anything she particularly likes?"

"You've stumped me there."

"Eh? I thought you were good with girls?"

"You all misunderstand me too much. I'm not a mind reader—I can't possibly know everything."

"Mhm, that's your problem. You never seem to understand when it matters."

Kaoru felt slightly embarrassed, but fortunately, his girlfriend was understanding.

She quickly offered her suggestion.

...

That afternoon, after school.

Amidst the bustling crowd, Kaoru spotted Ichinose and Amikura Mako waiting for him—two lovely figures standing out like plum blossoms in the snow, effortlessly drawing attention.

"You don't mind Mako tagging along, do you?"

Ichinose smiled at him, her expression unreadable.

Truthfully, Kaoru felt a pang of guilt.

He hadn't told Ichinose about the ring, making it feel like he'd been sneaking around with her best friend behind her back.

In contrast, Mako seemed shy, her heart fluttering like a deer encountering its crush.

She instinctively averted her gaze when meeting Kaoru's eyes, tilting her delicate face slightly as if something nearby had caught her attention.

A closer look would reveal her fingers fidgeting unconsciously, her legs slightly tensed beneath the white thigh-high socks, as eye-catching as ice cream.

"Having two adorable beauties accompanying me? I couldn't be happier—why would I ever mind?" Kaoru couldn't quite grasp Mako's state of mind—whether she had told Ichinose about the ring incident or not.

However, considering their relationship, Kaoru felt it would be best to come clean as soon as possible.

"Such a smooth talker."

Ichinose Honami chided him playfully before cheerfully announcing.

"Anyway, today's mission is planning Kikyo's birthday operation!"

Indeed, since having a boyfriend came with its own troubles, as his girlfriend, Ichinose naturally took it upon herself to rise to the occasion—even if it sounded like she was encouraging her boyfriend to cheat.

"Target: Keyaki Mall!"

Before the two could react, Ichinose quickly grabbed Kaoru and Mako's hands and marched toward Keyaki Mall.

Chapter 482: The Birthday Operation

The so-called "birthday operation" was essentially figuring out what kind of gift Kushida would like.

Not only did Kaoru need to prepare a gift, but Ichinose also felt it necessary to give Kushida a small present.

Otherwise, wouldn't their newly formed little group be meaningless?

Of course, they also had to celebrate properly on the day itself.

While Ichinose enthusiastically picked out gifts, Kaoru subtly moved closer to Mako.

"Mako, when's your birthday?"

His proximity made Mako tense up.

She couldn't quite describe the feeling—ever since accepting his ring, locking eyes with him left her dazed for a moment.

"M-my birthday? October 2nd."

Her words came out slightly stuttered. She knew tomorrow was Kushida's birthday, and Kaoru was planning to celebrate it.

But his sudden question about her birthday made the girl's imagination run wild with strange thoughts.

Kaoru didn't notice her expression, quietly relieved.

In truth, he hadn't realized that the day the training camp ended was also Shiina Hiyori's birthday.

He made a mental note to ask Miki Yamamura, Airi Sakura, and Hasebe Haruka about their birthdays later.

Celebrating birthdays wasn't a trivial matter—it was at least an important gesture among close friends.

"M-Mitoma-kun, when's your birthday?"

Mako couldn't bring herself to say his first name, as if the bold girl who once talked about a "friendship kiss" wasn't her at all.

"The first day of July." Kaoru answered absentmindedly, reflecting on what Ichinose had pointed out earlier.

Mako felt a pang of disappointment.

July? That meant she had missed it last year.

Then it occurred to her—Kaoru had missed her birthday too. The thought made her even gloomier.

If only they had been closer back then...

But what difference would it have made?

No sensible girl would ever approve of Kaoru. Who would agree to be with such a playboy?

Mako sulked silently, unable to articulate her frustration.

She just felt unbearably resentful, as if she had fallen far behind, with no outlet for her pent-up emotions.

"Mako, do you think this looks nice?"

Ichinose held up a small, glittering accessory that looked quite charming.

"It's pretty, but... do you think Kushida-san would like it?"

Mako leaned in to take a closer look.

She had some impression of Kushida, though the two had never really interacted.

"I don't think I've ever seen her wear accessories before." Ichinose recalled her interactions with Kushida.

"How about giving her a cute little plushie?"

"Plushies take up too much space. What about a keychain?"

Mako thought plushies were too bulky, and gifting something the recipient didn't like would probably make them secretly resentful.

Kaoru watched as the two girls chattered away about gift ideas when it suddenly dawned on him—he still hadn't asked Mako about the ring.

"What do you think we should pick, Kaoru?"

Ichinose ultimately tossed the question to Kaoru. "Did Kikyo ever mention what she likes to you?"

Girls generally liked cute things, but considering Kushida's personality, Kaoru wasn't entirely sure.

"Can I just call her right now?" Kaoru asked.

Ichinose scolded him lightly, "That would ruin the surprise! It'd be like she's ordering you to buy something for her."

Kaoru felt a headache coming on—this was the trickiest part.

After thinking for a moment, Mako spoke up, "Tomorrow's a day off, right? Why don't the two of you go out together and pick something she'd like?"

Then, she quickly added, "If it were me... I'd just be happy spending time alone with someone I... with the person. The gift itself wouldn't matter as long as it came from them."

Her words seemed to reveal a bit too much, and Mako didn't dare look at Kaoru.

"That's a great idea!"

Ichinose's eyes lit up, and she enthusiastically agreed.

"Kaoru can subtly figure out Kikyo's preferences while you're out! Mako's suggestion is brilliant!"

A one-on-one date...

Kaoru had actually considered it before, but with Ichinose and Mako right there, he didn't know how to bring it up and felt awkward.

"I was originally planning to invite you all to celebrate her birthday together—throw a little party to make it livelier."

Kaoru quietly swallowed his last thought: And it'd help strengthen the bonds in the harem.

Ichinose's eyes widened slightly before she smiled gently.

"I see. How about you two go out during the day, and we'll all gather for a party in the evening?"

Mako pointed at herself uncertainly. "M-Me too?"

Kaoru mentally tallied the numbers and replied, "I was thinking of inviting Suzune, Kei, and you two."

Of course, he could also include Airi Sakura and the others, but that felt a bit excessive—too flashy. The atmosphere might even turn awkward.

"Hmm, Mako and I will come along too."

Ichinose agreed with a bright smile, then suddenly blushed slightly as she recalled the last group outing.

Mako saw this and realized she couldn't refuse, so she nodded hesitantly.

She felt uneasy—though Ichinose had told her about Kaoru's harem, she wasn't familiar with them.

Would any of them look down on her?

"Looks like we're picking out a gift for Kikyo now."

Ichinose began scanning the shelves for a suitable little present. "What do you think of this one, Mako?"

Seeing them dive back into discussion, Kaoru wandered around nearby.

Having spent nearly a year at school, he was quite familiar with the place.

What would Kushida like?

As he pondered this, his thoughts drifted back to the agency a year ago.

At first, he had treated them merely as NPCs who would drop rewards, investing little emotion.

Later, he realized that the more he treated them that way, the less likely they were to drop rewards.

The agency's atmosphere had even grown tense at one point, nearly reaching the brink of disbandment.

It wasn't until he put himself in their shoes, helping them with their troubles, that their relationships gradually improved.

In the end, even if he didn't want rewards, they wouldn't let him go.

Now, Kaoru couldn't say for sure whether the despair he felt back then was out of fear or simply his own misunderstanding of them.

The ones he had assumed were NPCs ended up relying on him more and more, pulling him deeper into their lives.

"Mitoma-kun?"

Someone called his name, a mix of surprise and curiosity in their voice.

Kaoru snapped out of his thoughts to see Shiina Hiyori standing before him.

Dressed in her school uniform and carrying her bag, her eyes sparkled as she looked at him.

Chapter 483: Limited to the Scope of Friendship.

Shiina Hiyori had a favorable impression of Kaoru.

In her class, she had no like-minded companions.

She loved reading but had no one to share her thoughts with, often leaving the girl feeling frustrated, as if no one could understand her little world.

Then, at just the right moment, Kaoru appeared in her line of sight, catching her attention.

Except for that time in the library when she saw Kaoru's subtle interactions with Kamuro Masumi, making her cheeks flush as she assumed they were a couple.

Later, Kaoru inexplicably ended up with Ichinose Honami.

Even without a gossipy nature, Shiina couldn't help but feel a little curious.

Still, in this moment, she was simply happy to run into him at the mall.

"Are you here to buy something too, Shiina?"

Kaoru glanced at her small bag, which likely held a book or two today—though he didn't know the titles.

"I ran out of daily necessities, and I heard there was a discount on Friday, so I came."

Shiina looked a little embarrassed. "But I think I might be too late."

Though the convenience store offered free monthly essentials, they only covered the bare minimum.

Anything slightly better required spending money.

Kaoru pictured it for a moment—tiny Shiina, cheeks flushed, standing on tiptoe behind a crowd, jumping slightly but still going unnoticed.

"Shiina-san, have you noticed Morita-san on the left shelf before?"

"Eh, no."

"She really likes cute kids. Next time, you can ask her to save a portion for you."

Shiina Hiyori was taken aback.

After a moment, she pressed her lips together and laughed as if hiding something, which made Kaoru feel puzzled.

"Did I say something wrong just now?"

Kaoru was frustrated.

This information was actually Kushida's secret, and he only knew it because he occasionally talked to her on the phone.

"No, no, I'm just surprised by Mitoma-kun."

Shiina Hiyori quickly waved her hands, then gave a gentle smile. "You're quite knowledgeable about these things, Mitoma-kun."

Kaoru fell silent for a moment. "It's only been a holiday since we last met, but Shiina-san has gotten better at flattering people."

"Weren't you just flattering me too?"

Shiina was a little annoyed.

She had only spoken the truth without any insincerity, yet he could shamelessly call someone cute.

"Did I?"

Kaoru was confused, but seeing the girl's expression, he guessed he must have misspoken.

"Actually, I didn't mean any harm. On the contrary, I'm a little happy."

Shiina Hiyori froze slightly.

Before she could figure out what Kaoru meant, Ichinose's voice came from beside them.

"What a coincidence, Shiina-san, you're here too!"

Ichinose Honami and Amikura Mako, who had been picking items in the gift section, were now standing next to them.

Ichinose shared the same feeling as Kaoru.

Shiina Hiyori was a little surprised, but after a moment's thought, it didn't seem strange.

She said softly, "Are the two of you on a date?"

Amikura Mako froze for a moment before hearing Ichinose Honami's laughter.

"No, no, we're just shopping. We'll be heading back soon."

Then, Ichinose remembered that Shiina and Mako didn't know each other and took the chance to introduce her best friend.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Shiina."

Shiina nodded slightly at Mako naturally, but her indifferent attitude made Mako feel a bit awkward.

However, seeing Shiina Hiyori subtly increase the distance between herself and Kaoru, Mako inexplicably felt relieved.

"Shiina-san, the novel you lent me last time was really interesting! It was my first time reading a story like that!"

Shiina Hiyori, who had been about to retreat, suddenly stopped.

Her eyes lit up like fireflies, glowing faintly as she stared at Ichinose Honami the same way she had at Kaoru Mitoma.

"That's great. I'm really happy you liked those novels, Ichinose-san."

"Ehehe, it left me wanting more."

"Would you like me to recommend more?"

"Wouldn't that trouble you, Shiina-san?"

"Not at all. I'm happy to have someone to talk to about this."

Even without repeating the phrase "I'm happy," Shiina Hiyori's face was filled with a bright smile, leaving Amikura Mako momentarily stunned.

"Do you think she's a strange girl?"

Kaoru lightly nudged Mako's hand.

Unconsciously, he had moved closer to the girl.

Mako instinctively shrank back, meeting his gaze before suddenly blushing, flustered.

"S-strange?"

"She seems lost in her own world, indifferent to everything, yet at times actively and assertively expresses her will."

Was he talking about Shiina Hiyori?

Mako studied Shiina—petite, seemingly airheaded, but now her eyes were sparkling brightly as she chatted animatedly with Ichinose.

"No, it's not strange."

Mako said, "Honami-chan can talk to anyone, and she seems to really love novels."

A flicker of surprise passed through Kaoru's eyes before he pondered for a moment, as if changing the subject.

"Did you two pick out a gift earlier?"

"Yeah, but Honami-chan told me not to tell you."

Mako hesitated slightly, though she was genuinely curious about Shiina's background.

"Kikyo..."

Kaoru searched for the right words. "Actually, the reason Honami brought you along today was..."

"Because tomorrow is Kushida-san's birthday."

Mako took over the conversation, her gaze fixed on him. "Were you trying to ask why I'm here too?"

Kaoru looked at her for a moment before suddenly brushing his fingers against her right hand, making her tense up.

"Where's the ring?"

All the bravado Mako had mustered instantly crumbled.

A faint blush spread across her cheeks as she muttered, "I'll wear it if I want to, and not if I don't!"

"You really didn't throw it away?"

His tone was accusatory, which only fueled her irritation.

"I didn't throw it away!"

Mako was starting to dislike this guy.

"I've been keeping it safe. Did you think I'd flaunt it like some people?"

In her eyes, Sakayanagi's behavior was no different from that of a smug, petty person.

"I don't believe you. I'll check next time."

Kaoru said, "If I don't see the ring, it means you don't value our friendship. And I'll have to teach you a lesson."

Mako was both furious and flustered, blurting out without thinking, "If you want to do something bad to me, just say it, you pervert!"

The moment the words left her mouth, both she and Mitoma Kaoru froze.

"Do something bad?"

Kaoru quickly caught on, smirking. "So... you know everything?"

Mako realized she'd messed up.

Her and Ichinose's plan was about to be exposed.

Still, she stubbornly feigned composure.

"Know what? It's not like I haven't seen you do bad things to senpai before. And you're always saying weird stuff like 'let me see your legs.'"

"I see."

Kaoru chuckled. "So, Mako, will you let me do bad things to you too?"

Mako wanted to refuse—she wasn't some kid who'd fall for sweet talk.

But then, she thought of names like Kushida Kikyo, Horikita Suzune, and Karuizawa Kei.

"O-only within the bounds of friendship..."

Chapter 484: Doing Bad Things Is Allowed.

Truthfully, Amikura Mako wasn't sure how far she could accept things.

Kissing and hugging were understandable, but something like licking feet? That was way too embarrassing.

So when Kaoru took her small hand and led her behind another shelf, her heart raced uncontrollably, and a faint blush colored her cheeks.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

Mako kept her voice low.

This was a crowded mall—she couldn't possibly do something bad here, could she?

"I feel like Mako is hiding something from me."

Kaoru had noticed early on that Mako and Ichinose were plotting something, though he couldn't quite grasp their intentions.

"But I should be honest with you too—though you probably already know—Honami isn't my only girlfriend. There's also Kikyo from Class D, and even some upperclassmen."

Mako froze for a moment before forcing out a weak "Mm," her disappointment barely concealed.

"How many girlfriends you have has nothing to do with me. We're just friends," the girl insisted, even as Mitoma continued holding her hand.

"And I'm not keeping anything from you, so don't worry."

Kaoru gently stroked her small hand, causing her to snap back to reality and hurriedly pull away, her face flushing red.

"But like I said before, I have my own ambitions when it comes to you, Mako. Just being friends isn't enough for me."

For a brief moment, Mako held her breath, a light, floating sensation enveloping her.

Even though she knew she shouldn't show any reaction, her heart couldn't help but leap.

The warmth spread across her chest, where a restless little rabbit seemed to be hiding.

"W-who cares what you think?" She narrowed her eyes, masking the flicker of emotion within them, though her lips curled slightly despite herself.

"I already told you—someone as unfaithful as you could never win me over. It's already too much that I'm willing to be friends with you."

Kaoru studied her for a moment, Tachibana Akane's face surfacing in his mind.

Maybe those who could accept him were the real outliers.

"Hey, you'd better not be thinking of doing anything shady."

Misinterpreting his silence, the girl fidgeted awkwardly.

"That kiss last time... didn't mean anything. And Honami doesn't know about it either."

Her tone was almost comically unconvincing, betraying her bravado.

No girl would kiss a boy for no reason at all.

Kaoru, of course, understood this perfectly.

After a brief pause, he said, "Alright. But since we're friends, can I ask you for a favor?"

"Sure! What is it?" Amikura Mako nodded cheerfully.

Though she had initially been bitter about the whole girlfriend situation, she had gradually come to terms with it—after all, he had so many already.

One more or less wouldn't make a difference. There was no need for her to force her way in.

Therefore, Amikura Mako's current state of mind was that being friends was quite nice, with the occasional opportunity for some sneaky affection.

"Before we continue, Mako, from now on, could you call me by my first name?"

Kaoru said, "Even as friends, we shouldn't be addressing each other by surnames, right?"

Mako's happiness froze.

She stared at Kaoru in bewilderment, her gaze instinctively darting away, but there was nowhere to hide in this space.

She had no choice but to face one of life's major turning points—no less significant than the moment she first realized she might have feelings for this guy.

"Did I make you uncomfortable?"

"N-no, just give me a moment... I... I forgot your name for a second... No, no, I mean, I can do it right away!"

Under Kaoru's gaze, the girl's face flushed crimson.

After struggling for a long while, she finally uttered an extremely faint name.

"I didn't quite catch that."

"K... Kaoru..."

"What?"

"Kaoru... Kaoru-kun."

"What did you call me?"

"..."

Unable to withstand his teasing, Mako lowered her burning red face, seemingly ready to bolt.

Fortunately, he swiftly blocked her escape route.

"Ahem, alright, Mako, let's get to the main topic now."

Watching Kaoru casually block her path without a care, Mako muttered "mean" under her breath, though her eyes remained fixed on him, waiting for him to continue.

The next moment, Kaoru spoke up.

"Mako, you called me a pervert earlier, and I admit it. Part of the reason I'm interested in you is because you're cute and pretty, so I can't possibly suppress those desires."

Mako was furious.

Was he saying he only liked her because of lust?

But, considering he had called her cute, she decided to let it slide—for now.

"And then?"

The girl tried her best to keep a straight face.

"I won't be able to keep my hands off you."

After saying this, Kaoru braced himself for the worst.

Just as he expected, Mako froze for a long moment before making an expression of utter disgust.

"Pervert."

Hearing such an evaluation from a beautiful girl no longer fazed Kaoru in the slightest.

He continued calmly, "Is it really that hard for you to accept, Mako?"

"Of course it is! Isn't that obvious?"

Every time she faced him, Amikura Mako felt like she had gotten angry countless times.

"That kind of talk is way too flippant. Girls aren't your personal property—can't there be even a little bit of love, not just desire?"

Unlike boys, girls don't have such simple, crude physical desires.

Because there are so many potential partners who could satisfy them, most girls hope that the other person can fulfill their emotional needs before their physical ones.

In other words, Mako didn't see herself as Kaoru's personal property, nor would she ever accept a purely physical relationship between them.

"I understand. The problem has always been mine."

Kaoru let out a sigh of relief.

He suddenly realized that whenever he faced these girls, he always approached them with utilitarian motives.

Either to fulfill some wish or to satisfy his own selfish desires. They weren't idiots—they could naturally sense his intentions.

That's why, back then, he had been too direct, leaving Tachibana Akane no room to consider things.

Next, Kaoru froze for a long moment.

He glanced at Mako, then thought of Kushida and Horikita Suzune, his emotions tangled in complexity.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Amikura Mako assumed she had convinced him, feeling a mix of pride and lingering concern.

"Actually... you don't have to feel bad. Even if it's just... just simple desire, you still have Honami, right?"

She struggled to voice it.

Even if Ichinose Honami had confessed to her about their misdeeds, the imagery was still unimaginable to her.

"Honami is Honami. There are some things about you, Mako, that are different from her."

Kaoru exhaled deeply. "Like when I see your ponytail, I want to touch it. Or when I held your hand just now—I didn't want to let go at all. No matter what you think, the moment I see you, I want to be close to you."

He admitted to harboring utilitarian thoughts about these girls.

The reason Ichinose Honami's words had resonated with him was because he, too, had selfish desires—the darker side of a man's instinct to possess beautiful girls.

Now that their relationships had become this entangled, was Kaoru really going to abandon his own feelings?

Just because he had started with ulterior motives, did that mean this connection had to end here?

Kaoru had no intention of giving up.

Nor did he plan to deny his own pragmatism.

"To you, Mako, this might seem like lust. But seeing you by my side makes me happy."

As Kaoru spoke, Mako's lips parted slightly, her eyes wide with disbelief.

Her heartbeat raced wildly. In this situation... he dared to confess a second time?

No, no—this wasn't a confession.

Her thoughts were in complete disarray, unable to process what Kaoru was trying to do.

Even if she could think clearly, Kaoru would shatter her composure anyway.

Because a pair of arms wrapped around Mako, pulling her effortlessly into his embrace with masculine strength.

Then, wide-eyed, she watched as he leaned in and kissed her.

Lips met lips—a soft, fleeting kiss, carrying an unimaginable warmth that left her mind blank, buzzing.

"That was a Friendship Kiss, Mako."

Kaoru's voice was low. "And this is a Friendship Hug. Even if someone questions it, I'd dare say this is a friendship that belongs only to us."

Mako didn't hear a word he said.

All she could think about was the lingering sensation. Had her first kiss just been stolen so easily?

A faint frustration rose in her chest, quickly replaced by an inexplicable joy.

Maybe... this wasn't so bad after all.

"Still, I'm not trying to paint myself as righteous. You can keep thinking of me as a pervert."

Kaoru held the girl quietly in his arms.

Her school uniform revealed little skin, the thick blazer and shirt obscuring her figure.

Only when pressed against her could he feel the faint rise and fall of her chest, teasing his instincts with every subtle movement.

She tilted her head slightly, cheeks flushed, lips parted as warm breaths escaped.

A strange light flickered in her eyes, her legs rubbing together unconsciously, her waist twisting ever so slightly. Her breathing seemed to grow quicker.

"You... you kissed me?" Mako stammered, her words faltering.

Kaoru froze for a long moment.

After all he had said, the girl was still stuck at the beginning?

"Yes, I kissed you, and I'll kiss you a second time, a third time, a fourth time... until our friendship lasts forever."

Though it was clearly nonsense, Mako felt as if he had outright confessed to her, her face burning red.

"No more kissing!"

Mako waved her fists, trying to intimidate Kaoru with a fierce glare while struggling to break free from his embrace.

Kaoru had initially paid no mind, but the little rabbit couldn't stay hidden for long—her constant squirming in his arms, the irresistible softness and bounce—made him hold on a little longer.

Mako didn't realize any of this.

The moment Kaoru released her, she hastily took a few steps back, her face flushed, her heart pounding.

Just the thought of Ichinose being nearby made her feel like she was doing something bad behind her best friend's back.

"Let's keep doing bad things next time," Kaoru said. "Of course, these are friendly bad things. Mako should definitely keep them a secret from Honami."

Mako's eyes widened.

Oh no, she thought.

'He really figured out what's going on between me and Honami.'

"I... I won't..."

She had meant to refuse, but under Kaoru's gaze and the memory of that first kiss, the words died in her throat.

"You... already know?" Mako whispered.

Kaoru shook his head lightly. "I don't know what you two are planning, but I think I'm starting to understand."

Mako studied him for a moment, her fingers brushing against her lips, before a strange light flickered in her eyes.

She reached out with her right hand, grasping his sleeve, and stared straight at him.

"I'm not like Honami. I don't know if I've ever liked you, but I don't want to pretend anymore."

Her fingers tightened around his sleeve. "I don't mind you doing bad things to me—just one condition. You can't love me more than you love Honami, and you can't let me lose to the others."

After saying this, Mako felt her entire face burn as if on fire.

But since he had already guessed, there was no point in forcing herself to keep up the act.

Better to lay her feelings bare—after all, a first kiss wasn't something you could return.

He could take responsibility—but not full responsibility.

Because that would only weigh Mako down with unbearable pressure.

Chapter 485: Should We Get a Room?

Shiina recommended a few books to Ichinose before waving goodbye.

On the way back, Mako remained silent, as if nothing had happened earlier.

Kaoru, too, acted as usual, listening to Ichinose chatter about trivial details of their plans for the next day.

She suggested meeting in Kaoru's room—tomorrow was supposed to be a lively birthday party.

"Don't tell Kikyō. I'm planning to prepare a birthday cake for her. It's a secret~"

"Won't my room be too cramped?"

"Should we get a room?"

"..."

After Kaoru left, the two stood silently in the elevator, staring at each other.

Ichinose's smile faded, replaced by a slightly troubled expression.

"I don't think he's ever been in a proper relationship."

The words sounded like a complaint about Kaoru, immediately catching Mako's attention. She turned to Ichinose, her eyes widening slightly in surprise.

"Do you think he is particularly good at handling girls?"

"He probably is, otherwise..."

Mako couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence—otherwise, why would so many people like him? Otherwise, why would her first kiss have disappeared? She quickly changed the subject.

"Honami-chan, do you think he's done a lot of terrible things in the past?"

Ichinose shook her head. "It's not about the past. He lacks experience."

Mako was puzzled, but then she noticed Ichinose Honami pausing for a moment, as if reconsidering her own words.

Frowning, she corrected herself, "No... Something must have happened to him before. That's why he's willing to change."

Silence filled the elevator as Ichinose Honami seemed lost in thought.

Amikura Mako hesitated.

Should she tell her best friend what had just happened?

But as soon as the thought crossed her mind, the girl unconsciously touched her fingers, feeling a fleeting, almost transparent sensation—like the brush of a meteor's tail.

"Mako, what were you two doing just now?"

Faced with Ichinose Honami's casual question, Amikura Mako smiled faintly and shook her head gently.

"We just talked. Nothing else."

"Really?"

Ichinose Honami muttered something too quiet to hear, but soon, as if remembering something, she flashed a bright smile at Amikura Mako.

"Mako."

"Hmm?"

"If he ever makes you unhappy, tell me right away. I'll teach him a lesson for you."

...

Kaoru had sent a few messages to Tachibana Akane, but after waiting for what felt like ages, all he got was a "read" receipt—no reply.

Not the worst outcome.

At least she hadn't blocked him, and she was willing to read his messages.

Meanwhile, Asahina Nazuna had bombarded him with texts—some asking what he planned to do with Class 2-A, others probing for hints about his next move.

Logically, Kaoru shouldn't have answered her. But ignoring her completely would make him seem overly suspicious.

So, he told her everything.

After a long pause, Asahina Nazuna finally replied.

[You trust me too much. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I'll tell Nagumo-kun. After all, he's my childhood friend.]

[Not calling him by his name anymore, Senpai?]

[Won't you get jealous?]

[If you're already considering that, then I have no regrets. Even if you side with him, I'll defeat both of you together.]

Silence lingered on the other end before a single question finally came through.

[Actually, there might be room for reconciliation between you two... There's no need to be so tense.]

After all, they were childhood friends. Kaoru sighed as he typed a reply to his senior.

[I'm sorry for putting you in a difficult position. I'll be more mindful of that in the future. But I should also clarify—this matter wasn't my decision. It was Nanase's. Given his personality, after Horikita-senpai's expulsion, he'd start looking for the next interesting opponent. I just wanted to settle things now to avoid trouble later.]

[I understand. But with things escalating like this, if someone else gets expelled because of you two...]

[About Muto-senpai... I truly am sorry. And besides, I'm jealous of him. So I won't stop.]

[...]

Through a phone screen, it was hard to gauge Asahina Nazuna's emotions.

Kaoru felt they needed to talk face-to-face—their emotional foundation was too fragile as it was.

...

Soon, the next morning, Kaoru spotted Kushida at the Keyaki Mall.

She stood smiling under a tree, dressed in a brown coat over a fitted white blouse that accentuated the youthful curves of her figure. Her knee-length skirt revealed slender legs clad in black thigh-high socks, while her feet were hidden in a pair of chunky boots, leaving no trace of her ankles.

Just her outfit alone drew plenty of attention, let alone the fact that she was the legendary "Little Angel" of their grade.

It almost looked like she was on a date!

And in truth, today's plans weren't far from one.

"So, what are we doing today?"

Noticing his lingering gaze, Kushida playfully blinked at him.

"Hurry up and decide, or everyone's going to keep staring."

Kaoru was already aware of the murmurs around them.

After all, he was Ichinose Honami's boyfriend, and Kushida was the first-year's beloved angel—naturally, their pairing was bound to stir gossip.

"Let's just walk around for now."

He instinctively reached for her hand but stopped himself.

Kushida let out a soft hum, trailing behind him.

Though they weren't doing anything special, she couldn't suppress her bright smile, her light steps playfully stomping on his shadow as if she were hopping along.

For the students, Keyaki Mall was a place they knew all too well, which left Kaoru slightly stumped.

What exactly were they supposed to do here?

Then, as if reading his mind, Kushida tugged lightly at his sleeve and whispered.

"Hey... wanna go book a room?"

Kaoru nearly stumbled, turning to stare at her in shock.

A slender finger then poked his cheek as her voice dropped to a teasing murmur, "I heard there are private rooms here for resting. Wanna try one?"

"That's not the issue. Do you even realize what you're saying?"

Kaoru kept his expression blank, though her words were every man's ultimate fantasy.

"Duh. You think I dressed up this nicely for them?"

Kushida huffed, her eyes glinting mischievously. "Seriously, I've never done this before. I kinda wanna try it. And doesn't the idea of doing it on campus sound exciting?"

"So this is what you want for your birthday?"

For the first time, Kaoru was genuinely stunned by her.

"Hmm, you do have a point. That really wouldn't be appropriate."

Kushida withdrew her index finger, her face thoughtful. "Then let's wait until we've had our fun before getting a room."

Kaoru had to be firm in his opposition. "Hotels keep records. We'd better go back to my place instead."

Unexpectedly, Kushida burst into laughter, her eyes full of teasing.

"Is it possible... that I was just joking?"

The girl laughed for a while before quickly composing herself, her expression turning serious.

"But today is my birthday, so you have to listen to me. No objections allowed."

Kaoru had a feeling today might not go smoothly.

Chapter 486: Older Sister

They didn't end up getting a room—Kushida had just been teasing him.

Walking into a capsule hotel in broad daylight, looking all fresh and dewy? Absolutely not!

Since they were already out, Kaoru decided to ignore the stares around them and took Kushida to Keyaki Mall for some shopping.

Not to the food stalls, but to the arcade.

The two put on VR headsets and experienced the world of Jurassic dinosaurs, then tried their hand at racing—only to flip their car and drive backward, failing to even complete the first lap.

Perhaps because it consolidated most entertainment facilities, the arcade also had shooting ranges, archery, table tennis, billiards, and even an escape room.

Aside from these, Kaoru took her to try archery. With a five-meter target, she managed to hit the ceiling, the floor, and the walls—everything except the actual target.

Kushida didn't seem interested in arcade games.

After watching others play for a while, she grew bored and dragged Kaoru to the escape room instead.

By the end, even Kaoru felt slightly exhausted, but the girl was still full of energy, making him grateful for his choice.

"Haha, I've been to arcades before with Mi-chan and the others, but today feels different. It's kind of fun."

Kushida laughed for a bit before putting on a stern face, as if complaining.

"You usually seem so smart, but you couldn't even solve a few clues without me. Stupid perverted foot-lover."

"Yeah, yeah. Without the great Kushida-sama, I'd still be trapped in there, never to escape."

Kaoru couldn't be bothered to argue with her, a "second playthrough" player, and instead pointed at the nearby game consoles and claw machines.

"Want to give those a try?"

"I'm not a kid. Those things don't work on me."

Kushida reluctantly tore her gaze away from the claw machine. What would she even do with a plushie?

"You're making it hard for me to figure out what to give you."

Kaoru decided to be straightforward. "How about you close your eyes? I'll perform a magic trick for you."

Kushida's cheeks flushed slightly as she glared at him. "Who'd listen to you? You're just a perverted foot-fetishist with nothing but dirty thoughts."

Kaoru's face darkened.

He had been planning to pull out a reward—what was this girl imagining now?

"By the way, is your birthday in July?"

Kushida raised an eyebrow slightly, a strange glint flashing in her eyes that made Kaoru feel uneasy.

"Yeah, July." Kaoru replied.

At that, Kushida's expression shifted from suppressed excitement to visible exhilaration, her voice trembling slightly.

"So that means... you're a few months younger than me, right?" Kaoru fell silent.

When he was in high school, Kushida might still have been in her mother's womb.

Even now, he couldn't possibly say that out loud—it was too terrifying.

Kushida took his silence as agreement, a smug smile appearing on her face as she deliberately cleared her throat.

"Ahem, well, you are younger than me after all. It's normal not to understand girls very well. I won't hold the gift against you."

Kaoru understood her implication, his face darkening. "You want to be my older sister?"

The moment he said that, Kushida burst into laughter, shaking with mirth as she repeatedly patted his shoulder, nearly out of breath.

"Ahahaha! I—how was I supposed to know you're a few months younger than me? You always bullied me, but it turns out you're the younger one! You should be calling me 'big sis'!"

"This is the first time I've heard of an older sister being her little brother's slave."

Kaoru shot her a sidelong glance.

At that, Kushida's laughter abruptly stopped, her pretty face flushing red.

"N-none of your business! Can't you just call me 'big sis'?"

"I can. But you'll have to keep calling me 'master.' We'll each have our own titles."

"W-wait, who plays like that?!"

"Want to hear it, Kikyo?"

As his words hung in the air, Kushida stared fixedly at Kaoru, her throat bobbing as if she were enduring some immense trial.

"T-today's my birthday! I have special immunity!"

"So, does that mean when it's my birthday, Kikyo will obey my every whim?"

"Ugh..."

Kushida was tempted to agree outright—after all, his birthday wasn't today, and at worst, he'd just tease her a little.

But something about it still irked her!

She had wanted him to call her 'big sis' so she could bully him—how had it turned into her being the one getting bullied?

Seeing Kushida frozen in place, her face still flushed, Kaoru chuckled.

His gaze drifted over her skirt, which barely concealed her thighs, the black knee-high stockings hugging her slender calves, exuding the youthful energy unique to a girl her age. Especially the way her chest rose proudly, the dissatisfaction in her eyes, and the slight pout on her lips—it all conjured up certain images in his mind.

"Big sis."

Suppressing the odd feeling in his chest, Kaoru called out to the girl.

Kushida froze in place, her earlier displeasure slowly fading, replaced by excitement. Her cheeks flushed even deeper, her eyes sparkling.

"Say it again. I didn't hear you."

"Big sis, wipe that grin off your face."

"Ehehe, who could resist?! I think I'm feeling something extra—say it again~"

"That's enough."

No matter how much Kushida wheedled, Kaoru remained unmoved. He couldn't indulge his little puppy too much.

"Ugh, I should've recorded it!"

Kushida was annoyed, but remembering the sound of his voice made her inexplicably happy.

She couldn't quite describe the feeling—she just was.

Hearing him suppress his emotions and call her 'big sis' gave her an addictive thrill.

No wonder he liked making her call him 'master'—it really did feel good.

The two soon left the arcade. While eating at a restaurant, Kushida occasionally brushed her leg lightly against his.

"If you have something to say, just say it."

Kaoru couldn't take it anymore.

Unfazed by his tone, Kushida asked, "Do we look like a couple right now?" The girl sat beside him, their shoulders nearly touching—a subtle distance that suggested either close friendship or romance.

Moreover, the two made no effort to hide their closeness today.

As Kaoru spent time with her, he didn't avoid anyone's gaze, making it clear just how heated the rumors about them had become.

[First-Year's Cheating King],

[Two-Timing Scoundrel],

[Fake Angel],

[Kill Him],

[A New Girlfriend Every Semester]—and so on.

Rumors like these, Kaoru felt, were something he'd never be able to shake off.

So, he decided not to bother addressing them.

Meeting Kushida's gaze, Kaoru calmly rested his palm on her thigh and said, "This makes us look even more like a couple."

Kushida froze for a moment, only snapping back to reality after he gave her thigh a couple of light strokes.

Though her eyes flickered with shyness, she didn't push his mischievous hand away, feigning composure as she remarked, "No wonder you asked me out alone today. So you've decided to drop the act."

"I never said I was acting. If you don't mind, I'm the one benefiting here."

Kaoru's fingers traced the soft, plush curve of her thigh, the sensation warm and yielding beneath his touch.

Kushida, already reacting to his teasing, quickly pressed her hand over his to stop him from venturing further under her skirt.

Her cheeks flushed slightly as she whispered, "It's not just me, you know. If you want someone else, you'd better hurry."

Kaoru raised a brow.

What did she mean by that?

"Honestly, I wasn't planning on getting this close to you either. Having people think I have a boyfriend is a hassle. But... I realized this might not be so bad."

Her voice carried a complicated weight as she added, "About Yamauchi—I've already looked into him."

"Anything unusual?"

Kaoru withdrew his hand, his thoughts shifting to Nagumo Miyabi and Asahina Nazuna.

"Promise you won't get mad."

Kushida lowered her voice. "He likes Airi. Lately, he's been trying to get close to her—says he wants to confess."

Kaoru blinked, momentarily stunned.

He recalled the way Yamauchi had looked at Airi Sakura during the sports festival. He'd shut it down back then, but it seemed the guy still hadn't given up.

Kushida's tone turned distant, as if recalling something. "Even with a crush, girls tend to send out signals—[This one's mine, hands off]. Not that I'm interested in romance, but with you marking me, I won't have to worry about turning down confessions anymore."

Her words reflected reality.

A beauty like her never lacked suitors.

The reason Kaoru hadn't witnessed it firsthand was because she'd always handled it skillfully beforehand, leaving no room for false hope.

"So, you want me to openly build a harem?"

"That's what you said, I didn't say that."

"It just feels a bit unrealistic."

Whenever he thought of them, Kaoru inexplicably felt a sense of guilt. His intuition told him that something truly terrifying was waiting for him in the future.

"That's just how reality is."

Kushida said, "You've already done so much—there's no turning back now. Toughen up a little."

Kaoru's lips twitched.

Since when was it her turn to lecture him?

Seeing his expression, Kushida couldn't help but smile.

Though she had once wanted to deny it, Ichinose Honami's words did hold some truth.

She had to admit that sometimes, she felt possessive—wanting to be alone with him.

Or rather, to maintain a relationship, necessary alone time was a must. In other words, a so-called date.

"I don't care how many women you end up with in the future. Treating everyone equally is your responsibility."

Kaoru's mind was a mess. Even a time management master couldn't pull that off.

Kushida poked his cheek with her finger and smiled. "So, should we go watch a movie next?"

The standard dating procedure—of course she knew it. Young couples in love doing naughty things in the cinema.

"Are you actually planning to watch the movie properly?"

Kaoru eyed her mischievous grin.

Kushida blinked and whispered, "Don't you want to do something bad, Master?"

Kaoru stayed silent, his fingers subtly pressing deeper. Her breathing quickened, and she tightly clenched her thighs.

Chapter 487: Only With You Do I Want to Be Naughty

The movie was some artsy film—full of montages and incomprehensible scenes—but neither of them cared.

Kushida and Kaoru sat in the very last row.

In the dim lighting, she straightened slightly, legs pressed together.

Thanks to the indoor heating, she had hung her coat on the armrest beside her, leaving her shirt clinging tightly to her full chest. Her slightly short hair covered her ears, revealing the pale skin of her neck.

Her soft shoulders leaned gently to the side, while her small, delicate hand was held firmly in someone else's grasp.

As the light and shadows flickered across the screen, the girl's sweet fragrance occasionally drifted into Kaoru's nose.

She was slightly nervous, her small palm already damp with sweat.

Amused, Kaoru lowered his voice and whispered in her ear, "Big sis, are you thinking about doing something bad?"

Kushida jolted, momentarily ignoring that he had called her "big sis" again, and glared at him with flushed cheeks.

"You're the one thinking about it! I'm watching the movie!"

Kaoru smirked and raised his right hand, showing her his perfectly clean fingertips.

Kushida's face burned even redder.

Back at the restaurant, she had nearly embarrassed herself, and now, barely seated in the cinema, her mind was already filled with naughty thoughts—she hadn't been paying attention to the movie at all.

Even though this was just a movie screening, with a few other students present, her heartbeat refused to settle.

It was as if she hadn't come to a cinema but to a hotel.

Now that she had snapped out of it, the natural shyness of a girl finally kicked in.

Kaoru couldn't resist stroking her hand.

Even if this girl was a succubus, she was still an innocent one—like a high-attack, low-defense build during a training camp exam.

"Hey... when you went on a date with Honami, was it like this too?" Kushida wanted to change the subject.

"Shopping, eating, watching a movie, and then getting handsy."

"Any advice, Kikyo?" Kaoru asked with an amused smile.

"Not advice, just calling you a pervert."

Kushida shifted uncomfortably, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"But watching a movie with a guy isn't what I imagined."

"Not what you imagined?"

Kaoru held her hand, unconsciously recalling Ichinose from back then, feeling a rare stir in his heart.

"I couldn't focus. My heart was pounding the whole time. I thought it'd be more... romantic."

Kushida stammered out the words, her eyes shyly averted.

Kaoru had never quite understood what girls meant by "romantic."

What made a date romantic? What kind of atmosphere counted as romantic in a movie theater?

Under the shifting light, he studied the girl's profile—her slightly flushed cheeks, the crystalline glimmer in her eyes, her delicate porcelain-like skin, and her cute little nose.

Noticing his gaze, she grew visibly more nervous. The tips of her ears turned red, her lips parted slightly, and then she gently closed her eyes.

Kaoru was mildly surprised.

Did she think he was going to kiss her?

So, obligingly, he did.

Her lips were sweet and soft, like morning flower buds glistening with nectar—clear and delicious.

Kushida stiffened, her hands pressing weakly against his chest before gradually melting into him, soft whimpers escaping her nose.

"I... I don't think we had the same atmosphere as in the movies..."

Her voice was a breathy murmur. "It feels... feels too indecent. But kissing is addictive."

She couldn't explain why it felt indecent. Doing something improper in public carried a sense of moral transgression, of shame.

In movies, the protagonists agonized over the decision before mustering the courage to kiss their loved one in front of everyone.

But Kushida felt none of that. She just closed her eyes... and then they were kissing.

And she didn't want to stop.

Even though she knew it was wrong, that very knowledge made her heart race with excitement and longing.

She wanted to experience more of this "wrongness" in his arms.

"It's because you're a perv, Kikyo."

Kaoru lowered the armrest of the seat and pulled her burning body into his embrace.

"Normal girls don't outright say they want to get a room."

"That's not true! I only said it because you looked flustered, and I wanted to tease you."

Kushida squirmed as he wrapped an arm around her waist, her body nearly merging with his.

Her soft chest pressed against his arm, her heated cheek against his chest.

"E-even if I hadn't said it, you definitely would've led me into doing something bad."

"Like right now?"

Kaoru smirked, shifting his hand from hers to caress her softness instead.

Kushida froze, then frantically glanced around, relieved to find no one paying them any attention.

A small, conflicted sound escaped her as memories of their time together resurfaced.

"Pervert."

Her tone was half-complaint, half-pleasure, a faint smile playing on her lips.

"Having fun?"

"Soft and nice to touch. I like it."

Kaoru answered honestly.

Kushida suddenly felt embarrassed, an inexplicable shame washing over her.

Then she heard him ask, "How about you, Kikyo? Did it feel good?"

Kushida realized why she felt so ashamed.

Her face flushed as if she were drunk, and she lightly bit her lip.

"You're amazing... Every time, you make me feel so happy, so good... Mmm... I—I can't say it anymore..."

It was too humiliating—especially voicing her feelings in such a situation.

Seeing her reaction, Kaoru grew even bolder, a faint smirk playing on his lips as he soon had the girl panting and limp, unable to move.

Just as he was about to stop, Kushida, her face still red, silently pulled something out.

"Looks like the little angel is turning into a little succubus," Kaoru teased. "Aren't you afraid someone might see?"

"N-no choice... It's already... like this..."

Her face was flushed, her thighs pressing together slightly. "It's dark here... No one will see."

Kaoru thought to himself how fortunate it was that he had some unusual rewards—otherwise, this girl would definitely get into trouble.

"Is... is it not okay?"

Kushida didn't consider herself a proper girl.

The reason she took the initiative was because the thrill of the moment excited her, making her feel free and unburdened, as if she had shed her mask.

Perhaps during summer break, Kaoru had already awakened her peculiar desires.

Kaoru kissed her lightly and whispered, "I like a naughty Kikyo, but I don't want you to lose all sense of boundaries, obsessed with nothing but dirty thoughts."

He had plenty of ways to ensure no one saw them, but Kushida didn't know that.

She was just chasing the thrill, and if she kept pushing limits like this, he worried she might spiral into depravity.

Kushida stared at him for a moment before a faint smile tugged at her lips.

"Idiot... It's only with you that I'm like this."

With that, the girl kissed him.

Chapter 488: Too Bold

Kaoru lowered his head to see the girl's bright eyes gleaming in the dim light, her slightly flushed cheeks, gazing at him without blinking.

He was already struggling to resist the youthful allure of her—her full, tender chest occasionally brushing against his, soft and fragrant, her body igniting primal desire no matter where his hands wandered.

Her plush thighs pressed together, resting against him, her skirt slightly disheveled to reveal a glimpse of snow-white skin.

Her calves remained hidden beneath her stockings, their thick texture warm yet silky, like handling a fragile piece of art—torn between fearing he might hurt her and wanting to do just that.

"Has Honami ever done anything bad with you here?"

Kushida leaned in so close she was practically on top of him, her lips grazing his earlobe.

The supple bounce of her chest pressed against him with each slightly hurried breath, her body radiating heat uncontrollably.

"Why do you care about that?"

Kaoru's breathing grew heavier, his rationality drowning in her temptation.

"At least pretend to watch the movie for a bit. Who'd believe this is a proper date when you're like this?"

Kushida also knew that a proper date wasn't supposed to be like this—at least not the way she and Kaoru were carrying on.

And proper girls certainly wouldn't take the initiative as boldly as she did.

But who could blame her? He was the one who had corrupted her in the first place—whether it was outdoor "adjustments" or those intimate "steaming sessions."

Even if Kushida wanted to return to her proper self, after everything they'd done, how could she possibly pretend none of it happened?

Not only was it impossible, but she couldn't help craving even more mischief.

"Because I can't control myself... and neither can you, right?"

Kushida rubbed against him, her soft lips brushing his neck as she spoke, her warm breath tickling his skin.

Every now and then, a fleeting, slick sensation teased him.

Kaoru only felt an itch, but before he could react, the girl's mischievous hands began wandering—just as he had done earlier—and soon found their way to his most vulnerable spot.

"Every time I'm with you, I feel like I'm the virtuous one here."

Kaoru suspected the Wish Machine must have been with her instead of him. "Isn't this a bit out of character, little angel?"

Even now, he still had the nerve to tease her. Kushida pouted slightly in dissatisfaction.

But her displeasure didn't last long.

Kaoru was no pushover either.

He quickly found the girl's weak spots, his familiar techniques working their magic once more, making her shoulders tremble lightly as her face flushed crimson.

"Don't act like you're innocent. A pet takes after its owner— isn't that just how it is?"

Kushida no longer denied her role.

The humiliation of the past had long faded, replaced by the thrilling tension of their little games.

The words sounded familiar.

Kaoru abandoned reason, pulling her onto his lap and adjusting their position so he could torment her more effectively.

The girl in his arms murmured something under her breath, just enough to fuel the predatory desire rising within him.

The sweet scent clinging to her was like rich, tempting cheese—overwhelmingly saccharine with just a single taste, enough to make her melt helplessly.

The rapid rise and fall of her chest made it seem as though she were engaged in some intense physical exertion.

Kaoru rested his palm on her slender waist—so delicate yet curvaceous, with a plush rear that defied expectations.

It was hard to believe this was the figure of a young girl: voluptuous where it mattered, yet impossibly soft and slender where it counted.

Just holding her like this filled his mind with nothing but her, his so-called rationality evaporating at an alarming rate.

"You can be even rougher if you want... Today's my birthday, after all."

Kushida bit her lip. "I'm happy you agreed to go out with me... because you didn't deny what we are."

"Honami suggested it. She thought I should spend the day with you alone."

Kaoru tried to steady his breathing, but the girl's body only grew hotter against him, her soft yet resilient curves pressing firmly into his thighs.

Kushida couldn't help but giggle, her voice tender. "You've already spoiled me enough. Kei's way more jealous than I am."

Though Karuizawa never said it outright, everyone knew what happened on Christmas—how Ichinose, as the official girlfriend, had monopolized Kaoru's time.

"Don't bring her up. You're jealous too."

Kaoru gave her pert backside a light smack. "I won't be able to hold back much longer."

"If you can't hold back, then don't. What's the big deal?"

Kushida curled her lips into a smirk, deliberately rubbing against his thigh as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Since you already think I'm jealous, why not just indulge me a little?"

Kaoru remained expressionless, his fingers twitching slightly. Her smile gradually faded, replaced by a flush she struggled to suppress, tears glistening in her eyes.

The girl bit her lip hard, refusing to let out even a whimper.

Her fair neck slowly turned pink, and with each stifled sob, her delicate petals grew damp with dew, exuding a faint, sweet fragrance.

In the end, she collapsed weakly into Kaoru's arms, her body trembling faintly.

As if it were the first time, Kaoru raised his finger and smiled at Kushida.

Kushida was both flustered and annoyed.

Every time, he would play with her until things spiraled out of control, as if she were no match for him at all.

But in the depths of passion, even if she felt ashamed, the girl couldn't deny his way of playing.

Under Kaoru's slightly surprised gaze, she gently licked his finger, then took it into her mouth, her moist eyes fixed on him.

This girl really needs to be taught a lesson.

Kaoru could no longer hold back.

She bit Kaoru's ear, her originally fair skin now flushed a delicate pink.

On the screen, the protagonist was shouting the name of their beloved, riding a bicycle through the crowd.

A flash of crimson appeared before Kaoru's eyes—the hem of the heroine's skirt fluttering in the wind, revealing her slender, straight calves.

Kaoru stroked her thigh, the smooth silk-like texture and plush softness blending with the stimulation from both the movie and reality, making it impossible to distinguish between the two.

"I... I like you. Just having you by my side is the best gift."

Panting, the girl clung tightly to Kaoru. "Don't you dare abandon your pet, or I'll be the first to bite you to death."

Kaoru could feel her trembling.

Her breast were already half-exposed, yet they lacked the coldness they should have had—instead, they were warm, impossibly soft.

Her snow-white thighs pressed against him, her skirt draped over them, her heartbeat as frantic as a deer's, unbearably fervent.

"That's supposed to be my line, Kikyo," Kaoru murmured softly. "Stay by my side forever... please, Kikyo-nee."

Kushida shifted slightly, weakly punching his shoulder.

She had meant to keep a stern face, but for some reason, she ended up laughing.

"Don't joke around in a situation like this... you're so annoying."

"You're the one who told me to call you 'nee-san.'"

"It's not fun anymore... it's all your fault..."

Muttering to herself, she unconsciously touched her stomach, her expression growing even more bashful.

"Ehehe... do you think there'll be a baby?"

Kaoru's face darkened.

Did she secretly poke a hole in it or something?

Chapter 489: Hurry Up and Take a Bath

"The photo looks weird... do I look fat?"

"It's just the filter and angle. You were too close to the camera."

"Your smile looks disgusting."

"..."

After the movie, the two spotted a photo booth on the first floor of the mall.

Kushida, intrigued, dragged him inside to take several sets of pictures.

"Oh no... this really feels like we're a couple."

The more she looked, the more Kushida felt that her and Kaoru's expressions were way too cheesy—exactly like those of a young couple in a movie.

Especially her—how could she be smiling so happily?

"If you don't like it, then don't smile. Now we both look like idiots."

Kaoru was speechless.

She was the one who insisted on this expression, and now she's complaining that it's too cringey.

"None of your business. This doesn't even match our relationship." Kushida declared righteously, "You should be more submissive—no, wait, today's my birthday, so I should be the assertive one. You should be more obedient."

Kaoru lightly swatted the girl's pert backside, reminding her that her birthday wasn't a free pass.

"Stingy. It's not like I'm asking for anything unreasonable."

Kushida muttered under her breath but didn't push further.

Instead, she carefully tucked away the photo booth pictures she had earlier called "disgusting."

"Give me one. Why are you taking all of them?"

Kaoru also wanted a keepsake.

Kushida's cheeks flushed slightly as she whispered, "No way. These are too embarrassing. Just thinking about you looking at them every day makes me cringe."

Kaoru stared at her silently until she relented, reluctantly handing over one photo.

"It's not that bad, is it?"

He examined the picture closely—it showed the two of them pressed close together, shoulders nearly touching, both smiling brightly.

Kushida didn't answer.

How could she admit that the way they were positioned made it look like they were about to kiss?

"Mm-hmm, I'm satisfied for today. Now I've done everything you did with Honami."

Stepping out of the photo booth, Kushida stretched, her ample chest bouncing slightly as a contented smile spread across her face.

"Let's go shopping."

Kaoru checked the time—the clothing stores probably weren't closed yet.

Kushida turned to him, blinking. "You're really going to buy me a gift, just like Honami said?"

"If I only think to buy you things on your birthday, then the so-called 'birthday gift' is just a self-serving souvenir for my own satisfaction," Kaoru replied. "I think it's necessary for me to learn your preferences—what you usually like to wear, what you use."

"Smooth talker."

Despite her words, Kushida's expression softened.

Being cared for, having someone genuinely consider her feelings—it was a completely new experience.

But since Kaoru had gone this far, she saw no reason to hold back. She promptly led him to a women's clothing store.

...

At the doorway of the apartment, Karuizawa stood with her arms crossed, her gaze lingering on the numerous shopping bags in Kaoru's hands.

Her expression shifted slightly.

"Eh? Kei, what are you doing here?"

Kushida was startled, but the moment the words left her mouth, she realized her mistake and quickly corrected herself with a bright smile.

"Ah, sorry for monopolizing Master's time all day."

Karuizawa turned her head slightly away.

She was wearing an apron, her feet snug in white stockings, giving off the vibe of a domestic girlfriend.

"It's fine. It's your birthday, after all. Come in quickly—it's freezing outside."

With that, she turned and walked back into the living room.

Kushida leaned in close to Kaoru and whispered with certainty, "You'd better find some alone time with her soon. She's way too jealous."

And for good reason.

There had been no time during Christmas, none at the end of winter break, and even after returning to school, their schedules remained packed.

Soon, it would be Horikita Suzune's birthday.

Kaoru did the math—it seemed the only solution was to make time for Karuizawa sooner rather than later.

"Something smells amazing. Are you two cooking?"

By now, Kushida had already stepped into the living room, where she spotted Horikita Suzune in the kitchen.

Karuizawa, who had no culinary skills to speak of, could only assist as a helper.

"Mm, just wait a little longer. I originally expected you'd return around seven in the evening."

Horikita Suzune's voice was flat, devoid of any discernible joy or awkwardness.

"Ahaha, is that so?"

Kushida's smile seemed somewhat perfunctory.

To be honest, she hadn't expected Horikita Suzune to go this far, leaving her with mixed feelings.

As Kaoru set down his belongings, Kushida approached him with a grave expression, whispering in a hushed tone.

"Are you planning to throw a music party in your room under the guise of my birthday?"

With several people gathered like this, it clearly had the makings of a birthday party.

Kushida suspected Kaoru had ulterior motives—likely aiming to recreate their previous group escapade.

However, Kaoru responded with a karate chop to her head.

"If I were planning a music party, you'd be the first sacrifice."

Kushida's face flushed red with a mix of anger and impatience.

What kind of attitude was that? Was he throwing the party or not?

Had she known it would turn out like this, she should've bought a new box of supplies on the way back.

Wait, hold on—if there weren't any, wouldn't that mean...?

Kaoru delivered another karate chop, shattering her delusions.

"Stop blaming me for everything. You're the lewdest one here."

Kushida glared at him in dissatisfaction.

It wasn't like she was some pervert—she just enjoyed watching others fall into depravity alongside her.

Kaoru headed to the kitchen, but just as he was about to help, Karuizawa tugged at his sleeve and whispered.

"Honami went to prepare the birthday cake. She won't be back for a while."

"This birthday party seems to be making her restless."

Kaoru glanced at Kushida, who was fidgeting in the living room, stealing glances their way.

Perhaps due to Horikita's presence, she felt too awkward to approach.

"I heard Kikyo turned down an invitation from Wang and the others. If not for you, she'd probably be singing at a karaoke bar right now."

Karuizawa pondered for a moment. "Could it be that, with us here, she assumed tonight would be another one of your... sessions?"

"I should've brought her back later."

Kaoru reflected on his actions. Had he waited until Horikita and the others were fully prepared before returning with Kushida, the moment the door opened, they could've surprised her with birthday poppers.

"You should've just texted us in the first place. Now we're all stuck in this awkward situation—this is exactly your problem, Kaoru."

Karuizawa puffed out her cheeks. "If you were going shopping anyway, you might as well have taken your time and come back late."

Kaoru had no choice but to surrender. He really hadn't thought things through.

After scolding him for a while, Karuizawa suddenly asked, "Do you want to take a shower now?"

Kaoru was puzzled.

Wasn't it a bit early for that?

"Don't you need my help in the kitchen?"

"No. Go shower. Now."

"..."

Karuizawa shooed him out of the kitchen and huffily returned to her station.

Horikita, standing nearby, found this odd and asked, "Wouldn't it be faster to have him stay?"

Kaoru's cooking skills weren't bad either—Horikita had to admit the guy was competent.

"Can't you smell it?"

Karuizawa gritted her teeth. "Even though they were out on a date, they still had the nerve to...!"

During the training camp, and now today—Karuizawa was convinced Kushida was nothing but a sneaky cat, always ready to pounce on any opportunity to steal a bite.

Horikita was utterly lost.

Her mind hadn't been on Kaoru at all!

Chapter 490: Wiping the Slate Clean

Seeing Kaoru come out, Kushida stopped pretending to fiddle with her phone and quickly approached him, whispering.

"What exactly are you guys planning?"

"Didn't you say you wanted a party?"

Kaoru chuckled, "I don't mind indulging you later if you want."

"Stop joking around! You're the only one enjoying this!"

Kushida blushed and lightly hit him a few times before hesitating, "Are you really preparing a birthday party for me?"

Kaoru turned to Horikita Suzune and immediately said, "Suzune, Kikyo is asking if you got her a birthday present."

"Ugh, you're the worst!"

Kushida was furious—she had never asked such a thing.

"Yes, do you want it now?"

Horikita Suzune looked over as if she could materialize a birthday gift out of thin air the moment Kushida nodded.

For some reason, Kushida felt extremely uncomfortable.

Horikita probably assumed she hated her because of what happened in middle school.

But Kushida knew exactly why she despised her.

A lofty genius who didn't have to lift a finger yet effortlessly surpassed mediocrity like her—naturally the center of attention, shining so brightly that it eclipsed her own light.

Kushida relished her status, basking in the admiration and popularity she commanded wherever she went.

But ever since encountering more and more geniuses in middle school, they had stolen the spotlight that once belonged to her, leaving Kushida deeply resentful.

Yet there was little she could do except pour her efforts into social connections, meticulously maintaining her "little angel" persona.

In this way, even if she lacked talent, those around her would still flock to her.

Horikita was different.

This girl possessed striking beauty, exceptional abilities, and a natural charisma that drew people in.

If she were willing to lower herself to their level, Kushida believed that not just their class, but the entire grade—perhaps even the whole school—would revere her name.

Yet, Horikita never descended. She remained an untouchable goddess.

Kushida had originally thought she would never have any interaction with such a person—until they were placed in the same class.

During their time in Class D, she had witnessed Horikita being mocked and targeted by their classmates, but she had also seen Horikita attempt to change herself and integrate into the group.

Nowadays, the class no longer ridiculed her as they had at the beginning of the school year.

After all, they had spent so much time together and had come to understand her personality.

Moreover, it was clear that this girl was striving for the sake of the class, determined to lead Class 1-D to the heights of Class A.

Her emotions in turmoil, Kushida couldn't quite define what she was feeling.

She had once despised geniuses like Horikita—those who could effortlessly overshadow her own worth—and Horikita was the most arrogant of them all.

But now, staring into Horikita's bright, familiar eyes, Kushida found herself momentarily at a loss for words.

Noticing this, Kaoru smiled faintly. "Suzune's birthday is next month, isn't it?"

One born in January, the other in February—their connection felt strangely fated.

Horikita Suzune assumed he wanted to discuss birthday plans and immediately refused.

"If this is about a date, I don't need that kind of thing."

"Are you worried about Horikita-senpai seeing you?"

Truthfully, Kaoru was also nervous about that.

He had no idea what expression Horikita Manabu would make if he found out about him and Suzune.

At the mention of Horikita Manabu, Suzune's expression shifted.

For once, she stumbled over her words. "W-why would I worry about that? My brother is my brother, and I am me. I've already come to terms with that. I just... I just want to prove to him that I'm not the same person I was before."

Having said that, she inexplicably glared at Kaoru.

"Su-Suzune, is that... smoking?" Karuizawa pointed fearfully at the pan.

"Oh no, I almost forgot about this!"

Horikita Suzune no longer had time for him or Kushida. Frantically, she adjusted the heat, scrambling to salvage the poor cutlet.

Kaoru pretended not to see and headed to the bathroom, intending to draw a bath.

Meanwhile, Kushida hesitantly approached the kitchen, her gaze flickering between Horikita Suzune and Karuizawa.

"Want some?"

Assuming Kushida was hungry, Karuizawa stuffed a piece of tempura into her own mouth before skewering another for her.

Kushida leaned in and took a bite.

"Is it good?" Karuizawa mumbled through her full mouth. "I've had Kaoru's tempura before, but Suzune's is amazing too. I've already eaten two pieces."

"Don't compare me to him. Just take the whole plate if you want."

Horikita Suzune decided she probably didn't need this kitchen mouse's help and crunched down on something beside her.

Karuizawa was quite displeased.

She could only channel certain emotions into her appetite, otherwise she'd feel irritated just seeing certain people, even though she hadn't done anything wrong.

"Can I really eat all of this?"

"I can just make another portion."

"Suzune, you're the best."

Karuizawa crunched loudly on the tempura, and Kushida found it amusing, mimicking her crunching sounds.

"Did you already do it today?"

Kushida nearly spat out her food.

This gyaru was way too blunt, wasn't she?

"Aha, Suzune's cooking is really good," Kushida awkwardly changed the subject. "By the way, why are you all here?"

Karuizawa stared at her for a while, until it became unnerving, then flashed a smile.

"Isn't today your birthday? So we decided to celebrate it for you. Surprised?"

Kushida's feelings were complicated as she whispered, "It is surprising, but it kinda feels like a harem gathering."

Yes, she finally understood why she had jokingly mentioned an "orgy" earlier.

Because this felt too... normal.

Their relationships seemed to have progressed beyond just close friends, even though they were all technically part of Kaoru's harem.

The very people she should be jealous of were all here now.

Kushida couldn't even bring herself to say anything insincere, because Karuizawa clearly held some resentment toward her, yet was still willing to hang out.

What surprised her even more was that Horikita Suzune was also here.

"Harem... what a disgusting term," Karuizawa Kei muttered. "I prefer the term 'teammates.'"

"Teammates?" Kushida didn't understand.

Horikita Suzune interjected, "Kei thinks anyone with a ring is a teammate. Those without are enemies."

"W-well, that's just how it is! If more and more 'stray cats' keep appearing, you'd all get annoyed too!" Karuizawa Kei flusteredly but firmly asserted her stance.

Kushida recalled the name Kaoru had told her and hesitated to speak.

If Karuizawa found out about this, she'd probably consider the whole world her enemy.

Horikita Suzune, however, remained unfazed and said coolly, "My relationship with him won't progress any further. I might lose to him in high school, but not in my future."

Where did this confidence come from? Kushida turned her face away—this was exactly why she disliked Horikita Suzune.

"But Suzune, you also got a ring. You'll get married someday and have babies, right?" Karuizawa asked shyly, as that was her own post-graduation goal.

Horikita Suzune was momentarily speechless.

Marriage... and babies?

In her over ten years of life, she had never once imagined these words would ever apply to her.

"N-no, that won't happen," Horikita Suzune denied Karuizawa words.

She believed Kaoru wouldn't constrain her life. "If he tries to force me, I'll just return this ring."

A flicker of delight crossed Karuizawa Kei's face.

Great, one less "stray cat" to worry about.

"Hahaha, Horikita, I was overthinking things after all!" Kushida suddenly burst into laughter, nearly to the point of tears, leaving Horikita Suzune utterly confused.

"You think I can't do it?" Horikita Suzune grew irritated.

Come to think of it, it was Kushida who had dragged her into this mess in the first place.

Otherwise, she wouldn't be in this situation today.

"No, you should be able to do it."

Kushida suppressed her smile and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. "Who else but you would even think of doing something so foolish? Who else but you would actually go through with it?"

Horikita Suzune suspected she was being attacked and took a deep breath.

Today was her birthday—she wouldn't stoop to arguing.

"How strange. It's bizarre that I've been competing with someone like you all this time. Even lying in bed, I'd feel resentful just thinking about it."

"Enough!"

Horikita Suzune was furious.

Why did she have to bring up what happened in bed?

But Kushida simply grinned at her.

"Don't be mad. We're both part of his harem now, teammates, so let's call it even. Next month, I'll prepare a birthday gift for you too."

Horikita froze for a moment at her words.

Meanwhile, Kushida nonchalantly picked up a piece of tempura from the plate and crunched into it.

"Why don't you two go eat somewhere else?"

Karuizawa, seeing the plate emptied, narrowed her eyes and volunteered, "I'll stay behind to learn cooking from you! I want to make delicious miso soup in the future!"

Horikita's gaze darkened.

Was she planning to sneak bites while also building up her image in front of Kaoru?

Kushida, however, breezed out of the kitchen with ease, intending to pester Kaoru in the bathroom—when suddenly, she heard noise from the entrance.

Turning her head, she saw Ichinose standing at the door, holding a large box.

"Wow, Kikyo! You guys came back so fast!"

The moment she saw her, Ichinose's eyes widened in surprise.

Kushida was speechless.

If she was going to pull something like this, she could've at least planned it more carefully.

"I didn't see—"

Halfway through her sentence, it was Kushida's turn to be shocked.

Because behind Ichinose stood a petite figure—a familiar-looking girl with a round bun hairstyle, peeking timidly into the room from the doorway.

"U-um, excuse me..."

Tachibana Akane, a former member of the student council from Class 3-A, greeted Kushida with visible awkwardness.