

## God of Milfs 471

### Chapter 471: A Cute Couple

"W-We're just a boss and employee, ma'am...We're not a couple or anything!" She said quickly, her voice a little too forced and uncharacteristically flustered.

The couple only waved cheerfully, the man adding with a wink, "Employee or not, you two look rather cute together!...Reminds me of the days my wife and I started to go out!"

"Oh, you!~" The lady blushed at her husband's comment as she lovingly held his arms as they entered the changing room.

As the door clicked shut behind the couple, I turned back to Nina, propping myself against the counter with a grin I knew would get under her skin, and said,

"Guess we're not fooling anyone, huh?"

She crossed her arms with a dramatic harumph, tilting her chin up in mock disdain. "Keep it professional, Kafka." She retorted, though the faint pink dusting her cheeks betrayed her usual composure.

I didn't need to press her to know her thoughts had wandered. The idea of the two of us running this place together like a married couple had clearly stirred something in her.

The wistful look that flickered in her eyes for the briefest moment was impossible to miss. It wasn't just embarrassment; it was softer, dreamier, like the thought had snuck past her defences before she could shove it aside.

I opened my mouth, ready to tease her about it, but her sharp gaze snapped to mine, defensive.

"What are you smirking at?" She asked inquisitively.

"Nothing." I quickly said, though the amusement in my voice wasn't exactly subtle.

Her eyes narrowed as if she didn't believe me, but she let it go, huffing as she turned away.

For a moment, silence lingered between us, but I could feel her thoughts churning. She glanced at me, then away, like she wanted to ask something but couldn't bring herself to do it.

Finally, she crossed her arms tighter, her voice brisk and edged with curiosity as she asked,

"How do you even know so much about this place? All that stuff about minerals and circulation... You sounded like you'd been working here for years."

"I pay attention." I replied vaguely, enjoying the flicker of irritation that crossed her face.

Nina scowled, her lips parting like she wanted to press further. I could see the unspoken question lingering there, like she wanted to know how I dealt with them so easily or how I always seemed to know exactly what to say.

But she stopped herself. Experience new stories on empire

Maybe she thought asking would give me too much satisfaction, or maybe she figured I'd only answer with more smugness. Either way, she bit her tongue, her pride keeping her silent.

Instead, she focused on the safer question.

"Even I didn't know some of those details. Where'd you learn all that, huh?"

"Seriously, Nina? From the pamphlet. The one sitting right there on your counter." I leaned back against the counter, raising an incredulous brow.

Her mouth fell open slightly, then closed again as realisation dawned. "Oh." she muttered, her voice dropping.

"Yeah." I said, crossing my arms to mirror her stance. "How do you not know that when it's your pamphlet in your own place?"

A guilty look crossed her face as she shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm...not the biggest fan of reading, so I never even touched those pamphlets other than when I gave them out to guests." She admitted reluctantly, her voice quieter now, like she was confessing a deep, dark secret.

I couldn't help the wry smile that tugged at my lips.

"Figures." I said lightly, the single word carrying just enough teasing to hit its mark.

Nina's glare intensified, her cheeks flushing a deeper shade of pink.

"You little brat! D-Don't you dare look down on me!" She huffed, stepping closer with her fists clenched.

Before I could react, she swung at me—not seriously, of course, but with enough force to make her point. I

But of course I ducked easily, dodging her playful strike.

"Whoa! Is this how you treat your employees?" I teased, grinning as I straightened.

"Maybe if they weren't so insufferable!" She shot back, aiming another playful swipe, which I sidestepped just in time.

Her irritation only seemed to grow with every missed attempt.

"Stand still, you coward!" She demanded, lunging toward me.

"Not a chance, my angry little sapling." I said, laughing as I sidestepped her again. "I value my life, thanks."

She growled under her breath, her frustration mounting as she tried to land a hit. Her strikes were quick, but I was quicker, weaving out of her reach each time.

"Nina..." I said between laughs. "...You're really going to tire yourself out before the next wave of customers-..."

Ding~ Ding~

As if summoned by my words, the distant chime of the entrance bell interrupted us. Both of us froze mid-motion, turning toward the sound. Moments later, the soft hum of approaching voices grew louder—much louder than before.

Nina straightened, brushing imaginary dust off her sleeves as she threw me a sharp look.

"Looks like we're about to get busy." She said, her tone all business now, though her flushed cheeks betrayed the lingering embarrassment from our scuffle.

I adjusted my posture, cracking my knuckles with exaggerated flair.

"I'm ready for anything." I said confidently, then paused just long enough to catch her gaze and continued saying in a cheesy manner, "As long as you're by my side."

Her eyes widened, and the blush that had started to fade came rushing back in full force, unable to believe that she was getting embarrassed over such a cringey line.

She opened her mouth as if to retort, but no words came out. Instead, she quickly turned away, busying herself with organising the counter, though it was already perfectly tidy.

I watched her for a moment, the corner of my mouth twitching upward. She muttered something under her breath, though I couldn't make it out. Whatever it was, the way her lips pressed together told me she wasn't as annoyed as she wanted to appear.

As the first of the new customers stepped through the door, Nina threw me a glance over her shoulder.

Her expression softened just enough to reveal a flicker of something tender, something possessive, almost as if she were thinking that as annoying and bratty as I was, she wouldn't mind spending the

rest of her life running the inn with that same person, keeping him as an employee who just can't run away from her no matter what...

#### Chapter 472: Arranged Marriage

As the last guest of the bustling morning crowd disappeared into the changing room, Nina let out a dramatic groan, slumping against me like a marionette with its strings cut.

"I'm exhausted." She muttered, her voice muffled against my shoulder. "I swear, I miss the days when we only had a handful of customers. This...This is too much."

I chuckled softly, gently steadying her.

"Come on, Nina, don't give up on me now." I teased, wrapping an arm around her shoulder for support. "You're the proud owner here...What happened to that endless energy of yours?"

She let out a huff and waved me off.

"That energy ran out around the thirtieth guest." She grumbled, her head flopping against my chest.

"Alright, my drama queen." I said, smiling as I slowly guided her toward the counter.

With her groaning all the way, I managed to seat herself on her chair.

"Well, at least money's pouring in, Nina." I said, settling into the chair behind the counter beside her with a light grin. I leaned back, stretching my arms lazily before adding, "You could buy whatever you want with it, you know...Fancy clothes, a mountain of sweets, maybe even a vacation somewhere with actual peace and quiet. All this hard work's gotta pay off somehow, right?"

She wrinkled her nose at the comment, flicking her gaze at me with half-hearted irritation.

"I've never cared about the money, Kafka." She replied, her voice quiet but sincere. "I already have everything I need in the world...And if I really cared about money, I would've sold this place for an astronomical price."

"That is true." I glanced at her, my curiosity piqued. "Then why not limit the number of people who can come? You could cut the crowd in half and make your workload easier."

She straightened a little, her fatigue fading as something stronger flickered in her eyes.

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"Because it's not about making things easier, Kafka." She said softly. "I want everyone to experience this place. This isn't just a business to me; it's my mother's legacy." She hesitated for a moment, then continued, her voice laced with emotion. "She poured everything into these hot springs, made them magical. I can't deny anyone the chance to feel that, no matter how tiring it gets."

Her words carried a weight I wasn't prepared for. For a moment, I just stood there, staring at her. The passion in her voice, the determination on her face—it hit me harder than I expected.

Without thinking, I leaned closer and wrapped my arms around her in a deep hug.

Hug~

As I wrapped my arms around Nina, I felt her stiffen, her breath catching in surprise. For a moment, I thought she was flustered by the sudden act of affection, but surprisingly she didn't pull away. Instead, she stayed there, motionless, as though she really needed this hug at the moment.

"Kafka...Why are you hugging me so tightly?" Her voice was quiet but steady when she finally spoke.

I didn't loosen my grip, resting my chin lightly on her shoulder.

"This is for all the years of effort you've put into this place." I said softly, my tone earnest. "For every long day, every late night, and every ounce of dedication you've poured into keeping your mother's dream alive...I'm so proud of you for that, you know, Nina. So freaking proud of you."

Nina didn't respond right away. When she finally did, her voice carried a teasing lilt.

"You think a single hug is enough to make up for all of that?" She asked, her lips quirking in a half-smile.

"Does it?" I leaned back slightly to meet her gaze, raising a brow.

For a second, she just looked at me, her expression softening. Then, to my surprise, a beautiful, radiant smile spread across her face—a smile so warm and genuine it caught me off guard.

"It does." She said quietly, her voice filled with something deeper, more vulnerable. And then, without any hesitation, she lifted her arms and hugged me back, her embrace firm yet comforting. "It really does."

I felt her head rest lightly against my shoulder, and something in her posture shifted. It was as if the weight she'd been carrying for so long had lessened, even if only for a moment.

"You know." She murmured after a beat, her tone light but laced with sincerity. "I feel like I could take on any amount of work, no matter how exhausting, as long as you're by my side."

Her words made my chest tighten in the best way, but, of course, I couldn't let a moment like that go without adding my own twist, so I leaned closer with a teasing grin and said,

"Well, if that's true, then why don't you just leave your husband, Nina, and come with me?...I'll make sure that there isn't a day that you feel like you're carrying a burden, and even if you are, it will be with me right by your side."

Her reaction was immediate. She gasped, her eyes going wide before narrowing into a glare.

"Kafka!" She yelled, her cheeks flaming. Without missing a beat, she punched me square in the stomach, not hard enough to do damage, but enough to make me stumble back, laughing.

"Ow, ow!" I protested between chuckles, holding up my hands in mock surrender. "What? I was just joking!"

"Joking, my ass, you little twerp!" She snapped, her face still flushed as she shoved me further away. "This and that are completely different! M-My relationship with my husband is way more complicated than you think, and it's not simply a matter of leaving him or not!"

"Complicated how, Nina?" I asked, my voice light but laced with genuine curiosity. She looked ready to fire back, but before she could, I pressed on, my tone casual yet deliberate. "It's not like you married him because you were madly in love or anything."

"...It was an arranged marriage, wasn't it? Set up by your parents."

Her sharp inhale was all the confirmation I needed.

She stiffened, her lips parting as if to deny it, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, she turned her face away, her hands balling into tight fists at her sides.

The silence stretched, heavy and unspoken, as memories I'd pieced together over time filled the space between us.

Nina's parents had always been her anchor, their quiet but enduring love shaping the person she'd become. As they grew older, their worry for her only deepened. They'd given her the tools to run the hot spring, to carve out her own place in the world, but they feared it wasn't enough. They feared for the days when they might no longer be there for her, when the strength they'd always lent her would no longer be hers to lean on.

She, of course, didn't see it that way. Nina had always been adamant, stubborn even. To her, the hot spring and her family were everything she needed. She didn't want a partner. She didn't want to tether herself to anyone, and she made that perfectly clear. But her parents weren't so easily convinced. They saw past her bravado to the quiet loneliness she refused to acknowledge.

But when her mother's health began to decline, everything changed.

Chapter 473: Noble Sacrifice

Her mother's frail voice carried a single wish—to see Nina married, to know she wouldn't be alone before it was too late.

It wasn't a demand, but it might as well have been. Nina could never deny the people she loved most.

At first, they sought someone from their own race, someone who shared their traditions and understood their ways. But life wasn't that simple. There was no one nearby in a little town in the outskirts, and with time slipping away, they turned to a human family with a son also in need of a match.



It wasn't perfect, but it was something.

I could imagine Nina's fury when they first told her. She would've fought it, her voice sharp, her protests unwavering. But when her mother's health worsened—when she saw the hope and desperation in her parents' eyes—something in her must have cracked.

I could see it as if I'd been there: the resignation in her gaze, the way she'd bit back her pride and agreed, not for herself, but for them. Because that's who she was, someone who bore the weight of love, even when it crushed her own dreams.

But even though Nina didn't manage to marry someone who truly understood her—someone she thought would one day sweep into her life and see her for all that she was—she didn't let that heartbreak swallow her.

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Nina wasn't the type to wallow. She was spirited, resilient, the kind of person who could face storms with her head held high. So, she made a decision: if this was the life she'd been given, she'd make the best of it. She convinced herself that love could grow with time, that she could carve out something meaningful from this marriage if she just worked hard enough.

But reality had other plans.

Her husband, from the very beginning, seemed disinterested in building anything with her. He wasn't cold in the traditional sense—he didn't argue or cause conflicts.

No, his indifference was worse.

It was passive, quiet, and unrelenting. Nina quickly realised that he had been forced into this union just as much as she had. His parents, alarmed by his reclusive nature, had likely seen her as the perfect solution: a strong, independent woman with a thriving business, someone who could provide him with stability.

But the truth went deeper.

He hadn't just been unwilling to marry anyone; he had been unwilling to marry someone like her. A variant human.

Nina wasn't naive; she had heard the whispers and felt the weight of stares from those who saw her as different. But she'd never let it define her. She carried herself with pride.

Yet, in her husband's eyes, it seemed to be an insurmountable barrier. He had wanted a "normal" human girl, someone gentle, someone demure, someone who fit his narrow idea of what his life should look like.

Nina, vibrant and unapologetically herself, wasn't that.

At first, she tried. She reached out to him, gently encouraging him to spend time together, to talk, to share even the smallest pieces of their lives. But he rebuffed her efforts at every turn. He ignored her calls to bond, avoided her presence in their shared home, and refused to join her in public. He kept his distance as though she were a stranger rather than his wife.

The most interaction they had came in the form of his frequent requests for money from her. He contributed to the hot spring's operations by handling some accounting, but it was purely transactional, and it still didn't amount to the large sums he was receiving from Nina. There was no warmth, no partnership, just a begrudging coexistence.

Eventually, Nina also gave up.

She told herself it was enough that he had sacrificed as much as she had by agreeing to the marriage. She let him be, retreating into her own world while he stayed in his. They lived as strangers under the same roof, bound by nothing more than a piece of paper and a shared history of family obligations.

If her parents had still been alive, things might have been different. They would have seen her unhappiness, seen the emptiness of her marriage, and insisted she walk away. They would have realised the mistake they had made in their desperation to see her settled.

But they weren't there anymore. Her mother had passed away soon after the wedding, and her father not long after. Their absence left a void in Nina's life that no one, not even her husband, had tried to fill.

And so, she stayed in this mundane relationship. Not because she loved him, but because she felt she owed it to their memory—to the sacrifices they made for her—and also because she felt that she couldn't be the selfish one who pulled out of the relationship for her own desires.

It was a stalemate, a life stuck in limbo, where dreams were boxed away and the days passed in an endless cycle of duty and survival.

She was alone, but she bore it with the same quiet strength she brought to everything else. For Nina, life had always been about pushing forward, even when the path was steep. She poured herself into the hot spring, her mother's legacy, determined to keep that dream alive, even if it meant sacrificing her own.

But some nights, when the house was too quiet and the weight of it all pressed down on her, she allowed herself a moment of vulnerability. She would sit by the edge of the hot spring, her feet dipping into the warm water, and wonder if this was really all there was.

If love, the kind that burnt bright and filled every corner of the heart, was just something other people got to have while she was destined to stay away from such warmth. And even though she wouldn't admit it to anyone, not even herself, she still hoped.

Hoped for someone who would see her, truly see her, and remind her that she was worthy of more than this stagnant, lonely life.

After the silence, Nina let out a heavy sigh, leaning back against the chair as she glanced at me with a tired look in her eyes.

"How much do you actually know, Kafka?" She asked, her voice casual but with a hint of curiosity, as though she had half an idea where this was going.

I didn't hesitate.

"Everything." I said simply, watching her expression shift from mild annoyance to slight surprise.

She raised an eyebrow but didn't seem overly surprised.

"I figured you'd find out eventually." She muttered. "With how gossipy the neighbourhood aunties are, nothing stays a secret for long. They're always prying into other people's business."

"True." I agreed with a smirk, remembering how every time I passed by a group of older women in the neighbourhood, their eyes would dart to me before their heads leaned in for whispered conversations.

But Nina wasn't quite done. Her eyes narrowed as she leaned forward a little, the playful glint returning to her expression.

"So, tell me..." She began, her voice taking on a teasing tone. "Which of the aunties was it? I swear, they know everything about everyone."

I gave her a sidelong glance, my expression straight as I replied, "It wasn't the aunties." I could see her frown deepening as she waited for me to finish. "It was Camila, your long-time best friend."

At the mention of Camila, Nina froze, her eyes widening in a way that almost made me laugh. She was clearly caught off guard by the name, her lips curling into a playful yet irritated frown.

"Camila?" She said, her voice laced with mock disbelief. "That little vixen!" She huffed, crossing her arms tighter as she looked away, clearly frustrated, but with the faintest smile tugging at her lips. "I'll have to have a little chat with her the next time I see her. She really can't keep her nose out of my business, can she?"

The playfulness in her voice was obvious now, and it made me grin.

"Seems like it...She just can't help but intervene when she knows that her friend is struggling out there with no one to depend on." I said, which made the playfulness in Nina's voice fade as she gave a small, resigned smile.

"But Nina, if it's so obvious that your husband doesn't like you, why don't you just leave him?...I mean, as much as society is against women, it still allows for divorce, right?" I couldn't help but ask, my curiosity pushing me forward despite the weight of the moment.

Nina's wry smile deepened, and for a brief moment, I saw a shadow of something—something heavy—pass across her expression.

"Because it would be selfish." She finally said quietly, her gaze distant, almost lost in thought. "He's sacrificed so much for me...His time, his dignity. He could've been with someone else, someone who would've made him happy, but he stayed because of his parents' wishes...How could I leave him for my own selfish reasons, knowing all that?"

Her words hit me harder than I expected, a strange feeling settling in my chest. It was clear she felt a deep sense of obligation, almost guilt, for being stuck in a marriage that clearly wasn't what she wanted. But in that moment, I couldn't help but think she's being too naive.

Nina seemed to believe that the only reason her husband stayed with her was for his parents' sake. But I could see the cracks, the things she didn't quite understand. Her husband wasn't staying because of some noble obligation; there was something more complicated at play, something deeper that Nina wasn't seeing. But I kept that thought to myself for now, unsure how to voice it without hurting her further.

She let out a quiet sigh and continued, her voice tinged with both resignation and a strange acceptance.

"Until the day comes that he himself gets fed up with me and pushes me away, I'll stay, Kafka." She said, her eyes steady, almost too steady. "I can't bring myself to be the one to walk away. If he wants out, then I'll go...But until then, this is my choice. I won't be the selfish one here."

Her words echoed in my mind long after she spoke them. Nina, with all her strength and resilience, was holding onto something that, to her, was a duty—something she felt obligated to honour for the sake of others.

It made her admirable in a way, but also, in my eyes, a little gullible. She was blind to the true dynamics of her marriage, and the longer she held onto this misplaced sense of duty, the more she would remain trapped in a cycle that might never let her go.

But as sullen as her words were, the more I thought about it, the more I realised that there was a way out for both of us—Nina, with her sense of duty, and me, with my endless love for her.

I couldn't help the sudden excitement that bubbled up inside me. Maybe it was the hopeless romantic in me, or perhaps I was just looking for an excuse to get closer to her, but I knew this was my chance to turn the tables.

A grin spread across my face as I leaned forward, my voice light but eager.

"Well, if your husband were to leave you...Ahem...On his own accord, of course..." I started, my words playful. "...you wouldn't mind getting together with me, would you, Nina?"

Nina's eyes widened, and her face flushed a deep shade of red. She blinked at me, completely taken aback by my boldness.

"You...You're happy about asking a wife about her husband leaving her?" She sputtered, her voice both exasperated and embarrassed.

I chuckled, unable to contain my amusement. Her reaction was too cute, too perfect if I had to say.

"Hey, I'm just saying." I teased. "It's an interesting thought. You've got options, Nina."

"You're unbelievable, Kafka!" She exclaimed, though there was no real malice in her voice. "Who asks someone about something like that?!"

I smiled, enjoying the moment, but her expression shifted, becoming more contemplative. Slowly, she looked up at me, a coy smile playing on her lips.

"Well..." She said, her voice a little softer. "...If he did leave me. Then I guess I wouldn't have much choice, would I?...S-Since I don't want you to start crying if I choose someone else after my husband leaves me."

My heart skipped a beat at the way her gaze lingered on me. It wasn't just the words; it was the way she said it, the challenge behind her eyes.

I could see the shift in Nina's expression as her voice softened, a bit of mischief still lingering there.

But before I could get too comfortable in the thought that she might be open to the idea, she quickly added,

"Of course, there's no way he'd leave me!...I've told him countless times that it's fine to go and find his own happiness...But for some reason, he always says no, even though it's so obvious that he's

not interested in our relationship." She let out a small sigh, as if this was just another thing she'd accepted as part of her life.

I couldn't help but furrow my brows at her words. She'd already given him permission to leave, but why was he still sticking around, especially when it was clear that their marriage wasn't even close to what it should've been?

There had to be something more to this than she was letting on.

And then, a thought crossed my mind, cold and unsettling: What if he had a reason to stay? A reason that had nothing to do with love or obligation but something darker, something that might not be as straightforward as it seemed.

But even as a chill ran through me, a cold, calculated smile stretched across my face without thinking.

The more I considered it, the more I realised that if I could figure out what exactly he was after, it wouldn't be too hard to push him to sway in a justified manner. Even if I couldn't find some dirt on him, I could just make him disappear one day and treat it as a noble sacrifice for me and Nina to get together...

#### Chapter 474: Shrimp-Clock-Moon

As we sat behind the counter, the morning rush finally behind us, Nina leaned against my shoulder with a sigh of relief. She was quiet, her usual brashness softened by the moment. I glanced down at her, noting the faint blush creeping across her cheeks as she stared off into the distance.

I had a pretty good idea of what was going through her mind, especially when her lips quirked into a small, embarrassed smile. She probably realised how we looked right now—two people slumped together, exhausted but content, like a couple resting after their first shift at work. The thought must've embarrassed her because the blush deepened, and she shifted ever so slightly, as if to mask her thoughts.

I decided to cut through her musings by asking her about something that I've been wanting to ask about for a while now.

"You know, Nina." I said, my voice light with amusement. "We really need to talk about your texting skills."

She immediately straightened, her blush deepening as she turned to face me, her eyes wide with surprise.

"What are you talking about?" She asked, her tone defensive but curious.

"Oh, don't act like you don't know." I teased, leaning back in my chair and folding my arms. "Your messages are...let's just say, a little hard to interpret sometimes."

"What do you mean by 'hard to interpret'? I text just fine!" Her brows furrowed, and she crossed her arms as if to shield herself from my impending critique.

"Sure." I replied, drawing the word out. "If fine means sending cryptic half-sentences that could mean five different things. Or using emojis in ways that don't even make sense." I gave her a sarcastic look and then continued asking in an inquisitive manner, "Last week, you sent me a shrimp emoji, a clock, and then the moon. What was I supposed to do with that?...Like seriously, what am I supposed to interpret from that? That a shrimp time travelled around the world and landed on the moon?!"

"It meant that I was going to eat my dinner at eight in the night, Kafka! How is that not obvious?...I even told you that I really liked to eat fried shrimp with beer at night, so it should've been obvious!" She groaned, burying her face in her hands.

"Right, because everyone naturally interprets shrimp-clock-moon as 'dinner at eight.' Makes perfect sense...Truly, Nina, your texting game is unparalleled." I barked out a laugh, shaking my head.

"But you know, I can overlook the emojis. The real question is—can you even spell?" I asked, propping my elbows on the chair and tilting my head at her with a chuckle.

When she heard the accusations I was throwing at her, her head whipped around so fast I thought she might strain something.

"Excuse me?!" She squawked, her voice teetering between indignation and outrage. "Of course, I can spell! I'm not a complete idiot, Kafka!"

I smirked, delighting in her reaction.



"Really? Because I have my doubts." I said, dragging out the last word for emphasis. "If you do know how to spell, then why do all your messages look like a bad scrabble board? Half the letters are missing, and the rest are playing hide-and-seek. It takes me a solid minute to decipher what you're saying—every single time! Honestly, I feel like I'm decoding an ancient text."

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, her face rapidly turning scarlet.

"I—I—That's because..." She stammered, clearly grasping at straws for an explanation. But I held up a hand, cutting her off before she could flounder any further.

"And don't even get me started on how long it takes you to send a single message." I said, feigning exasperation. "You know how many times I've seen the little 'typing' prompt from your side?...I could brew coffee, drink it, and start another pot, and you'd still be typing the same message...What are you doing? Writing your autobiography?"

"I—It's not like that!" She protested, waving her arms as though she could physically deflect my words. "I'm just...thinking!"

"Thinking about what?" I asked, grinning like a cat who'd cornered a mouse. "It's a text, Nina. Not a marriage proposal...What's so complicated?"

"I'm being careful!" She snapped, though her voice cracked in a way that betrayed her embarrassment. "You know...To make sure I don't say something stupid!"

"Oh, so 'shrimp-clock-moon' was carefully thought out?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Kafka, you're the worst!" Her hands flew to her face, covering her flushed cheeks as she let out a muffled groan.

"And you're avoiding the question." I pointed out, my grin widening. "Seriously, Nina, even kids that were born a few years ago can text better than you. Actually, scratch that—even my 100 year grandma could probably do better, and she still types with one single finger!"

Nina finally snapped, her hands clenched into fists as she burst out.

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"Kafka, stop bullying me! You're such a jerk and a big meanie!"

Her voice was a mix of frustration and a strange pitifulness that almost made me feel bad. But she wasn't done. With a dramatic huff, she continued to give me a surprise that I wasn't expecting.

"I-I mean, h-how else do you expect someone to text when they just bought a phone a few weeks ago?!"

That stopped me in my tracks. The smug grin slipped off my face, replaced by genuine confusion.

"Wait, what?...Y-You just got a phone?" I tilted my head at her, brows furrowing.

Nina crossed her arms and glared at me, her lips pursed like she was trying to decide if I was messing with her.

"Yes, Kafka." She said sharply. "I just got it...Why do you think I'm so bad at it?"

"But..." I gestured vaguely at her, at the hot springs, at the entire world outside. "How is that possible? You run a business in the modern age! How were you doing anything without a phone until now?"

She let out another exaggerated sigh and leaned back, still looking at me indignantly.

"I already had a phone, Kafka." She said, her tone rough like she was scolding a child. "It just wasn't a... You know..." She trailed off, avoiding my gaze.

I stared at her, waiting. "A what?" I prompted, though I was already bracing for the answer.

"A smartphone." She admitted finally, her voice barely above a mutter.

That threw me for a loop. My jaw dropped.

"You mean to tell me you've been using one of those ancient button phones? The kind from a decade ago?...The ones you see in museum exhibits now?" I asked in an exasperating manner.

Nina's glare sharpened.

"Don't act like it's that strange!" She snapped. "It worked perfectly fine for what I needed! And smartphones just seemed so...complicated and finicky, and I couldn't be bothered to learn to handle them, so I settled for what I had."

That did it...I couldn't hold it in any longer.

A laugh bubbled up from my chest, and I quickly clamped a hand over my mouth to muffle it. But the more I thought about it, the more absurd and adorable it seemed, and the laughter slipped out anyway.

Nina's face turned crimson as she leapt to her feet.

"Don't laugh at me!" She cried, grabbing my arm and shaking me with all her strength. "I'm serious, Kafka! Stop making fun of me!"

"I-I'm not making fun of you!" I managed between laughs, though my weak attempt at denial only seemed to enrage her further.

"You totally are!" She shot back, still shaking me like I was a rag doll. "You're awful! I swear, one of these days, I'm going to—"

I cut her off, catching her wrists gently. "Seriously, I wasn't teasing you." I said, my laughter softening into something warmer. "I was laughing because I just thought that's just 'so you'."

She blinked, her grip loosening slightly. Her brows furrowed.

"What's that supposed to mean?...What's so me?" She asked, her voice dripping with suspicion. "Being too dumb to use a smartphone?"

I shook my head, a smirk tugging at my lips.

"No, dummy. It's not that." My eyes softened as I leaned closer. "It's you being so stubborn about your choices, sticking to what you think works, no matter how outdated it is. It's just so...you. And it's kind of...well, it's freaking adorable."

Her mouth opened as if she was ready to fire back with another retort, but the words never came. The moment she registered what I said—adorable—her cheeks flamed red. Her hands fell to her lap, and she sank back into her seat, staring at the floor like it held the answers to life's greatest mysteries.

"I-I'm not adorable." She mumbled, barely audible.

"What was that?" I teased, leaning closer. "Did you say something?" A grin spread across my face.

"I didn't say anything!" She exclaimed, her voice a high-pitched squeak as she looked everywhere but at me.

Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her sleeve, her lips pressed into a pout. The sight was almost too much to handle. I chuckled, letting her stew in her flustered state.

"Sure, sure." I said, my voice dripping with amusement. "You're not adorable at all."

"Exactly!" She insisted, but her voice trembled, and she was still blushing fiercely.

I didn't need to say anything else. The fact that she couldn't even look me in the eye was proof enough. And somehow, that stubborn, flustered expression of hers was just about the cutest thing I'd seen all day...

#### Chapter 475: It's Illegal To Be This Adorable

I scooted closer to Nina, the warmth of her body now brushing against mine. My fingers found her thigh, tracing light, playful circles against the fabric of her pants. She didn't pull away, though her shoulders tensed slightly, her blush deepening. Her eyes darted to the side, stubbornly avoiding mine.

"So..." I slowly asked, a curious grin tugging at my lips. "What made you finally cave and get a smartphone after all these years?...Must've been something major to change your stubborn little mind."

Her blush spread from her cheeks to the tips of her long ears, and finally they flapped around as well. She then pressed her lips into a thin line, her hands fidgeting with her sleeves.

"I...I don't want to say." She finally muttered, her voice barely above a whisper. "You're just going to make fun of me."

The corners of my mouth twitched upward. Her stubborn avoidance only made me want to know more, so I leaned in, my tone softening as I pleaded,

"Come on, Nina. I really want to know now...I promise I won't laugh."

She finally glanced at me, her eyes shimmering with uncertainty. Her gaze was so open, so vulnerable, it made my chest tighten.

"You promise?"

"I swear on my heart. No laughing. No teasing. Just tell me." I nodded, letting my hand rest gently on her thigh.

She studied me for a long moment, as if weighing my words. Finally, her shoulders sagged in surrender.

"Okay." She said softly, her voice trembling a little. "But if you break your promise, I'm going to dunk you in the hot springs."

"I accept my fate...Now spill." I held up a hand in mock seriousness.

"Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when you gave me your contact details?" Nina let out a small huff, her fingers still twisting in her lap.

I nodded, recalling the moment vividly. I'd scribbled down my messenger ID, suggesting we text more often since she was always buried in work. It seemed like a good way to stay connected without interrupting her schedule. We'd talked on the phone before, sure, but texting felt like an easier, more immediate way to keep in touch when she was in the middle of things.

Her eyes searched mine, and when she saw the flicker of recognition, she continued, her voice softening.

"Well...I was really happy about that. I mean, I liked the idea of staying in touch even when I was working." Her cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink. "It felt like...like you'd be with me, even when you weren't...Just seeing your name pop up on my screen made me feel giddy, you know? Like you were there, keeping me company."

A warm smile crept across my face. I couldn't help it; she was just too cute. The way she spoke, so earnest and shy, made my heart swell.

"That's adorable." I murmured, my eyes never leaving hers.

Her lips curled into a bashful smile, but it faded as she let out a sigh, her brows knitting into a frown.

"But then I found out the ID of the messaging app you gave me—the one you use—it only works on smartphones." She crossed her arms with a huff, her cheeks puffing out slightly. "And my old brick of a phone couldn't do anything with it."

"Wait, seriously?" I blinked, taking that in.

She nodded, her expression caught somewhere between frustration and embarrassment.

"Yeah. I spent hours trying to figure it out, thinking I was doing something wrong...But nope. Turns out, my ancient button phone was just useless for that."

A chuckle slipped out before I could stop it. I clapped a hand over my mouth, eyes glinting with amusement, and quickly, when I saw her looking up at me, "Okay, okay, I'm not laughing at you, I swear." Continue reading at empire

"You so are." Nina's eyes narrowed, her lips pursing.

"I'm just picturing you angrily pressing those tiny buttons, trying to get that app to work. It's kind of cute and also a little funny, which even you have got to admit." I let my hand fall, the smile still tugging at my lips.

"See? I knew you'd tease me." She groaned, throwing her hands up in mock despair.

I watched as she looked away, her arms crossed over her chest in a defiant little huff. She was clearly pretending to be mad, but I could see the corners of her mouth twitching with that familiar shy smile. It was impossible to keep a straight face when she acted like that.

She ignored me for a moment, her eyes staring off somewhere else, probably lost in thought. Then, after a beat, she spoke again, her voice a little quieter.

"I tried everything I could, but it just didn't work...I spent hours trying to get that app to work on my old phone, but nothing. It was like trying to make a cat do tricks—hopeless."

"I'm still picturing you squinting at that tiny screen, desperately trying to make it work." I smirked, loving how dramatic she was about it, like she was trying to figure out how to operate a supercomputer.

She glared at me playfully, but then her expression shifted. She straightened up a little, a sudden coyness in her smile as she finally said,

"S-So, I finally decided...T-That I'd just go and buy a new smartphone instead of using my old one."

The words hit me like a splash of cold water. I blinked, not sure if I'd heard her correctly.

"Wait, hold on. You...bought a new phone? For me?" I asked, my voice betraying a mix of surprise and awe.

She looked away, her ears flushing with a light pink hue and flapping around like a butterfly, clearly embarrassed by the attention.

"It's not just for you, okay?" She shot back, clearly flustered. "Camila kept nagging me about it. She's always on my case, saying I'm too old-fashioned. And, well...I thought about it for a while. I was already planning to get one eventually, so I just did it...I-It's really not because I wanted to keep in contact with you at all times."

As Nina rambled on, clearly trying to cover up the truth, I couldn't help but smile. The way she was so flustered, the way she fumbled through her words, it was all too obvious. She was trying to deflect, but I saw right through her...I knew her well enough by now to understand the truth behind those carefully chosen excuses.

She was trying to make it seem like her decision wasn't as personal as it really was, trying to convince herself that it was just a practical change...But deep down, I knew.

I knew that she had done it for me. Because she cared. She loved me so much that she was willing to change something so fundamental about herself, something she'd been stubbornly holding on to for years, just to be able to reach me more easily. And that thought...It made my chest swell with warmth.

And because of that, I couldn't hold back anymore.

I lunged forward, wrapping my arms around her in a tight embrace.

Hug~

Nina gasped, her body stiffening in surprise, but I didn't let go. I pulled her closer, my lips finding her cheek as I started showering her face with kisses to her shock, my heart racing with the overwhelming rush of affection.

Chu!~ Chu!~ Chu!~

Chu!~ Chu!~ Chu!~

Nina squirmed because of the sudden onslaught of kisses, her voice flustered and full of panic.

"K-Kafka! What are you doing?!...W-Why are you kissing me so suddenly?!" She pushed at my chest, though there was no real force behind it.

Her hands were more like little taps, as though she was trying to stop me but couldn't quite bring herself to do it.



I then pulled back just enough to look at her, grinning from ear to ear, and said,

"How could I not, Nina, when you're so sweet and adorable! I just couldn't help myself...Honestly being this lovable should be a crime, if I had to say."

And then I leaned in again, kissing her on the other cheek, her forehead, and the tip of her nose, my heart soaring with each soft press of my lips.

Chu!~ Chu!~ Chu!~

She let out an exasperated little squeal, but I could see the way her eyes softened, the way the faint blush on her cheeks deepened, a sign that she was far from angry.

"Stop! You're-" But the words faltered, and she didn't finish her sentence.

Instead, she gave up any attempt to push me away.

Her hands, which had been trying to fend me off moments ago, were now softly placed against my chest, her fingers lightly curling into my shirt as if holding me closer. Her head tilted slightly, and she let out a soft sigh, almost like a contented little hum, though she still refused to look me in the eyes.

I pulled back slightly, just enough to see her face more clearly. She wasn't glaring at me or pushing me away anymore. In fact, she looked...happy.

Not just happy, but completely at peace in this moment. And that realisation made my heart swell all over again.

"You really can't stop teasing me, can you, Kafka?" She muttered softly, her lips tugging into a shy smile, but it was clear there was no real annoyance in her words.

She didn't need to say anything more. The way she was looking at me, the way her cheeks were flushed with warmth, said everything.

I smiled and leaned in for one last gentle kiss on her lips, slow and tender. When I pulled away, I couldn't help but laugh softly as I said, "Of course, Nina...With you being the adorable little creature you are, I'm never going to be able to stop."

Nina smiled and then looked up at me, a mixture of embarrassment and fondness in her eyes, and for the first time, I saw a glimpse of just how much she cared.

It wasn't just the phone. It wasn't just the changes she was making for me. It was everything...All of her stubbornness, all of her reluctance, was simply a front for the tender heart that beat just for me.

I held her gaze, feeling the warmth of her love radiating back at me, and I couldn't help but lean my forehead against hers, basking in the quiet intimacy of the moment.

"Thank you, I whispered softly, the words carrying all the gratitude I felt in my heart.

"For what?" Nina, her voice barely above a whisper, murmured back.

I smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face.

"For being you...Just your existence alone is enough to make me thank the Gods a million times for putting me into this blessed world."

She didn't say anything in response, but the way her eyes softened, the way her hands gently held onto me, was all the answer I needed.

Chapter 476: Secret Folders

As we sat there together, the world outside seemed to blur into a gentle haze, leaving just the two of us wrapped in our little bubble of comfort. Nina's fingers intertwined with mine, her touch light and playful. She traced the lines of my palm with her fingertips, her gaze drifting downwards, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"Your hands are so big." She murmured, turning my hand this way and that as if inspecting a rare artifact. "Mine look so delicate compared to yours." She wrinkled her nose, giving my fingers a tiny squeeze. "It's like holding a bear paw."

I chuckled, letting her play with my hand while my other one idly scrolled through our chat conversation on my phone.

The screen flickered with messages, a chaotic mixture of emojis, half-written words, and, of course, her utterly baffling encrypted messages. As I scrolled further, a grin tugged at the corners of my mouth, and a soft laugh escaped before I could stop it.

"What are you laughing at, Kafka?...It better not be about me." Nina's eyes flicked up, suspicious.

I tilted the screen towards her, the light reflecting off my amused expression.

"I'm looking at our chat log, Nina. And, honestly, how do you expect anyone to understand this?" I tapped one message. " 'Whr u? Bsy w wrk. Il cl u ltr?'...That's not a text—that's a riddle."

"I'm not that bad!...I-I was typing with one hand at that time, so it ended up that way." She gasped, cheeks puffing out in an indignant pout.

"Oh, you most definitely are that bad, Nina." I teased, scrolling down. "Here's another classic: 'Yup 👍😄🏃💧.' I'm still trying to figure out if that meant 'yes' or if you were just having an emoji breakdown."

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She let out a dramatic groan, burying her face in her free hand. "Stop bullying me!" She whined, her voice muffled. "You're such a jerk, even though you know I'm an amateur at this stuff and that I'm doing my best!"

"But you make it so easy, and your reactions are just the cherry on the top." I grinned and leaned in, my voice dropping to a gentle murmur.

"Hmph! If I didn't like you so much, I'd seriously reconsider this whole thing." She said as she gave my hand a light pinch, her lips forming a sulky pout.

I laughed softly, squeezing her hand in return.

"Okay, okay, I'll stop." I said and then continued to ask something on my mind, "But Nina...It seems like even though you aren't the most fond of texting, you really like to send me pictures, seeing as you don't just send one or two in a day but dozens."

Her eyes widened in shock when she heard me calling her out.

"What? I do not!" She leaned forward, trying to peek at my screen, her face scrunched in disbelief.

"You totally do, Nina." I said, still scrolling. I held the phone out for her to see. "Look at this...Here's one of a cup of coffee. And here's one of your desk. Oh, and look—your lunch, your shoes, the sky, some random cat on the street..." I kept flicking through. "You even sent me a picture of a half-eaten sandwich once."

"I don't even remember sending half of these!" Her jaw dropped, her eyes darting between the screen and me.

"Well, you did." I chuckled, scrolling through the endless parade of pictures. "It's like you have this compulsion to share every little thing with me."

She bit her lip, her cheeks flushed a soft pink. Her gaze dropped to her lap, fingers twisting a loose thread on her sleeve.

"It's not like I plan to send you so many pictures, Kafka." She finally admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's just that whenever I see something amusing or funny, or even something I did, I want you to see it, too." She peeked up at me through her lashes, the vulnerability in her eyes tugging at my heart. "But that's probably annoying for you, huh?" Her lips quivered into a small pout. "I should probably stop sending you photos on a whim, shouldn't I?"

Her question, filled with such quiet hesitation, punched me straight in the chest. I grabbed her hand immediately, shaking my head with a vehement grin as I said in a hurry,

"Stop? Are you kidding me?...Those silly pictures make my whole day, and I literally cannot live without them anymore!"

Her eyes widened, the pink in her cheeks deepening.

"I mean it." I insisted. "No matter what mood I'm in—whether I'm exhausted, annoyed, or just having one of those days, when I hear your notification sound, I get this stupid smile on my face." I

laughed softly, my thumb brushing over her knuckles. "Because I know it's going to be something hilarious, ridiculous, or just so you...And that makes everything better."

Her lips trembled, a soft breath escaping her as her eyes shimmered with emotion.

"You... You really feel that way, Kafka?"

I nodded, my grin softening into something tender.

"Of course, Nina. And if you don't believe me, I can even show you a whole folder I made just for all the pictures you sent to me."

"A folder?" Her brow furrowed, and then I proceeded to show her what I was talking about.

I pulled my phone closer, swiping to my gallery app and opening a neatly organised folder titled 'The Things My Adorable Little Tigress Sent Me'.

The gallery filled the screen with a chaotic mix of pictures: her lunch in weird angles, street cats pulling goofy faces, accidental selfies of her scowling at her phone, and random snapshots of flowers, clouds, or doodles she'd done on napkins.

The sheer number was staggering.

Her eyes went impossibly wide, and her mouth fell open in a gasp.

"Kafka!" She yelped, her face going bright red. She lunged for the phone, her hands flailing. "Delete it! Erase all of it right now!...This is so damn embarrassing!"

Laughing, I held the phone high above my head, easily out of her reach.

"Not a chance." I teased, my voice laced with affection. "These are my treasures now, and there's no way I'm allowing you to lay your paws on them."

Her hands dropped to her sides, and she pouted, her eyes glinting with a mixture of frustration and bashful joy. "You really do know how to make my life difficult, don't you, Kafka?" She grumbled, crossing her arms. But the smile tugging at her lips betrayed her.

Then, with a haughty tilt of her chin, she smirked.

"Well, for your information, I also have a folder full of pictures you've sent me." Her eyes gleamed like she'd just played a trump card, clearly trying to claw back some dignity.

I raised an eyebrow, leaning in with a competitive glint.

"Oh, really? Is that so?" I challenged, a playful grin spreading across my face. "Alright then, let's see it...Let's see if your collection even comes close to matching mine." I waggled my brows, pretending to size her up. "Bet mine's still better."

Nina's eyes narrowed as a spark of mischief danced behind them.

"Oh, it's on." She whipped out her phone with a determined look, her fingers flying over the screen as she navigated to her photo albums.

For a moment, she seemed ready to throw down the gauntlet, a bright, eager smile lighting up her face.

But as she scrolled and found the album she'd been searching for, her confidence faltered. Her cheeks turned crimson, the bravado slipping away in an instant. She blinked, frozen, like she'd just realised something mortifying. Her thumb hovered over the album name, which I couldn't quite see.

"Uh, w-wait a second." She stammered, trying to sound nonchalant as her fingers fumbled to rename it.

"Nina...What exactly are you trying to delete?" My eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Hold on, I just need to...Um, fix something real quick—" She shot me a panicked glance, her voice rushed.

I wasn't about to let that slide. With a swift motion, I plucked the phone out of her hands before she could react.

"K-Kafka!" she squeaked, her eyes going wide. She lunged forward, desperately reaching for the phone. "Give that back! You can't look yet!"

Laughing, I leaned back, holding the phone high above my head. "Nope! Not a chance!" Before she could scramble any closer, I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her snugly against me.

She let out a gasp, her flustered protests muffled against my chest. My other hand held the phone firmly, scrolling through the screen.

"Kafka, seriously! You can't!" She whined, her face burning as she squirmed in my grip. Her small hands pawed helplessly at my arm, but with my strength, she had no hope of breaking free. "Let me go! You're cheating!"

I grinned, tightening my hold slightly, keeping her pinned to my side. "You think I'm the cheater? Then what are you hiding, hmm?" I teased, my voice low and mischievous.

"You're gonna regret this!" She let out a tiny whimper, her face buried against my shoulder now, making her voice muffled.

Ignoring her half-hearted threats, I finally found the album and squinted at the name. And there it was, glowing on the screen:

'My Sweet and Handsome Dummy.'

I blinked, and then my grin stretched impossibly wide.

"My Sweet and Handsome Dummy?" I repeated, my voice laced with delight.

Nina let out a pitiful groan, her hands covering her face.

"Don't say it out loud!" She pleaded, her voice tiny.

I couldn't help but laugh, a deep, warm sound that made her squirm even more.

"You're really calling me a dummy?" I teased, nuzzling the top of her head. "When you're the one who spent years resisting a smartphone just to end up making an entire secret shrine to me?"

Her shoulders trembled, and she peeked up at me, eyes shimmering with embarrassment and reluctant affection. "It's not a shrine, Kafka." She mumbled, her voice barely audible. "It's just...just a bunch of pictures that made me really, really happy, okay?"

She took a shaky breath, her cheeks now a deep crimson as she decided to go all out with her thoughts now that she was exposed.

"But seriously...Can you blame me?" She added, her voice flustered. "You send so many photos where you look so freaking handsome all the time, so what else am I supposed to do but save it all!"

"...How is anyone supposed to resist making a folder dedicated to that?" Her hands flew up to cover her face, and she groaned as if the weight of her confession was too much to bear.

I blinked, completely caught off guard.

"Handsome? Wait, when did I send anything like that?" I scratched my head, genuinely puzzled. "I'm pretty sure I just send pictures of whatever I'm doing. Like the one where I was fixing the car...Or the time I was stuck in that boring neighbourhood meeting with my mother...Or when I was waiting for my coffee."

She peeked out from behind her hands, nodding quickly.

"You did! But that's exactly it!" She exclaimed like she was trying to prove her point. "Even in those random pictures, you're in them. Unlike me, who just sends photos of random things like a cute dog or some weird sign, you're always in your own shots!"

"Is that a problem?" I frowned, still not getting it.

"Should I stop including myself in the pictures?...Is my face that annoying to look at?" I teased, though a hint of genuine curiosity lingered in my voice.



Her eyes went wide in panic, and she shook her head so violently it looked like it might fly off.

"No, no, no, Kafka! It's the exact opposite!" She practically shouted, clutching my shirt in her fists. She then continued saying, while her face was blazing but her eyes were filled with sincerity, "Every time you send a picture with you in it, I can't help but blush! You always look so good, like stupidly good!"

"...Even when it's just you sitting in a chair, you look like you're in the middle of some professional photoshoot! How do you even do that?"

She covered her face again, peeking through her fingers with a flustered look in her eyes for admitting so many embarrassing secrets...

Chapter 477: Let's Take A Photo

I stared at her for a moment, processing her words, and then a slow grin spread across my face.

"Really?" I leaned in closer, a teasing glint in my eyes. "So, what you're telling me is...I'm an accidental model who looks stellar in all the photos I'm in?"

"Ugh, I shouldn't have told you this! Now you're going to be more narcissistic than ever!" She groaned, her voice muffled behind her hands.

But then she glanced up, eyes sparkling despite her embarrassment, deciding to say everything on her mind now that she had already started.

"Kafka, do you know just how hard it is to stay composed at work when I get one of your pictures? It's so bad that sometimes I squeal out loud!" She let out a long sigh, shaking her head. "It's a miracle that the neighbourhood aunties haven't caught on yet."

I laughed, warmth spreading through my chest. The image of her, fierce and composed on the outside but squealing like a teenager when she saw a simple picture of me, was almost too much to handle.

"So, what you're saying is, I'm a workplace hazard now?" I asked in a haughty manner.

"Absolutely...An absolute distraction that keeps on pulling me away from my work." She muttered, though a shy smile was starting to bloom on her lips.

"Well, if I'm going to be a hazard, I might as well lean into it." I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger against her cheek.

Her eyes widened, and before she could protest, I snapped a quick selfie of the two of us, her blushing face next to my mischievous grin.

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"There." I said, holding up the screen so she could see. "A new addition for your shrine."

"...But if you really don't want the photo, I can just delete it—"

Before I could even finish, Nina's eyes widened in panic. In a flash, she snatched the phone right out of my hand with a speed that would've made a hawk jealous.

"Don't you dare!" She growled, clutching the phone protectively to her chest. Her eyes narrowed into a glare, but her cheeks betrayed her with a furious blush. "I swear, if you even think about deleting it, I'll punch you so hard you'll forget how to take selfies!"

I blinked, taken aback by her intensity.

"Whoa, whoa! Okay! No deleting, I promise!" A laugh escaped me. "I didn't think you would get so feisty over a single photo."

She huffed, still hugging the phone like it was a precious treasure.

"That's because it's mine now." She muttered defiantly. Her eyes softened as she finally looked down at the screen.

There I was, grinning smugly, and there she was, cheeks flushed, eyes wide with surprise. Her fingers hovered over the image, and a gentle smile curled at the edges of her lips.

Her thoughts wandered as she stared at it like it was the most precious treasure.

Her heart fluttered, and she bit her lower lip, debating something. Then a thought struck her, and her eyes lit up with determination like she was going to figure out how to change her wallpaper.

As if reading her mind, I leaned closer, trying to peek over her shoulder.

"What are you plotting over there?"

"N-nothing! Mind your own business, you peeping Tom!" She spun around to block my view, her blush deepening.

I shook my head, a grin tugging at my lips. Her blush had deepened to a shade I'd only seen on the ripest tomatoes.

"You know..." I said, as I played with her slender waist. "You keep saying you're star-struck by my pictures, but it's actually the other way around...Every time you send a photo of yourself, I'm the one who's in awe."

Nina's eyes widened before she scoffed, rolling them dramatically to hide the red creeping up her neck.

"Yeah, right! There's no way that's true. I'm horrible at taking photos!" She huffed, her fingers already moving on the screen. "Here, look at these disasters."

She shoved her phone in my face, and the first image nearly made me snort out loud.

It was a blurry selfie where half her face was out of frame, her eyes wide and startled like she'd just seen a ghost. I stifled a laugh, covering my mouth with a fist.

"Wait, it gets worse." She said, swiping to the next one.

This time, it was a shot of her looking determined, but the flash had gone off unexpectedly, making her eyes glow like she was possessed by some demonic spirit.

I lost it...A burst of laughter escaped me, and I had to grip my side.

"What even happened here?! Are you summoning dark forces or taking a selfie?"

"I was trying to turn off the flash! It just wouldn't listen to me!" Nina puffed out her cheeks, pouting.

She flipped to the next photo—an accidental close-up of her forehead and one of her eyes, glaring fiercely into the camera.

"And this..." She grumbled. "...was me trying to adjust the angle. It's like my phone actively hates me."

"Nina, these are gold!" I couldn't breathe. I leaned forward, laughing so hard I nearly tipped over.

"I told you! I'm the queen of photo fails." She crossed her arms and turned her nose up, feigning offence.

I nodded, my eyes glinting with playful sincerity.

"It's absolutely true. You are the queen of photo fails." I teased, watching her pout deepen. "You mess up angles, forget to focus, and somehow manage to take photos where half your face is missing."

"Gee, thanks for telling me what I already knew, Kafka." Her cheeks puffed up like an irritated chipmunk, and she glared at me.

"Don't get upset now...Let me finish." I laughed, reaching out to gently boop her nose. "Sure, you're not exactly a pro behind the camera, but you know what? You don't need to be...You've got this... this innate beauty that somehow makes even the silliest, most messed-up photos look like a masterpiece."

"W-What do you mean by that?"

Her eyes widened slightly, her blush starting to creep back.

"Look, the reason I come out decent in photos is because I'm trying...I know how to stage it, pick the right angles, and fake being photogenic." I shrugged. "It's all smoke and mirrors."

She tilted her head, her lips parting slightly as if she wasn't sure whether to believe me.

"But you, on the other hand..." I continued, my gaze softening. "...you're effortlessly gorgeous. You don't need to try. Even if you take a photo that's blurry, crooked, or completely out of focus, it still feels real...You make it beautiful just by being in it." I grinned. "Honestly, the worst photo you've ever taken could still be framed and hung on a wall."

Her blush deepened to the tips of her ears, and she averted her gaze, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt as she said,

"You're just saying that to appease me."

"I'm not, Nina...I mean every word I said." I leaned closer, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"You really think that?" She glanced up at me through her lashes, her voice soft and shy.

"I know that." I nodded, my smile unwavering, which made Nina lean onto me, her head resting on my shoulder, a soft smile curving her lips.

"Fine..." She murmured, her voice low and playful. "I'll go out of my way to send you more pictures of myself. If it makes you that happy...." She paused, her eyes glinting mischievously. "...But you better send me more, too, or I'm cutting off the supply."

I couldn't help but laugh, the sheer silliness of her threat making me grin.

"Oh no, not the supply chain!" I teased, feigning panic. "How ever will I survive without your blurry selfies and half-face portraits?"

"Don't mock my generosity, Kafka. This is a high-risk trade deal." She poked me lightly in the side.

I chuckled, tightening my arm around her waist.

"Trust me, I'm fully committed to the terms...You keep sending those adorable disasters, and I'll flood your inbox with my best attempts, even though they'll never match up to the ones you always send."

"Good. I like knowing you're just a message away...Even when we're apart." Her smile softened, a hint of shyness creeping in as she whispered.

"Always." I pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her head, my voice equally soft.

She snuggled closer, and for a moment, everything felt perfectly balanced—just the two of us, wrapped in this easy, playful warmth that neither of us wanted to end.

...But of course that got interrupted by a request from the Gods.

[The God of Flames Ophelial sends a request: Make Nina send some 'dirty' pictures of herself right here in the hot springs]

[Successfully fulfil the request and gain the Gods satisfaction and approval]

[Fail the given request and experience the highest degree of heat that anyone can experience from the flames that engulf the World of Winslow]

Chapter 478: I'll Surpass You Two!

Sigh...Nina already struggles to take normal photos, so how exactly is she going to take 'suggestive' ones where a lot more of her flawless, verdant skin is going to be seen? Her hands would probably tremble so much from the embarrassment that all the pictures would end up really blurry.

But her assets are also quite big anyway, so no matter how blurry the picture is, they'll still be outlined in the picture like a tank hidden in a veil of fog.

It's just that I have to make her take those provocative photos, which shouldn't be too hard, seeing as how eager she is to send photos that make me happy now...I just have to build a story that gathers her sentiment to the extent that she herself decides that she wants to send such photos to me, which should be quite easy with how much she trusts me.

While I was thinking about how to save myself from being burnt alive by a Goddess, Nina leaned into me, interrupting my swirling thoughts with a bright smile and a glint of excitement in her eyes.

She then lifted her phone, showing me a picture of a cake—golden, fluffy, and surprisingly well-decorated, with a delicate drizzle of icing on top. It wasn't perfect by any stretch, but for her, it was a masterpiece.

"Well? What do you think?" She asked, her voice tinged with both pride and a flicker of nervousness.

I took a closer look, raising an eyebrow with genuine surprise as I said,

"Wait...Did you actually make this using the lemon cake recipe I sent you? The one I sent a couple of days ago saying that it would be a good beginner cake?"

She nodded eagerly, her cheeks turning the faintest shade of pink.

"Yup! Followed it step by step this time... didn't even set anything on fire or call you in a panic halfway through." She paused, puffing out her abundant chest just a little for not almost burning her house down this time. She then continued saying with an excited look in her emerald eyes, "I think I'm finally getting the hang of this, Kafka. I really do!...It won't be long before I make so many more dishes and outdo you and Camila!"

I chuckled, a wave of warmth settling over me.

"Wow, look at you! From setting off smoke alarms with scrambled eggs to pulling off this beauty and even challenging professionals in this business like us...I'm impressed, Chef Nina."

Her face lit up, and she tried to mask her smile with a casual shrug.

"Well, I had a good teacher." She murmured, clearly fishing for more praise.

"You sure did. But hey, you put in the work, so you should be proud of yourself, just like how much I'm proud of you." I couldn't help but grin as I patted her silky head to her utter delight. Stay updated with empire

I remembered the first time she asked for a recipe, out of nowhere, her voice gruff and awkward like she was embarrassed to even bring it up. Back then, she'd brushed it off with some excuse about how she was bored and wanted to try something new...But I knew her better than that.

She'd never outright said it, but I'd pieced it together. Nina wasn't just learning to cook for the hell of it...It was because I loved cooking and because Camila loved it, too.

You see, deep down, Nina didn't want to be the odd one out. She wanted to be part of those kitchen conversations, those little moments where recipes and kitchen disasters became inside jokes. She wanted to belong, to contribute, to be someone who could surprise me with a homemade dish.

And more than that—she wanted to make me proud. To see me smile at something she'd created from a hobby that I particularly enjoyed was so freaking sweet to think about.

I then took another look at Nina's ravishing face, the way she was sneaking glances at me, eyes shimmering with barely hidden hope. She didn't ask for praise out loud, but her entire body—the way she stood, the way she held her breath—was practically begging for it.

I smiled, warmth blooming in my chest. "Hey..." I said softly, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "...You did an amazing job. Seriously. I'm proud of you, my adorable little sapling."

Her breath stopped for a second, and for a moment, she didn't move. Then, a slow, shy smile spread across her face, so radiant it made my heart skip. She looked away, trying to hide the blush that crept up to her ears.

"It's...It's no big deal." She mumbled. She then continued saying as she looked up at me, "I-It's just that...That I didn't want to be the only one left out. You're so good at cooking, and even Camila makes it look easy, so I figured if I didn't learn, I'd be stuck eating instant noodles forever."

"I wouldn't let that happen. I'd cook for you every day if it came down to it." I laughed, shaking my head.

She glanced at me, her expression softening.



"I know. But...I wanted to be able to make something for you, too. Like, if you're ever having a rough day, I want to be the one who surprises you with something nice."

Something in my chest tightened at her sincerity. I reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as I said, "You have no idea how happy that makes me."

Her blush deepened, and she looked away, fidgeting with her phone. "Don't get used to it. I still mess up, like, a lot. Remember the cookies that I was making that turned into something harder than a rock?"

"Oh yeah...I remember getting six panicked calls in fifteen minutes over that one." I chuckled.

"Don't remind me! I swear, I thought I'd never get it right." She groaned, covering her face with her hands.

"But you did." I said, my voice soft with admiration. "And now look at you—making cakes that look like they belong in a bakery window."

"You really think so? You really think that they look that nice?" She peeked at me through her fingers, a shy smile tugging at her lips.

"Absolutely...If you had a bakery of your own, I'd visit every day and buy your entire stock." I said, my eyes holding hers. "And it's not just about the cake, Nina. It's the fact that you tried so hard, even when it wasn't easy...You kept going, and that means more to me than anything."

Her breath caught for just a second, and she leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder. She didn't say anything, but the way she clung to my side told me how much that simple praise meant to her. It wasn't the cake she cared about. It was this—this quiet moment of feeling seen, appreciated.

"Don't stop now. I expect more of these masterpieces." I smiled, brushing a kiss against the top of her head.

"Masterpieces, huh? Now you've set the bar too high." She snorted, a spark of mischief returning to her eyes.

"Nah, I'm confident. With how much hard work you put into things, you'll definitely make it." I grinned, brushing a thumb over her knuckles.

Her eyes widened for a second, like she hadn't expected the genuine compliment. Then her expression melted into one of pure happiness, a soft glow lighting up her face. She leaned into me, snuggling into my arm with a satisfied little hum.

The warmth of her cheek pressed against me, her fingers gently curling around my wrist. It was the kind of innocent affection that made my heart thud a little harder in my chest.

For a moment, I just enjoyed the peace, her warmth against mine, the rhythmic sway of her breathing.

But of course I also had to think about my own life that was hanging on the line, so I decided to disturb the moment we were having and spout out a story to make her willing to complete the request herself.

Chapter 479: What Did You See?

"You know, I saw something really interesting on the bus a few days back when I went over to the town next door." I cleared my throat, feigning casual curiosity and starting my act.

"Oh? What was it?"

Her head perked up, eyes instantly sharp, as just like the neighbourhood aunties, Nina really liked gossip and wasn't willing to miss any piece of information floating around.

But of course I couldn't pull my rod so quickly and needed to wait until she's more invested, so I glanced away, as if reconsidering, and said, "Hmm, actually...Maybe I shouldn't say. It's not exactly a topic I can talk about openly." I hesitated, letting the suspense build. "It's kind of an 'adult' topic that I don't think you can handle."

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"What do you mean by adult? Why are you hesitating when I'm actually the adult in the picture while you're still in school?" She narrowed her eyes, her brow furrowing.

"I just think it'd make you flustered, that's all. I shouldn't share it, unless I want you getting all worked up." I shrugged, suppressing a grin.

Her mouth fell open in disbelief. "You're kidding, right?" She straightened up, pulling away just enough to glare at me. "I'm older than you, Kafka! You don't get to act like I'm some sheltered kid."

"I don't know, Nina. I'm just looking out for you...Wouldn't want to ruin your innocence." I chuckled, savouring the indignation in her eyes.

"I am not innocent!" Her jaw clenched, a frustrated blush creeping up her cheeks.

"Oh really?" I raised a brow, smirking. "Then maybe you're just too delicate for this sort of thing."

Her eyes flashed, and she gripped my sleeve tightly as she said, "I swear, if you don't tell me right now, I'm going to—"

"Relax, relax!" I held up my hands in a false surrender. "Alright, I'll tell you what I saw. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"I can handle it. Just spill it already, Kafka." Her eyes were locked onto mine, intense and curious, the hint of a challenge gleaming behind them.

I relaxed myself a little, dragging it out, just to see her squirm a bit more. "Alright, alright." I said, my voice low and teasing, and then continued my story, saying, "So, a few days ago, I was on the bus, you know, just minding my own business."

Nina nodded eagerly, her eyes not leaving mine for a second, completely engrossed.

"There was this guy sitting next to me." I continued. "Looked like a young office worker—freshly started at his job, maybe. You know, shirt a little wrinkled, tie a little loose. At first, I didn't really care. Everything seemed pretty normal."

I paused, watching her hang onto every word. Her fingers were still clutching my sleeve, as if she was trying to anchor herself. "And then..." I trailed off, eyes narrowing slightly for effect. "Sudeen, the guy's face completely lit up. I mean, his whole expression changed...He grinned like he'd just won the lottery."

"Why? What happened?" Nina's eyes widened, her brows knitting together with curiosity.

I smirked, deliberately slow to respond as I said, "He was looking at his phone, right? And I'm not normally one to snoop, but—"

"You peeked?" She interrupted with an incredulous look on her face.

"Hey, I'm not a nosy person!" I defended with a laugh. "But he looked so excited that even I got curious. I just had to know what was making him beam like that. I mean, his smile was too huge to ignore."

"Okay, and? What did you see?" She leaned in closer, her grip on my arm tightening.

"I mean, I really shouldn't say..." I hesitated, my lips curling into a mischievous grin.

Her eyes flashed with impatience. "Kafka!" She almost shouted, her cheeks flushing as she shook my arm. "Just tell me already!"

I chuckled, dragging out the suspense as I said, "Well, to my surprise, I leaned over and saw..."

Her breath hitched, her eyes wide with anticipation. She looked like she was seconds away from throttling me.

I let the pause stretch until her frustration bubbled over. "Saw what?!" She demanded, her voice teetering on the edge of exasperation.

I then leaned in closer, lowering my voice conspiratorially. "I saw...on his screen...a bunch of erotic pictures of a girl." I paused, watching her eyes widen as the realisation sank in. "And not just any pictures. She was showing off parts of her body that she'd never normally show off to the world."

Nina's face instantly turned crimson. Her mouth opened, closed, then opened again, struggling to find the right words.

"W-What?!...He was seeing that 'that' kind of content? In public?! Does he not have a room where he can browse such matters? Why in public?!" She finally stammered, her eyes darting left and right as if someone might overhear. She then asked in a coy manner, "Did you...Did you report him to the police for what he did? F-For disturbing the peace of the public and breaking the basic principles of decency?"

"Nope." I directly stated and shook my head with a sheepish grin.

"What? Why not?!" Her jaw dropped.

"Look, I—"

"Were you scared or something?" She interrupted, her brow furrowed. "Seriously, Kafka! If you didn't want to make a scene, you could've just called me. I would've dragged that pervert out myself!" She huffed, crossing her arms, her cheeks still glowing red. "Imagine being so shameless in public! What if a child had seen that sight instead of you?! Ugh!"

"I appreciate the backup, Nina, but it's not that I was scared." I couldn't help but chuckle at her fiery response.

"Then why?" She demanded, eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Don't tell me you were enjoying the show." Her glare was sharp enough to cut steel, though the blush dusting her cheeks softened it just a little.

I smirked, relaxing myself on the chair just enough to make her glare falter, and said in a teasing manner, "Not really. Not at all...I mean, why would I need that when I already have a woman who's more provocative with clothes on than some women are with them off?"

Her long, elf-like ears immediately turned crimson, twitching like they were caught in a breeze.

"W-What kind of nonsense are you spouting now? Stop that!" Her blush spread across her cheeks like wildfire, and she tried to cover her ears with her hands.

I chuckled, unable to resist teasing her further as I said, "It's true. You've got this way of driving me crazy without even trying."

Her ears flapped indignantly as she buried her face in her palms. "I-I'm not listening to this." She muttered, voice muffled by her hands.

"Relax, that man wasn't doing what you think he was doing." I informed and laughed, sounding rather amused by her adorable reactions.

Her hands lowered just enough to peek out, one eyebrow arching skeptically.

"Oh? Then what exactly was he doing that you were so accepting of?" Her voice was dripping with suspicion, eyes narrowed like she was ready to pounce.

"Well, you see...The photos were all coming through a messaging app." I scratched my cheek, drawing out the suspense.

She blinked, processing that. "A messaging app?" Her blush deepened. "You mean someone was sending those dirty pictures?"

"Yep...The person who sent those pictures was taking pictures of herself and sending them to him." I nodded, fighting to keep a straight face.

Her eyes widened in horror and curiosity as she asked in disbelief, "W-Who the hell sends pictures like that?! I can't imagine someone being shameless enough to send naked pictures of themselves!"

I grinned, letting the silence stretch just long enough to make her squirm. Then, with a casual shrug, I replied,

"Who else? His girlfriend. Or maybe even his wife."

Nina's eyes went wide, her jaw practically unhinging in shock. She stared at me like I'd just told her the sky was green. "What?" She breathed out, barely above a whisper. "No way...There's no way that's true." Her voice wavered with disbelief, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. "You mean to tell me a girl...No, his partner was the one sending those kinds of pictures through her phone?"

She blinked, her ears twitching as if trying to pick up some sort of logical explanation from the air around her. Then, her eyes narrowed slightly.

"There's no way that's possible, right?...R-Right?"

Chapter 480: Couples Do It All The Time

I barely held back a laugh, her innocence shining through in the most adorable way.

Shaking my head, I leaned closer, my grin widening as I said,

"Oh, it's absolutely true. Happens more often than you'd think."

She blinked rapidly, trying to process this shocking revelation. "You're messing with me." She insisted, though the wavering tone in her voice betrayed her doubt. "People really do that?"

"Yup." I confirmed, nodding solemnly. "Couples send these kinds of pictures for all sorts of reasons."

Her brow furrowed, her lips parting slightly.

"Like what?" She asked, her voice barely above a squeak. "For what reason would they send such shameless pictures to one another?"

"Well..." I began, counting on my fingers. "Sometimes it's just to make their partner happy or excited when they're apart. A little...reminder, if you will." I smirked. "Like leaving a tiny spark that could turn into a fire when they finally see each other."

Her cheeks flushed a brilliant red. "A-A fire?" She stammered, clearly trying not to visualise it.

I chuckled, undeterred as I continued saying, "Other times, it's a way to build trust and intimacy. Letting someone see you like that takes a lot of vulnerability."

"H-How do you even know all this, Kafka?!" She asked in a fluster, wondering why I was so educated on such matters while she was just learning about it.

I shrugged casually. "It's common knowledge. And..." I leaned in, my voice dropping to a teasing whisper. "...you'd be surprised how many couples do it for the thrill."

"The thrill?" Her eyes went wide with disbelief.

"Sure..." I continued, nodding. "It's the excitement of knowing you're sharing something private, just between the two of you. The secrecy, the anticipation..." I let the words hang in the air, watching her ears twitch madly as she tried to absorb this new world of information.

"This is n-normal?" Her hands slowly slid down her face, revealing her bewildered expression.

"For most people, yeah." I laughed.

Her lips parted slightly, as if she were going to say something, but no words came out. After a moment, she finally croaked,

"I can't believe it. People are just out there, sending—" she paused, her face going crimson. "—those kinds of pictures like it's no big deal?"

"It's not like they're sending them to random strangers. It's between people who trust each other." I casually said while smirking.

"I-Is that so?" She let out a long, shaky breath, eyes still wide. "Ahh...My brain hurt from hearing all this."

"You really are so innocent, Nina." I laughed, ruffling her hair gently.

She swatted my hand away, her cheeks still blazing.

"I'm not innocent! I'm just—just...Uninformed!" Her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her eyes darting away in embarrassment.

But despite her attempt to stay composed, I caught the flicker of curiosity in her eyes. After a brief silence, she glanced back at me, trying to sound nonchalant.



"So...What exactly was going on with that guy on the bus? Why was he getting those pictures? Was it just for fun, or...was there some other reason?" Her voice trailed off, her gaze narrowing with cautious intrigue.

I smiled, savouring her shift from embarrassment to genuine curiosity.

"Oh, there was definitely a reason." I said, leaning back as if recounting a fascinating story. "From what I saw when I accidentally peeked—"

"Sure, accidentally." She snorted.

I ignored her jab and continued. "The guy was having a rough day. He was texting his partner about how he got scolded at work; it looked like he was feeling pretty low."

"That's rough...Poor guy." Nina's eyes softened.

"Yeah. But here's where it gets interesting." My grin widened. "His girlfriend must have known exactly how to cheer him up, because right after he sent that message, his phone lit up with photos."

"Photos? Like...selfies?" Her brow furrowed.

"More like...pictures of her in some very revealing lingerie." I chuckled.

"Wait—What?! She sent it on her own?" Her eyes widened like saucers.

I nodded, fighting back laughter. "Yup. She sent him a series of photos that left very little to the imagination. And let me tell you, his face lit up like a kid who was opening up his birthday gifts."

Nina's mouth fell open. "In public? She sent it? Knowing that he was on a bus?" She swallowed hard, her ears twitching. "Did that...actually cheer him up?"

"Oh, more than that." I smirked. "He was grinning so hard it looked like his cheeks were about to split open. The guy stayed like that the entire ride, all the way until he got off the bus...He was practically glowing."

She blinked, processing this revelation, her mind clearly blown as she said, "That's...That's insane. And it worked?"

"Like a charm." I confirmed, nodding. "It's not just the photos themselves; it's the thought behind them. She knew he was down and found a way to lift his spirits...A little confidence boost, a reminder that someone out there cares about him in a special way even though it's a little naughty in nature."

"I still can't believe people do things like that." Nina's lips parted slightly, her eyes still full of disbelief.

"Sometimes a little surprise like that can turn someone's entire day around." I shrugged.

She relaxed herself, her arms loosening from their tight fold. "Younger people these days know way too much." She muttered, her cheeks still tinged pink. "Meanwhile, I'm just out here learning that lingerie selfies are apparently the cure for a bad day."

"Well, now you know." I laughed.

As if that was the final word on the matter, I pushed myself back on the chair, thumb idly flicking through the photos on my phone. My other hand absentmindedly traced lazy circles on Nina's palm, my attention seemingly elsewhere. The playful intimacy of the moment lingered, but the conversation had come to a halt.

Nina's eyes flicked toward me, a hint of frustration in her gaze. 'That's it?' She'd been drawn in by the topic—something that had her mind swirling with thoughts she never entertained before—and now I was just...done?

The spark of curiosity and embarrassment simmered in her chest, and she didn't know what to do with it. Her ears twitched slightly, the tips still tinged with red.

She glanced down at our hands, the way my fingers twined gently with hers. Her heart thumped a little faster.

There was a question burning in her mind, one she couldn't shake now that we'd started talking about that. But the thought of asking it out loud made her cheeks flare hot again.

Her teeth worried at her bottom lip as she wrestled with her thoughts. And finally, she cleared her throat, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey..."

"Hmm? What is it, Nina?" I looked up from my phone, tilting my head with a soft smile.

She hesitated, eyes darting away as she muttered, "You know, since...since you're young too, like that guy on the bus..."

"Yeah?" I arched an eyebrow, curiosity sparking.

Her fingers tightened around mine, and she took a deep breath, her face now a deep shade of crimson.

"D-Do you...I mean, would you also...w-want that kind of thing?"

Her words tumbled out in a rush, and she immediately clamped her mouth shut, mortified.