
2
Setsuka Narumi
Illustration by:
ALmic
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BAD CHILDREN


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RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR




“You’re the ones pranking the school, right?”
NANA NANAOUGI
Second year at Saigou High.
She has been the top-scoring student since her admission and is respected by the entire faculty.


"Tell me, Natsume.
It's just you and me, and we've got the whole night ahead of us.
How far are we gonna take this?"


"Oh, Natsume! Welcome home.
You're late today!"



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Presented by Setsuka Narumi

Illustrated by ALmic



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YEN ON
New York



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Illustration by:
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Translation by:
Andrew Cunningham

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PROLOGUE

Kurumi's scream echoed through the spacious gym.

"I'm *done* putting up with crap! *Done* doing what useless grown-ups say!"

She stamped the floor and roared furiously, letting her impulses drive her. The impact shook the cat mask and can of spray paint by her feet.

"I hate *you*, too! I need to make you understand our resistance is *not* just some game! But I also want to *save* you! Why don't you get that?!"

Her voice shook. I knew she meant every word.

"Make up your mind. You need this. It's your salvation! Please."

A desperate plea. She was speaking for both of us, and it was as genuine as it was heartfelt.

"If you don't act, you'll die. Your body or your soul—whichever goes first."

Silence fell. It was as though Kurumi's voice had cut down all other sounds, slaying them.

Ten seconds passed without a response. Twenty. The stifling, torturous hush threatened to smother us all.

Suddenly, we heard a shout from behind us. The back door had just opened, signaling an end to it all. Kurumi and I had no more time to wait for her decision.

"Let's go, Kurumi."

"…Right. Goodbye."

We had a route secured, and we used it to escape the gym.

"Do you think that was the right choice, Kurumi?" I asked.

She was a few steps ahead of me, the heat of summer still lingering around us. "…I think…it was." Her shoulders heaved, a fragile smile on her lips. "We should start acting like children again. Say no when we don't wanna, hate what we don't like, lash out at people we can't stand. We need to be like little kids and forget how to just grin and bear it."

"…Yeah. I think you're right."

"Maybe it'll be a long, long time before she works out what I meant, but…I'm sure she'll get it someday. And that's enough."

On we ran, feet beating the pavement. We had nowhere to go—no place to return to.

Passersby gawked at us like we were monsters.

I offered up a prayer.

Retribution was coming for us. This impulse could only lead us to destruction.

But let that wait a while longer.


adness!!
Human
Rights!
No more
grades-based
discrimination!!
Daily
insults



ACT ONE

I, Ren Natsume, have loathed the sound of cicadas for as long as I can remember.

Why? Well, I know it's unreasonable, but whenever I think about how that sound isn't just a summer noise but a bunch of cicadas singing, I feel a sense of stagnation.

No vacation plans with friends. Endless summer homework. No more popsicles left in the fridge. No family at home.

Every time I ran into stuff like that as a kid, I'd find my ears full of the cicadas' cries, forcing their way into my mind and making me hate them.

"We'll be skipping this problem in class; look it over on your own time. Next page."

I was at my seat by the window, eyes on the view outside, as the sound came through the glass. A billion malformed bells were ringing…or so I tried to convince myself. But it was obviously cicadas. It was the first time this year I'd clearly heard their cries. And now they wouldn't stop.

"As for the next problem… Let's have Ogino try it."

The sun was high in the sky, dazzling my eyes. A plane drew a vapor trail across a sea of blue. Puffy clouds loomed in the distance.

The rainy season had come and gone, and summer was here. Summer vacation was upon us…or rather, it *should* have been.

"Can't do it? Gimme a break. We're going by seat number; make sure you're ready, you dunce."

And yet Saigou High was the same as ever.

"Keep it together! You're in the summer course—you don't *get* a vacation!"

I heard a *bang* so loud, it shook the room. Glancing toward the front, I saw a dark green handprint in the middle of the chalkboard. Our teacher was nearby. She must have slapped the board.

"If you can't even solve a problem like this, you're better off dead! What are you living for?!"

If you can't even treat inanimate objects with respect, how can you be hired as a teacher?

Our school is beyond salvation, I thought, thoroughly convinced. *This world is doomed.*

Resting my chin on my hand, I stuck my finger in one ear.

I didn't think it would drown out the verbal abuse, but I wanted to push the rot out of my mind somehow. I hoped class would end soon.

I turned away from the room and looked back outside. It was so bright out. The classroom was kept dim in an attempt to save electricity. I couldn't see the cicadas, but I knew they were out there somewhere.

"…Hey… Hey! Snap out of it!"

"……"

"Hey! I'm talking to you, Natsume! Ears open, punk!"

I swore under my breath. Still looking out the window, I spat, "They're open."

Bile was building up inside me.

Shut up. Don't you dare talk to me.

*

After school, I slipped out of the classroom.

Saigou High didn't allow clubs or teams to meet over summer vacation, for fear they would interfere with summer lessons.

Naturally, if any teachers spotted me heading to the clubroom, they'd be furious, so I had to keep my eyes peeled on my way there.

I left the main building and headed toward the old club annex. Once inside, I made my way to that overheated hallway. I passed doors to either side, ignoring the signs lined up next to them.

Finally, I reached the door at the very back and stopped just outside. Making sure no one was watching, I glanced up at the paper plastered over the original sign. The name of the club was written on it in magic marker.

STARGAZING CLUB.

Like the sign said, this was the Stargazing Club's room. But that club didn't have any active members, so they weren't using this space for anything.

Instead, *we* were using it as the headquarters for our resistance movement hell-bent on changing this school.

I took a deep breath and opened the door. We had a strategy session planned for today.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, stepping in.

The girl inside looked up from her paperback. Her eyes gleamed like black quartz under her cat-eared newsboy cap. Her black hair was cut neatly in a bob. Its underside, dyed an ash gray, peeped out as her hair swayed.

Kurumi Hoshimiya was flashing me that mean-spirited grin of hers, clearly in revenge mode.

"You're *super* late," she replied. "I'm already at the climax of this amnesia romance."

"Hmm? Oh, your book? Sorry, it was hard getting here without anyone spotting me."

"Was it? Then I'll forgive you. Well done, Natsume."

"Yeah, thanks. Same to you, Kurumi."

As I spoke, I grabbed a folding chair and moved it right up next to her.

I looked around at the empty shelves, the wobbly folding table, and the light from the setting sun streaming through the window.

Surrounded by familiar sights, I stretched and let my shoulders relax. It had been a long day, but I could finally take a load off.

"Natsume, you hanging in there? You look seriously exhausted." Kurumi snapped her book closed, concerned. I leaned back in my seat, and she sidled over and looked up at me. "Heat getting to you? If you're not feeling up to it, we can reschedule."

"Oh, that's not the problem. I'm fine… Well, not really 'fine,' I guess." I straightened up, admitting it. I didn't want to make her worry, and there was no use in trying to act strong in front of Kurumi. "Just feels like the teachers have reverted back to their old habits."

"Oof. Same in your year, then?"

The first-year teachers must have been just as bad.

We'd broadcast the teacher's insults over the PA system during the school festival before summer vacation. It had caused an uproar, and the faculty had started watching what they said. There was talk of the Board of Education getting involved, of some teachers maybe getting fired.

Our plan had worked…or so we'd thought.

But a few days later, Saigou High was back to normal. People didn't care about anything but grades, studying, and college entrance exams. Nothing else mattered—least of all glorified pranks staged by a couple weirdos.

That was the attitude the teachers adopted, and the students just fell in line.

Soon, the faculty had ramped their rhetoric right back up, and the students took it as a natural return to routine after the brief respite of the festival.

In the end, our school still only cared about its students' GPAs.

Summer classes started, everyone got busy, and the uproar dissipated.

Beliefs instilled over years couldn't be changed and forgotten so easily.

"But that's fine," I said. "I didn't expect something like that to fix all our problems."

Kurumi was nodding. "Exactly! Our goal was just to reduce the number of applicants for the next school year. It's too soon to say if we achieved that or not. We'll just have to cross our fingers."

"Will you stick around long enough to find out?"

"Hmm? Should I take that to mean you *want* me to stay?" She shot me a provocative grin, and I came clean.

"That's what I said."

This rattled her. "Wh-where'd that come from?" she stammered, cheeks red.

Don't be stupid, Kurumi. I'm already committed. I've decided to fall with you, and I'm not afraid to say it.

…I was still embarrassed, of course.

Kurumi cleared her throat and tried to cut through the awkward atmosphere. "Well, like I said, I'm not about to drop out yet. Not until I've taken a principled stand, made these awful teachers pay, and forced the students to change their attitudes."

"Yeah. We're just getting started. We're gonna change this school."

"Heh-heh. I'm pinning my hopes on you, Natsume. Let's do this together!"

Kurumi rubbed her nose, adjusted her hat, then reached for the backpack at her feet. She pulled out a yellow notebook, flipped through the pages and put it down, open to a blank page in the center.

This was her Notes on Revenge, where she kept all her ideas for our resistance movement. She tapped the page with the end of her mechanical pencil and hummed in thought.

"On that note, how should we proceed?" she asked.

"Can't we just keep coming up with more schemes?"

"We *could*. But I mean…the festival's over, and we're technically on summer vacation. I thought we could use a new goal."

So this was about motivation, then. She might have a point.

"A goal for summer vacation, hmm?" I wondered aloud. "What would be good?"

Both of us were taking part in Saigou High's summer classes, allowing us to be at school during the break. It seemed a shame to let that opportunity go to waste.

We thought for a while, then Kurumi's head snapped up. "Come to think of it, I'm a little surprised you're taking summer classes, too."

"Not like I wanted to. My father applied for me. Like last year."

"Oof. That explains it. My sympathies." Wincing, she rubbed my head.

Stop. That is so cringe. I'm not your dog.

"I could say the same to you, Kurumi. Why would you sign up when you're planning to drop out?"

"Oh… Well, I didn't want to come, but when I told my mom I was putting off my plans to drop out, she went and applied for me. Eh-heh-heh, guess we're both in the same boat!"

Grinning, she took my hand in hers. Our fingers threaded together. She squeezed twice. I squeezed back. This was how couples held hands.

I looked up at her, and she smiled. It was embarrassing, but it also made me feel better. It was strange how that worked. I rather liked times like these.

For a while, we savored each other's warmth. Then I voiced a passing notion.

"We could try to disrupt the summer lessons. Not like either of us want to be here."

"Oh? Interesting! I like it. A bold proposition!"

"And even if we don't manage to disrupt them, I still think they're a good target."

Saigou High's summer lessons were a hellish experience that kicked off right after the festival ended on July twenty-third.

They skipped homeroom and any hands-on lessons in favor of a more condensed schedule of focused study. Five hours on weekdays, three on Saturday.

They weren’t all that different from standard classes; in other words, they were a complete waste of time. The teachers spouted insults and discriminatory remarks. Sometimes they even stormed out. The textbook might be different, but it was the same teachers teaching the same classes.

They were like a concentrated dose of our school’s rotten day-to-day. That was all our summer classes amounted to.

Kurumi was experiencing them for the first time, but the last few days had undoubtedly demonstrated just how crappy they were. She was nodding, lips curled in a vicious smirk.

“Hmph! Fight back against those worthless lectures! I like it,” she said enthusiastically. “Their summer curriculum was pissing me off anyway. All they do is demand to know how far we are in our summer homework.”


NO MORE SWEET



"Yep. It's just like it was last year."

"Yikes. That's terrible. This place is a hellhole." Wailing, she started scribbling in her notebook. "So this summer, we're going after summer lessons hard."

"Yeah. We'll do everything we can to upset them."

We were out to relieve our frustrations—and hopefully change the school while we were at it. If we wanted anyone to take our attacks seriously, we needed to have lots of witnesses.

"I'm on board with our target, but what should we do? I've run out of specific ideas. Nothing else on tap!"

"Hmm… If we're starting from scratch, I'd like to do something to point out the irony of summer lessons."

"Good point. All our classes feature abuse, so there's no use griping about it here. Not that I'm okay with it, but…"

"I get your point," I said, nodding.

I did. She wasn't just trying to do something different this time. We had a more specific target now, and she wanted to make the best of that opportunity.

But what could we do? We thought about it for so long that we even forgot we were holding hands, but nothing really came to mind.

"Summer lessons have just started, so I guess we should spend a little while observing," I suggested.

"I guess so, yeah. If we find something new to grumble about, that might give us a lead."

"Then let's head out. We'll schedule another meeting at a later date."

"Sounds good. I'll be in touch."

Kurumi snapped her notes closed, wrapping up our strategy session. We let go of each other's hands, and I grabbed my bookbag and got up to leave.

"Oh, Natsume. Hang on a second."

"Hmm? Oh, sorry. Did you have more to say?"

"No, I'm done. Just…*smooch*."

Her soft, warm lips brushed mine. She'd leaned in as I got up and kissed me.

"…Caught me off guard, there," I said, trying to act unperturbed as I brushed my fingers against my lips.

Kurumi licked hers, then flashed me a mean-spirited grin. "Mwa-ha-ha! Don't read too much into it. Let's go!"

She packed up, pinned her hair to hide the gray, and left the room.

Wait… What do you mean, "don't read too much into it"?

Making out was part of our bad behavior and a way to vent stress. What else could I read into it?

…Better not overthink it. I don't want to cause any misunderstandings.

*

Our garbage classes continued, still full of insults and dehumanization. The lectures went nowhere as teachers wasted all their time yelling at kids. And that wasn't even the half of it.

Appallingly, these classes cost *money*—on *top* of our regular tuition fees. Students participating had to apply ahead of time and pay for the privilege.

They took our money and didn't teach us a damn thing. That was the truth behind the summer lessons at Saigou High. The whole thing was completely unsalvageable. It was clear the school didn't give a shit about their students.

"Don't screw up something so easy, brat. Go back to junior high!"

The day after Kurumi and I picked our new target, teachers were yelling over the sound of toppling desks once again.

Our summer classes continued to be a sick joke. Yet as awful as they were, every year, a fair number of students attended them. Since they cost extra, they were naturally optional—yet the majority of students wound up enrolling in them anyway.

A few students might have positive motivations—they needed to be ready for college exams and wanted to spend summer vacation reviewing what they'd learned, or something like that—but I knew for a fact many of them were here for much darker reasons.

"Don't slack off just because it's summer! At the very least, you're better than the hopeless idiots on *this* list! Make the most of it!"

The teacher was standing by the secondary chalkboard to one side of the room. The week's schedule was written on it…along with a list of six names beneath the header APPLICATION NOT SUBMITTED.

And there you have it—the reason almost everyone attended summer lessons: Anyone who opted out got their name written up on the board. It was the same in every class and every grade, a Saigou High tradition. The list went up in mid-May, and every single student's name went up on the board, erased only when they turned in their summer lesson application.

What did that mean? Well, basically, this: Anyone who didn't attend—cheaters, if we're being mean—would have their identities exposed. Putting those names on display generated a buzz, and students would start asking one another why they weren't applying.

Unless you were extremely sure of yourself, not attending would put you in a *very* awkward position at school. And like dominoes, all the students gave in to the peer pressure. That was what the school wanted, and that was why their names were on the board.

"Everyone on this board must have a very busy schedule. Lots of summer plans! Isn't that nice? You *don't*? So do your damn work!" Spitting sarcasm, the teacher went back to the podium.

Everything about this public humiliation sucked, but there was one aspect of it that pissed me off more than anything else: the way the teachers pretended they left those names up just for reference.

We *all* knew it was about malicious humiliation. And for that reason, the way they avoided overt insults galled me. The phrase APPLICATION NOT SUBMITTED was full of cowardice.

Don't pretend like you're being polite. If you're gonna be assholes, go for broke. Gimme a reason to clock your ass. Don't go around

with an innocent look on your face, like you haven't done anything wrong.

This chain of thought reminded me of my strategy session with Kurumi. If I took aim at *this* frustration, maybe I'd find a line of attack.

Hiding my phone under my desk, I sent Kurumi a text.

"For our resistance, wanna hurl a stone at the list of names?"

She was in class, too, but her answer came quickly.

"I have a plan. I call it 'Painted Heads on Pikes.'"

It was hard to tell what she was talking about. What did this scheme involve? The name was awful, but that was nothing new.

I was about to reply when she sent the details.

We'd need to get some paint—or magic markers—and sneak into the classrooms undetected. Then we'd change the lists' headers to read "Heads on Pikes." That would force the teachers to admit that they were treating nonattenders like executed prisoners. And it would certainly help vent our frustration with our summer lessons.

"I like it," I replied, before quickly glancing back at the chalkboard and sinking into thought.

Now that we'd settled on our method of attack, we needed a date and time. When could we safely get this done? We'd have to do our homework. We'd need to figure out the right color and size for the writing, too. We needed to hammer out all the details.

As I pondered these questions, Kurumi wrote back.

"Another idea: Could we decorate the header with this?"

She'd attached an image, and it almost made me crack up in class.

It showed a very real-looking severed head, almost certainly made by doctoring a cheap mannequin. The hair was a mess. The eyes were rolled back, showing only the whites. The neck was painted red, as though blood had gone everywhere.

It was a horrifying image. Where had she even found it?

"Awesome," I replied. "Let's make some and hang them everywhere."

"Let's swing by a hundred-yen store on the way home!"

It seemed we'd be making these gruesome heads, then. We hadn't done any arts and crafts since the eraser stamps. Though I hoped I would be more useful this time around, I doubted I'd improved at all.

I still had my phone in my hand when another text arrived. But this one wasn't from Kurumi. It was from a totally different account.

I swapped over to the screen with the new message. It was from Tanaka, who sat next to me in class.

"If you keep looking at your phone, the teacher's gonna catch you."

I glanced over, and our eyes met. She maintained eye contact, smiling faintly.

…She was such a do-gooder. She could've just hung me out to dry.

My fingers danced on the screen, punching in a quick reply.

"Thanks for the warning."

I flashed her a quick smile of my own.

It had been a month and a half since I started talking to Tanaka, and I'd finally worked something out: This was as close as we should ever be.

*

Kurumi and I spent two days preparing to carry out her plan.

We let the summer lessons flow in one ear and out the other, then met up in the clubroom after school.

We discussed the right time to stage the attack as well.

Ultimately, we settled on Saturday morning. Since classes ended before noon, there were fewer teachers around, which meant lower odds of getting caught. We went with early morning because we thought it would be less suspicious if we claimed we'd shown up early to review for the day's lessons.

We'd decided on a concept, a method, and a time. Fully prepared, we put our plan into action.

I'd been worried about making the severed heads, but to my great relief, Kurumi took care of that at home. I was totally useless when it

came to handicrafts.

At last, the big day arrived. We rode the train in, sneaking the mannequin heads onto school grounds in a bag. Then we held one final meeting in the Stargazing Club room.

"The heads are all in order. Natsume, did you buy what I asked for?"

"Yeah, a thirty-centimeter ruler and permanent markers. White ones."

"Nice. Yep, gotta be white to write on chalkboards."

"I bought extras, just in case; we can both take two."

"Roger that. Okay, we're good to go."

We each took a deep breath.

"Well, Natsume. Let's make this a delightful attack."

We turned to face each other and shared a quick kiss, then left the room.

It was time for action.

Kurumi and I split up and moved from one room to the next, switching out the APPLICATION NOT SUBMITTED header. Using the ruler and the white permanent markers, we wrote HEADS ON PIKES in big letters in its place.

We attached the mannequin heads to the chalkboards in several rooms. We weren't able to smuggle enough in for every class, but some compromise is inevitable when it comes to that kind of thing.

The act itself went smoothly. We made use of verandas and emergency exits, ensuring our crimes went undetected. Then, when it was done, we split up, and I hid out in the toilet stall, killing time.

When the noise levels in the building started to rise, I headed to class like any other student.

In every room, a crowd had gathered below our graffiti. They were making a bunch of noise, but I didn't hear anyone saying they'd seen us.

Our first attack of the summer had been a perfect crime.

*

There was no homeroom during summer lessons. And so our attack was discussed during first period instead.

"…I suppose I might as well ask. Do any of you know anything about the graffiti or the creepy dolls?" As soon as class began, the teacher—a shorter woman—looked around Class 2-5. "Or maybe you just heard someone discussing something out of the ordinary. Nobody?"

The students glanced at one another, but no one raised their hand or spoke up. I betrayed nothing myself, and the classroom stayed silent.

"Nothing, huh? Damn. Well, we're looking for information. Both on this incident and about the festival broadcast. We can't overlook anything so eerie and ridiculous."

Like you have principles, I thought. *We're the ones who can't overlook* you.

"If anything comes to mind, speak up," the teacher continued. "Come talk to one of us in private, if you're uncomfortable."

"……"

"What's wrong with you all? I expect an answer when I speak!"

Reluctantly, the students replied in chorus, "Will do!"

No one had seen me or Kurumi in action. None of our classmates had any information to provide and no clue how to respond to the teacher's demand.

She sighed dramatically and then glared back at the chalkboard.

"Ugh. What's all this crap about, anyway?" she muttered, picking up the mannequin head.

What's it about? Come on. You know full well what we're mocking. Don't pretend you don't.

"…Teacher, is there some kind of writing on the back of that thing?" someone called out, breaking the awkward silence.

Oh, well spotted. As one of the architects, I'm pleased.

"Hmm? Back…where?"

"There, on the nape of the neck. It looks like some kind of quiz."

"Oh. What the…? A code? No, a problem from the Math II textbook? I can solve it, but…"

Like she said, there was a math code on every mannequin. If you used calculus and sines and cosines to solve it, then good golly, you'd get some letters! A string of words that ultimately meant nothing, that is.

In other words, we'd stuck a cipher with no answer to the backs of their heads. The smarter you thought you were, the deeper the mire. It was a vicious little trick.

It would look like a challenge to the academically inclined, but it wasn't one. Something like that would be *truly* pointless. It had no real connection to the Heads on Pikes motif, but I liked the irony of it.

"Has anyone solved it?" asked the teacher. "You're second-years; we've covered this."

"I'd like to try! Can I get a closer look?"

"You didn't even do your homework! …Well, the answer looks right, I guess."

Watching the teacher and my classmates frown over the cipher, I suppressed a smirk. *Fret away, you fools.*

The teacher scowled away at the mannequin as students began voicing their opinions. Gradually, the discussion moved on to various rumors, and the mood of the classroom began to relax. But just as everyone thought we'd end up wasting the whole class solving this riddle…there was a knock, startling us all.

"Hello, pardon me."

Someone opened the door without waiting for permission.

I couldn't have been the only one who gaped. The unexpected intruder was someone quite well-known.

She had almond eyes and intelligent features. She was prettier than most models—tall and slim, but with a big bust for a high schooler. Her gorgeous bluish-black hair was gathered behind her head and flowed smoothly down her back in a straight line.

It was Nana Nanaougi of Class 2-1.

She was the head of our grade and had maintained the highest scores in our year since the day she enrolled. In other words, she was the best student in the best class in Saigou High's second year.

After a moment's pause, things started to move.

The teacher frowned at her. "Nanaougi? Why are you here? What do you want? Class is in session."

"Sorry, sorry, I'm well aware." Nanaougi brushed the teacher off, not even using polite language consistently. "But I've got permission. I'm here to clean up."

"Clean up? What do you mean?"

"This," she said, shaking the bottle in her hand.

"What is that?"

"Dehydrated alcohol. From the science lab."

"Why are you carrying that around? What's it for?"

"It's the best way to clean up permanent markers. Mind if I hit up your chalkboard?"

With that, Nanaougi moved over to the Heads on Pikes display, moistened the rag in her other hand, and proceeded to wipe the header clean.

"Nanaougi, will that work?"

"I got it off in the other rooms! Trust me. This won't take long."

The white graffiti was already fading. It didn't come off with a single swipe, but the more she rubbed, the less clear the writing became.

"See? It's coming right off."

"So it is… Well, I see you've earned your reputation. Thank you."

Nanaougi flashed the teacher an indomitable grin. "You're welcome! Oh, and can I have the head as well?"

"Oh, er… Hold on, there's a note on the back. It might be a message from the culprit—can you solve it? I'd love to have your help…"

"I don't think it's a real code. The math problems are easy enough to solve, but it doesn't seem to come out to the kind of message you all are probably hoping for."

"Huh? Oh, I see…"

"There's no use thinking about it. Best to just put it out of your mind."

With that, Nanaougi plucked the head from the teacher's hand and tossed it in a big plastic bag she'd left in the hall. There was a whole pile of them—all the heads Kurumi had worked so hard on. Nanaougi had clearly been going from room to room collecting them.

"That should do it," she said. "And I'm off!"

"R-right," the teacher stammered. "Thanks again, Nanaougi."

"Not at all. Oh, Ms. Ookuma, I've got something I want to chat about with you a bit later."

"Oh? With me? Very well. Is it a study question…?"

"More or less. I'll explain later. Keep working hard, everybody!" she said, shooting the class a wink.

This was clearly directed at the whole room, but it felt like her eyes momentarily met mine. I'd never once spoken to Nanaougi, so I was sure it was a coincidence. But it felt like a meaningful coincidence.

It was hard to say anything for sure… But she'd just wiped away our whole crime, and I had to admit, I didn't really care for her.

*

Whenever our attacks succeeded, Kurumi and I would meet up to celebrate. But we never did it on the same day we carried out a scheme, since meeting up in secret while the school was still in an uproar was too risky. If the teachers found us, it might arouse their suspicions.

For that reason, Kurumi and I planned to leave school separately on that day. We took off at different times, looking for all the world like we'd done nothing at all.

I shouldered my backpack, changed out of my school slippers, and left the building.

Saturday classes ended before noon, so it was still light out. Dazzling white sunlight poured down, baking the top of my head.

I wasn't all that hungry, so I figured I'd just grab some cold noodles somewhere.

But as I stepped through the school gates, someone called out to me.

"Hey. Hey, you there. Hold up."

The voice was strong and confident, and I recognized it. I'd heard it this morning. It belonged to Nana Nanaougi.

…Was she talking to me?

Just to be sure, I looked around without turning my head. There was really no one else nearby. Most students grabbed lunch in the cafeteria before they went home, so not many people were heading out just yet.

In that case, odds were high she *was* talking to me. I didn't know what she wanted, but ignoring her seemed like a bad idea. I decided I'd better stop and listen.

"Oh, you heard me! 'Sup?"

I turned to find her bluish hair gleaming in the sunlight. Nanaougi was beaming as she offered me a cheery greeting.

"Hi there, lovely day, isn't it? You're from Class 2-5, right?"

"…Yes. What's this about?"

"Hmm. It's not really *about* anything. I just saw you this morning and thought you seemed pretty cool. Figured I'd hit you up. Sorry to bother you, I guess?"

She sure didn't seem sorry as she crooked her head at me.

Unsure how to interpret what she was saying, I asked the obvious question: "So, are you hitting on me or something?"

"Yeah, sure. You can take it that way if you want."

Seriously? What is up with this girl? I hadn't pegged her as a man-eater. Was that what her glance this morning meant?

A beautiful girl had just told me I seemed cool. Most guys would be tickled pink, but it didn't make me happy in the slightest.

Nanaougi was the best student in the best class in our grade. She stood at the pinnacle of the discriminatory polices gripping the

school—the SaiHigh Law. She was in a totally different caste from Kurumi and me—and I'd rather have nothing to do with her.

Maintaining a poker face, I shrugged. "Sorry, can't take you up on that offer. I've already got someone."

"Oh yeah? Shame. But that hardly matters, let's just have a little fun."

"No thanks. I don't wanna know what she'd say if she caught us."

"Your girlfriend sounds pretty scary? Come on. Ditch her and join me on a proper date."

She took a half step closer, and I backed off, letting my distaste show.

Male or female, you ran into people like this every once in a while. Like them, Nanaougi seemed to think that just because she was in a better class, she could have anyone she wanted. It felt like she was just seeing me as some guy and not as myself, and I didn't appreciate it at all. But voicing those feelings wouldn't get me anywhere with someone brainwashed to believe in this school's values.

I scowled at her in silence, and she broke into a laugh.

"Ah-ha-ha, don't give me that look. I was just kidding."

"…It wasn't funny. What if I'd taken you seriously?"

"Oh, no, no. I meant it when I said you were cool. I was joking about the date thing. I was having too much fun with the whole 'hitting on you' vibe and got carried away."

Cut the crap. Who cares which one you were joking about? It's all the same.

I was still glaring at her, but Nanaougi didn't let it bother her.

"So, listen. Much as I'd love to go on a date, there's something I need to take care of first."

"…What?"

"I've gotta throw out all this trash. I mean, look how much there is!" She held up the big bag she'd been dragging around.

It was a clear plastic bag—and it was full of all the horrifying severed heads Kurumi had made. She'd gone around to every class

that morning, collecting these.

…Aha. So she's throwing out the trash, huh?

I doubted she put any thought into that turn of phrase, but it got under my skin. Students from better classes thought nothing of our resistance.

"Hmm? No reaction? Don't leave me hanging! It's like I'm talking to myself!" Nanaougi narrowed her eyes and peered into my face.

It was frustrating to hear our efforts—and Kurumi's handiwork—dismissed so easily, but I couldn't let my reaction show. I didn't want her to figure out it was us.

I tore my eyes off the bag and said the first thing that came to mind. "Right, right. Must be rough. You're in a good class, and they're still making you do stuff like that, huh?"

"Oh, nobody made me do this. I volunteered!"

Earning brownie points with the faculty? Well, well. What a tryhard.

"But okay! If you're feeling sympathetic, then gimme a hand. Maybe we can't go on a date, but you can help throw out the trash, right? That hardly counts as cheating. You're just being helpful!"

"…Nah, I can't. I've got places to be. Leave me out of this."

I turned to go. I didn't have plans, but I didn't want anything more to do with Nanaougi.

"Okay, fine. Can't leave your girlfriend waiting!" She caught up with me, matched my pace, and kept on needling me.

"You don't know when to quit! It's none of your business! I'm going home!"

"If you're seeing a girl, you've gotta dress for the occasion! At least dust off your bookbag." She reached over and thumped my backpack twice.

What the hell? This girl is really getting on my nerves.

"Get lost," I said, batting her hand away and stalking out of the gates alone.

*

“All righty, Natsume. Here’s to another successful attack! Cheers!”

After school on Monday, two days after the Painted Heads on Pikes scheme, Kurumi and I held a celebration in the Stargazing Club room, just as we’d planned.

The usual spread was set up on the table—potato chips, cookies, chocolate, a liter carton of orange juice, and two plastic cups.

“It went off without a hitch!” Kurumi said, cheerily tearing open the cookies.

“Yeah. I’m glad, but… You’re not letting it go to your head, right?”

“Not in the slightest. Been a while since we had to sneak around. I was kinda stressed out.”

“Oh, yeah. Not since we made the insult stamps, right?”

Kurumi nodded and devoured a cookie. “Mmph… Yeah, your veranda idea was good. Thanks to that, no one spotted us. Excellent work, Natsume.”

“It was so early, we probably would have been fine even if we hadn’t used the verandas.”

“Easy to say in hindsight. Just take the compliment!”

She was right. I had a bad habit of arguing with anyone who praised me. I was pleased, of course; I really was! I just didn’t know how to accept stuff like that.

Feeling uncomfortable, I reached for a cookie. Kurumi did the same, and our fingers bumped. Then our eyes met.

On reflex, I tried to pull away. But she didn’t let me. Instead, Kurumi grabbed my hand, wound her fingers through mine, and squeezed. Then she smiled, looking thoroughly satisfied.

“…What?” I asked.

“Hmm? Nothing. Never you mind.”

She gave my hand a tug for some reason, then brought it to her cheek. Now my fingers were between her soft skin and that ash-gray underlayer.

Her palm was soft, and the back of her hand was smooth. I felt a sensation, half-ticklish, half-warm, and the information overloaded my brain.

"…You're gonna get crumbs on your face," I said.

"No, I won't. You've only touched the individually wrapped stuff."

This was true, and I was well aware of it.

Did she know that I was just deflecting out of embarrassment…? Kurumi's face melted, and she rubbed her cheek against my hand. The whole time, she never took her eyes off my face.

A bewitching silence followed, setting off sparks in the back of my brain. It lasted nearly a minute. Then she let go and stood up.

She came right up next to me, her voice somewhere between a whisper and a purr. "Natsume… Let's make out."

I looked up. Her eyes gleamed, locked on mine.

"Don't you want to…?" she asked. "Say something."

"I'm not…*against* it, just…"

Kurumi's hands were reaching for me, like they were trying to get back to where they belonged. My heart longed for her the same way. How could I refuse? I didn't *want* to say no. I was lost in the moment.

"Come on, Natsume."

"…Okay, fine."

I shifted my chair back, and Kurumi stepped in even closer. Knees together, she sat down on my lap, like I was a knight carrying a princess. Then she twisted her upper body, put her hands around my shoulders, and looked down at me from only centimeters away.

Kurumi put her cat-eared newsboy cap on the table and hooked her hair behind her ears. Looking faintly embarrassed, she wrapped her hand around the back of my head.

"Okay, I'm gonna start…," she said.

"…Go ahead."





Without further hesitation, our mouths locked together.

"Mmph… *Smooch*… Ahh…mmm… Natsu— …Mmm!"

How many times had we kissed? We were way past holding back.

The moment our lips touched, our tongues entwined. They reached out to each other, invading the other's mouth, searching for a place to be. But no force on Earth could make them settle down; they constantly sought new ground, new stimulation. Our tongues were jostling for control of the domain.

It was a passionate, sensual kiss, like one between old lovers.

As our tongues led the way, oxygen deprivation consumed my thoughts. Concerns like reason, instinct, world peace, and even the significance of this kiss all grew hazy and chaotic, driven to the back of my mind. Worries and motives were simplified and forcibly cleared away.

Soon, my mind became incapable of perceiving anything but the wet, sticky sounds of her lips on mine.

"Gasp…that was great, Natsume! Hahh…mmm…mmph!"

Kurumi smashed her lips against mine even harder, and my tongue rose to the challenge. She noticed, and I felt the corners of her mouth turn up.

"*Smooch*… Mmph… You're incorrigible, Natsume…"

Her hot breath washed over me, and I thought, *Why not? I love kissing you, too.*

*

It was at that exact moment that a certain someone chose to arrive at the Stargazing Club room.

Kurumi and I were in each other's arms, trying to replenish our oxygen supply. Our kiss was over, and we'd separated, but our noses were still almost touching, and we could feel each other's breath.

My thoughts had cleared just enough to register footsteps approaching—strong, confident footsteps. I didn't have any evidence, but somehow, I was sure of it. Whoever it was, they were headed *here*.

"…Kurumi, hang on. I think we'd better separate."

"Wuh? Why?" Her eyes were bleary, and that question had clearly taken her last shreds of reason to form.

We were too late. Far, far too late. Just as Kurumi started to shift her weight, the door opened.

The intruder saw Kurumi on my lap. She saw the strand of saliva trailing between our lips. She'd waltzed right in without so much as a knock and had rudely launched right into a greeting.

"Why, hello there, lovebirds! Pardon me for interrupting."

I need hardly say who it was. This was our third encounter in as many days.

With a supremely confident grin, Nana Nanaougi stood in the doorway of the Stargazing Club room.

Shit… But also, what the hell? What's she doing here? Is she back to hit on me some more?

And even if that was the case, I had no clue how she'd tracked me down *here*.

I was always careful not to let any teachers spot me on my way to the clubroom. I'd have known if someone was following me, and it shouldn't have been very easy to tail me in the first place, considering my route.

But that wasn't the real problem here. It didn't matter who it was, or how they'd gotten here. What mattered was that she'd seen us using the clubrooms during summer vacation—and in the throes of inappropriate relations. That was a way bigger problem.

This could come back to haunt us.

"…Clearly, we let our guard down," Kurumi said, wincing. She must have known it was too late to gloss things over. She stayed put on my lap, glaring up at Nanaougi with naked hostility. "What do you want? Who are you, anyway?"

"That's Nana Nanaougi of Class 2-1," I said.

Kurumi shot me a look of surprise. "Huh? Who? Why do you know that? Are you two friendly?"

"Not…really. But most people in my grade know who she is."

I gave Kurumi a brief rundown. Mentioning that Nanaougi had made a pass at me seemed like it would complicate the issue, so I stuck to the raw statistics.

Nana Nanaougi was a name every Saigou High second-year knew. Our school prized academic excellence above all else, and she'd maintained the highest scores in our grade since she enrolled. She hardly seemed human.

Humanities, STEM, exams, mock tests—she *always* got the best score. She was a literal genius. All the students in the good classes working together couldn't hope to best her.

And it wasn't just academics. She infamously excelled athletically and artistically, too. Not only did she dominate her grade in physical fitness exams, she got the best scores in the *entire school*. She played the piano and painted, too. Everyone agreed that if she entered a contest, she'd come back with a trophy. In fact, she'd done just that. She'd been called to several awards ceremonies last year, proving that her rumored skills were the real deal.

She was the portrait of a perfect being, the target of envy and admiration. That was Nana Nanaougi.

"…So what brings this brilliant mind here?" asked Kurumi.

"That, I can't answer. You'll have to ask her." I glanced at Nanaougi, and she put on a sardonic smirk.

"I appreciate the hype train. Clearly my hard work's paid off. You make me feel like a celebrity."

She wasn't the least bit rattled, which frustrated me. Had she really come here just to see me? It was scary how little she let show. I had a bad feeling about the whole thing.

As I racked my brains, Kurumi hopped off my lap and moved over to her. She put her hands on her hips, puffed out her chest, and faced the intruder down.

"This is the Stargazing Club," she said. "Nonmembers are not welcome."

"Oh-ho? Do you really wanna use your club name as a shield? I saw what you were getting up to in here, you know."

"Grr… You've got me there!"

Kurumi had been silenced! Her scowl deepened.

We weren't getting anywhere. Nanaougi had caught us dead to rights, breaking school rules. She even knew Kurumi had her underlayer dyed—another violation. She clearly had the upper hand in this discussion. We'd have to lower our register a bit. We didn't want to incur Nanaougi's wrath.

I got up from my seat and took a position between the two girls.

"…So why *are* you here, Nanaougi?"

"You really are cool," she said. "Though that glare's a bit intimidating!"

I suppressed the urge to snap back and said, "You're here for me? In that case, let's hear it."

"Have to admit, I'm not feeling very welcome here. There's no need for this hostility, I assure you."

"No hostility intended. If this is personal, let's talk in the hall."

I gestured toward the door, but she didn't budge. She stayed right where she was, with that shit-eating grin on her face.

"Oh, did you think I was picking up where we left off? Afraid not. This time I'm not here to hit on you. This is far more important."

"…What's that supposed to mean?"

"Heh-heh, good question. I'm here to talk to both of you."

Not me—me *and* Kurumi. This was sounding worse and worse.

From what I'd just heard, it seemed that Kurumi and Nanaougi had no previous contact. Unlike Tanaka, she was not a lapsed member of the Stargazing Club. I had no clue what this was about.

…Unless… But how?

My hackles went up, and Nanaougi shrugged.

"You seem lost, so let me get straight to the point. Or rather, let me come right out and ask."

She folded her arms, placing one hand to her chin, then narrowed her eyes.

I braced myself, ready for anything. I could think of several possibilities, including using my make-out session with Kurumi to blackmail me into dating her. But what she actually said was the thing I least wanted to hear.

"You're the ones pranking the school, right?"

I felt Kurumi flinch behind me. My own throat clenched up hard.

I'd hoped my fears were unfounded, but clearly today was not our lucky day.

So it was our "pranks" that had brought Nanaougi here.

I'd had a vague feeling that was what this was about. The Stargazing Club was virtually unknown, with no active members. Nanaougi couldn't have come to join the club. It was also a well-known fact that she belonged to no clubs or teams—even the student council. That meant she couldn't be here to discuss the club's activities or to threaten to shut us down.

That meant it was far more likely she was here for reasons unrelated to the club. And she'd said she wasn't here for me, but for both of us.

With that much information, it was hard not to take the hint. Nanaougi knew we were the resistance leaders. That's why she'd come here.

Shit. This is the worst possible scenario.

"…Natsume," said Kurumi anxiously, grabbing my shirt.

I know. I'll handle this.

But what could I do? I had no clue how she'd figured it out or what she was after. It was probably safe to assume that ridiculous pass she'd made at me before had been her way of sounding me out.

Nanaougi suspected we were behind the Painted Heads on Pikes, but I had no idea why.

I was at a loss. What should I do?

How much did she know about the other incidents? Was she just assuming the same culprits were behind everything? Or did she have proof we were involved in all of it?

I didn't know. At the very least, I had to avoid letting anything slip. I didn't want to dig my own grave any deeper.

I shook my head, trying to seem genuine. "No idea what you're talking about. You must be confused."

"Playing innocent? I guess that's natural. It's not something you can just come out and confess to." Nanaougi chuckled. She was clearly very confident in her accusation.

Don't let it get to you. Stay calm. It could still be a bluff.

Don't give her an opening until she's sealed off every escape route.

"Spare me the wild accusations," I said. "You don't have a shred of evidence."

"I don't, huh? I figured you'd say as much, so I brought proof."

…No way. Our attack had been a perfect crime. We hadn't left any physical evidence. We'd even used rulers to draw the words specifically so they couldn't trace our handwriting.

We're good. We're fine. Whatever proof she thinks she has, it's not definitive.

I kept my back straight and faced her down.

Her smirk never faded as her gaze raked over me. She was toying with me.

"I could produce that evidence and declare checkmate, but where's the fun in that? Instead, I'd like to share my tale of woe and tell you about all the hardships I went through to get here."

Nanaougi snorted a laugh and leisurely prepared to launch into her speech.

I wanted to drive her away as soon as possible… But I didn't have a clue what she knew, and I wanted to get as much info as I could

from her. I glanced at Kurumi, and we settled on hearing her out.

"I first learned of your existence with the stamp incident. You made stamps from the teacher's insults and doctored the tests for the upper classes, right? That piqued my curiosity."

Making those insult stamps out of erasers had been our first act of resistance. And it was true that I'd stamped quizzes from Class 2-1.

Aha. It seemed I'd just happened to target Nanaougi's class.

"Since they were using Furukawa's handwriting, I suspected the culprit must have him for math and be in a lower-ranked class—specifically 2-4 or 2-5."

"…I see."

"After that, I looked into each subsequent incident. The flyers labeling tables 'Reserved for Good Students' confirmed you must be in a lower-ranked class. The threats you posted looked sloppier the closer you got to the first-year area, so I suspected you had a younger accomplice."

"And that led you to us?"

"No, at that stage, I still hadn't narrowed it down that far. I still didn't have any specific suspects."

Of course not. We hadn't made it *that* easy.

"For a while my investigation stalled, but then I caught a break. The broadcast during the school festival. That gave me the missing pieces."

Nanaougi's eyes narrowed.

"When I heard those patchwork rants, I was sure of it. Your recordings narrowed it down. They were all from Furukawa's math classes, or Shimizu's Japanese. Only Class 2-5 has them both. I figured that if a student from that class fled the broadcast booth, they must be the culprit."

She'd recognized the teachers from the voices alone and pinpointed my class from the data distribution. I felt like she was calling out our carelessness.

I was starting to feel genuinely rattled—not just because of her expert analysis, but because she seemed downright *obsessed*.

"I figured your escape route would involve the emergency exit. With the uproar you caused, you could hardly take an ordinary route. The moment the broadcast started, I headed for the upper floors for a stakeout."

A shockingly quick decision, but she'd been on the lookout for our next move. And given her brilliant mind and athletic abilities, it didn't seem out of the question.

"And voilà! I caught a boy from Class 2-5 and a first-year girl running near the broadcast room."

Nanaougi made that snorting laugh again.

"I didn't expect you to jump off the roof, though."

Crap. She saw that, *too*?

I'd had everything backward. She'd had her eye on us before summer vacation even began. And then, when we put our Painted Heads on Pikes plan into action, she'd simply assumed it was the same people at work.

It all added up, and that wasn't good. I crunched the numbers in my head and found no grounds to argue. Anything I tried to say would just be a vain attempt to wriggle off the hook.

The more I thought about it, the faster my pulse started to race.

Goddamn it. There's nothing I can say. My mind's gone blank.

She knew full well we were the culprits. It would be best to just admit it.

"As for my evidence—I took a photo during my stakeout. Behold."

Nanaougi held up a photo. It showed Kurumi, in full revenge mode, and me, leading her by the hand. The date and time were clearly visible in the corner.

"I had your faces. That led me to your names and other personal data, which helped me track down your lair. Thank you for listening to my little story. I went through a lot to track you two down! But now I've found you, Ren Natsume of Class 2-5 and Kurumi Hoshimiya of Class 1-6."

"……"

"Fess up! Admit that you're behind these pranks. If you do, I won't tell the school about any of it, or the fact that you're making out, or that Kurumi's dyed her hair."

Kurumi still had a death grip on my shirt. I glanced back; she looked anxious. She didn't have any more ideas than I did. It was time to raise the white flag.

We had no means to defend ourselves, and no alternatives. It would be best to give up and admit defeat.

I turned back to Nanaougi and put my hands up, surrendering. "… Fine, you've got us. We're the school's resistance movement."

"N-Natsume…!"

"Kurumi, relax. She knows this much already. We have no choice."

There was no use trying to hide it. She already knew everything.

As for the photo…we could argue we just happened to be in the vicinity. The problem was Kurumi's hair. Now that she planned to stick around, we couldn't let the faculty find out about her dye job. Lashing out would only come back to haunt us. We needed to play the game on Nanaougi's terms.

"…So?" I asked, glaring at Nanaougi.

Therein lay the rub. From what she'd said, she hadn't yet ratted us out to the faculty. That meant she'd come to the clubroom with a goal in mind, maybe some demands. We had to find out just why she was so fixated on our attacks.

Keeping my face impassive, I met her gaze. "What are you after, Nanaougi? Did you just come here to play detective?"

She blinked at me for a moment, then threw back her head and laughed. "What a turn of phrase! Obviously not."

"Obviously. So spit it out. What do you want?"

"Heh-heh, then let's get down to business." She gave us a long look, eyes gleaming cleverly.

Where was this going? Romantic relations with me…were off the table now. That whole conversation had just been her way of making contact with the culprit. What else? Did she want me to slack off on the next test? We were already in the lower-ranked

classes, so that made no sense. That left money or a personal vendetta.

I would prefer to spurn any and all demands. Hopefully, there was at least a compromise solution.

As my brain spun, she said the last thing I expected.

"Let me join you."

Her casual words hung in the air.

Huh? What did she just say? Did I hear that wrong? There's no way!

"Nanaougi, are you saying you wish to join our resistance?" I asked.

"Yep! I wanna join your roster and aid in your attacks. Plain and simple."

Kurumi took a step forward, standing with me. "…Why do you want to join us?"

"Because it sounds like fun."

"……"

"……"

Kurumi and I looked at each other. I was pretty sure we were thinking the exact same thing.

Piss off.

We had it in for this school. We might look like we were just pulling pranks, but we meant business. We were genuinely trying to bring about change.

How could we let in someone who had no problems with the school itself? I wasn't about to let a good student join in for *fun*. A demand like that grated on me more than being asked for money.

"Absolutely not," Kurumi snapped, taking another step forward. The corners of her eyes twitched with fury.

"Huh? Really? I didn't see that coming. I'm a highly skilled individual."

"Your skills don't matter here."

"I'm certain I can make myself useful. Are you sure?"

"That's not the problem. We're not recruiting based on talent alone."

Nanaougi seemed genuinely taken aback, but Kurumi was still shaking her head.

I agreed with her completely. We had a *cause*. Nanaougi's talent and potential contributions didn't matter.

I hoped she'd take the hint and back off, but would she? It didn't seem like Nanaougi got where Kurumi was coming from.

"Hmm. Now what do I do?"

For a moment, she fell silent, her hand to her chin, thinking. She looked at me, then at Kurumi, then back at me. Suddenly, as if an idea had just struck her, she nodded and thumped a fist against her palm.

"Oh, in that case, allow me to demonstrate my sincerity."

"Um, what do you mean by 'sincerity'?" Kurumi asked.

Nanaougi straightened up. Was she going to bow? I realized a moment later how foolish that thought was.

She took a half step toward me, too close for comfort. And before I knew it, her pale, thin arms had a firm grip on my head.

"Let's go, Ren. Please go easy on me."

"Huh? What? Er, Nanaougi, hold on— Mmph?!"

I was yanked toward her. Her features seemed to lunge toward me. I tried to pull away, but it all happened too fast. And before I could put up a fight, she was in. Something damp and squishy blocked off all my air.

It was a bizarre turn of events. But the facts were clear enough.

She'd kissed me. Out of nowhere, Nana Nanaougi had stolen my lips.

"Mmm?! *Gasp!* What the—? Mmph?!"

"*Gasp!* …My bad, our teeth bumped. I'll do better… Mmph…"

"Wha—? No… That's not the prob—! Mmm…!"

I tried to pull away, but to no avail. Nanaougi had a firm grip on my head, and she kept me in place. I was locked down, unable to escape as she laid waste to my lips and tongue.

Nanaougi's kiss was—for lack of a better word—*powerful*.

I let my lips part for a moment to breathe, and she got her tongue in. She raked it along the inside of my lips, the inside of my cheeks, and the back of my tongue. She hit all the most sensitive pleasure centers quickly and precisely, deftly stimulating them.

Her kiss had none of the guilty passion I shared with Kurumi. Nanaougi's kiss was controlling. It was meant to toy with the recipient.

"…Mmm… *Smooch*… Ah-ha! Your eyes are losing focus. Ren, you're even cuter than I thought. Mmm… Oh? …Mmm…mmph…"

"*Gasp!* …Hey… What in the…? Mmph! Wait, stop…!"

I tried to peel her off, but my hands slipped off her shoulders, unable to grasp them. Her kiss had left me too weak-kneed to apply any real force.

And all the while, she kept persistently prodding my weak points. How long would I be at her mercy?! Why was this happening at all?!

I looked to the side. Kurumi was standing there, gaping. I begged her for help.

Please! Don't just watch… Stop her!

She caught the look in my eye and shook herself, snapping out if it.

"H-hey, wait a sec! What are you doing?! Get off him! Back away!" Kurumi dived in between us, prying us apart.

The arduous kiss ended with an ardent gasp. Spit trailed between our lips, before melting into the air.

Whew. I was free. My mouth was on fire. The experience had been overwhelming.

"Nanaougi…? Was that your name? What's the big idea?!"

"What do you mean? That was a display of my sincerity, like I said."

"In what world does kissing mean sincerity?! What country are you from?!" Kurumi roared.

I could almost see the question marks hovering over Nanaougi's head. "Is membership not contingent on kissing the boss?"

"Why would you think that?! Absolutely not, you hussy!"

I felt like we were the last people to be throwing that accusation around, but I let it pass. Saying something would only complicate things.

Kurumi had started hissing like an angry cat, so after wiping my lips with the back of my hand, I pulled her away.

I thought I should probably handle the discussion, since Kurumi seemed even more worked up than I was.

"…Nanaougi, I'm afraid we can't let you in. We're not pranking this school for shits and giggles. We've got a *cause*."

"I'm well aware. I've been following your careers."

"Then you should have expected rejection. Why would we want someone who's just here for fun?"

"Aw, I hate this school, too. Is that not enough?"

"How can we believe you? You're in a *good* class," Kurumi spat. I had to agree with her.

Nanaougi saw how tense we both looked and sighed. She seemed just as confident as ever.

"Fair enough, fair enough. Guess I'll just have to keep proving my sincerity."

"…That's not happening again!"

Kurumi placed herself between us, but this time Nanaougi meant something else. She folded her arms, a cocky grin on her lips.

"I know. Instead, I propose a wager… No, more of a contract."

"…Meaning?"

At that point, Nanaougi dropped a bombshell.

"Before summer vacation ends, I'll launch an attack on Saigou High. I'll show you what sort of resistance *I* can muster. If I manage something that really impresses you…then admit I'm serious, and let me in."

"Huh…? You've gotta be kidding."

"I'm not joking at all. In fact, this is about proving that."

Silence fell. Kurumi's glare met Nanaougi's level gaze.

She had a point. An attack of her own *would* prove she meant business. It was a viable approach. Scoring a victory on her own would demonstrate far more sincerity than her kiss, at least.

"How will you determine if we're impressed?'" Kurumi asked, her gaze like daggers. "That's not a very specific measurement. All we have to say is, 'It wasn't all that,' and you'll never get in."

"That's not an issue. I just have to do something so amazing, it'll make you change your mind." Nanaougi's eyes narrowed, her tone growing increasingly competitive.

How was she so damn sure of herself? Did she have a plan of attack in mind? Or was she just born this way? I couldn't tell.

"A successful attack will prove I've got it in for the school, right? Are we agreed on that?"

"……"

Kurumi and I looked at each other, then down at the floor. After a long silence, we looked back up at her and nodded.

"…All right, you're on," Kurumi said. "On one condition—not a word about this to anyone else. And if you fail to convince us before summer vacation ends, you'll erase all the evidence you've collected and agree to keep your distance from us. Promise us that."

"Okay, sure. I swear. And if I can knock your socks off, you'll let me join?"

"Yeah, okay. *If* you manage it."

Nanaougi nodded, and the contract was made.

I had no issues with the terms Kurumi had laid out.

All we had to do was stay firm. I wasn't sure what Nanaougi had in mind, but this agreement was entirely in our favor.

She had a photo of us from the broadcast incident, making it tough for us to reject her outright. This was a formality—but it was one we'd both agreed to, and that made all the difference.

…But just in case, I'd better make sure she understood.

"Well, there you have it—expect great things, Ren, Kurumi," she said, fluttering a hand.

"Hang on, Nanaougi." I took out my phone and showed her an app for recording oral notes. "I've recorded this conversation. You'd better not leak that photo or tell the school about us. Should that happen, everything you've said will be made public knowledge."

"Tell the school about you? Puh-leez. I never had any intention of doing something so boring. I'm not turning you in. You have my word."

Losing us would be boring for her. That made sense, in a way. She had photographic evidence but hadn't once threatened to show it to the faculty if we didn't let her join. That was because she'd never intended to snitch in the first place.

As I accepted that, she leaned in close.

"So you like to keep your bases covered, huh, Ren? I do love a cautious man."

"*Love*?!" shouted Kurumi. "Argh, what is your problem! Go away!"

"I was speaking to Ren. Come, now, no need to push…!"

Kurumi forcibly ejected Nanaougi from the Stargazing Club room.

Damn. This girl was a total nightmare, and I couldn't predict her at all.

ACT TWO

Lunch break was over, and we'd started our afternoon classes.

I was busy looking out the window, remembering my first-ever strategy session with Kurumi—the time we hashed out the details of the eraser stamp plan.

Like today, it had been a sunny summer day. We'd taken advantage of a break in the rainy season to slip out of school and do our shopping.

In that moment, the two of us had been all alone in the school—in the world—together.

Let me join you.

Nanaougi's words had rattled me, but ultimately the whole thing had gone a lot better than I'd feared. As long as we stuck to our guns and rejected her, we could maintain the status quo—just the two us, in the clubroom, scheming and making out.

But I couldn't count on everything going smoothly. We were still in a dicey predicament. One student had already tracked us down. It was only a matter of time before our deeds became public knowledge and the school took us out.

The fact that Nanaougi was a brazen hedonist had bought us an extension on life, but that was all. While I'd impulsively used my recording of our conversation as leverage, Nanaougi was probably

well aware that it wasn't much of a threat. All it proved was that Nanaougi *planned* to carry out an attack, not that she actually had. And she was the top student in the best class in our grade. The teachers would side with her for sure. It would take a lot more than that to get her in any real trouble.

Meanwhile, we actually *had* carried out multiple attacks. If we started snitching on each other, it was obvious which of us would come out on top.

…This is pointless. All I can do is pray that things go in our favor.

"……"

I knew perfectly well that fretting about this wouldn't accomplish anything, yet here I was.

I sighed and went back to staring out the window from my little corner of the classroom.

Summer was in full swing, with blue skies and big, puffy clouds. They were astonishingly white, totally devoid of answers or signs to point me in the right direction.

"If you haven't made any progress on your homework yet, there's no way you'll finish by the end of vacation. Do you know what 'summer homework' means? It's called that because you're supposed to do it *during the summer*. *Tch*. You don't have a clue. What a moron."

As always, the teacher was ranting away. Nanaougi's visit the day before hadn't changed a thing. Saigou High's summer lessons still sucked.

We were currently in the middle of homework progress checks. The teacher went to each student, one by one, and asked how much they had finished. If they hadn't done enough, they were subjected to a torrent of abuse the faculty liked to call a "lecture," forced to stand at their seats while insults rained down on them.

We were fifteen minutes into class, and not a single stray mark had been made on the green chalkboard. It was pure madness. The teacher clearly had no intention of ever *teaching* us anything.

"A real bargain! Takes place right at school!" That was Saigou High's pitch for their summer lessons. But with classes this useless, you'd be better off paying for a proper cram school.

It was absurd on the face of it. Why, you ask? Well, we had to pay extra tuition to attend classes during what was supposed to be a vacation, and the teachers didn't even bother to change their approach. *Even though yelling insults, dehumanizing students, and storming out does no one any good. This school is rotten to the core.*

"You've gotta make a plan for getting through your homework!" said the teacher. "Let's get this class started. Open to page five. Here's a problem you lower-ranking dunces couldn't solve last time…"

Everyone sat down, and the lesson finally began. Not wanting to attract any unwarranted attention, I opened up my flimsy textbook.

Just then, my phone vibrated.

"…Hmm?"

Class was in session, but I figured I could steal a glance at the screen without the teacher noticing. I pulled my phone out under my desk, checking to see what that notification was.

I had a new text from someone with a black cat icon—Kurumi.

"I'm by the school gates."

I checked the top of the screen; it was just past two PM. She was a few minutes early. Kurumi must have left the building ahead of schedule. I didn't want to leave her standing there in this heat; she might get sunstroke.

The teacher had wrapped up the screaming session, so I took action.

As problems began to appear on the chalkboard and the room filled with the sound of pencils scratching against paper, I got to my feet and called out, "Teacher, I feel sick. Can I leave early?"

I was at the back of the room, so every other student turned to look at me. And on the other side of their stares, the teacher stopped writing and swiveled around to face me.

"You're sick? You'd better not be faking it."

"…If you need proof, I can throw up right here."

"*Tch*, spare me. Get out."

That was hardly any way to treat a sick student. Our teacher wasn't just bad at their job, they were a bad *person*.

I stuffed my things in my bag and headed to the back door. As I left, Tanaka looked up at me from the next seat over and whispered, "You okay?"

I nodded back. Of course I was okay. I was faking it.

Saigou High's summer lessons were technically voluntary. They didn't affect your attendance record, so I figured the teacher wouldn't bother arguing if I said I was sick. I was right.

Outside the classroom, I moved through the empty corridors. There wasn't a soul in sight. I went down the stairs toward the shoe boxes, where I changed out of my school slippers and headed outside.

The blazing sun scorched my skin. The rainy season must have used up all the precipitation in the air, because the sky was very clear.

I found Kurumi hiding behind a tree near the gates.

"Sorry I left you stranded in the heat."

"Ah, Natsume, at long last!"

Kurumi popped out from the shade. She still had her gray underlayer pinned up beneath her black hair and her bookbag over her shoulder. I'd assumed as much from her text, but it was clear she'd successfully gotten out of class early.

"…Doesn't seem like anyone's watching. Should we head to the station?"

"Yeah, let's get moving."

Side by side, we set out.

Kurumi and I had decided to bail early today so we could discuss how to handle Nanaougi the next time she made contact.

Since she'd tracked us to the Stargazing Club, it was no longer a good spot for clandestine scheming. That meant we'd have to find

somewhere else, but with all the other students leaving right after classes, odds were high someone would spot us sneaking off together. We didn't want anyone else finding out that Kurumi and I knew each other, so we had to be careful. After some consideration, we decided to ditch early, buying ourselves time to confer.

"Any ideas for where we should meet?" I asked.

"Yeah. Well, I'd already thought of one when I proposed leaving early."

She did? Well, there were plenty of options. We could always just hit up a karaoke place. As I casually set off walking, I sensed Kurumi staring at me from the side.

I glanced over and found her watching me closely, an impish smile on her face.

"…What?"

"You're not gonna ask where?" She stretched up to whisper directly in my ear. "I was going to suggest you come to my place. We'll be all alone."

…Hang on, that was an option?

Even in the blistering heat, I was very conscious of her breath on my cheek.

*

Trapped between the sun from above and its reflection off the asphalt, we headed down the road. I looked up at a vapor trail stretched across the sky, wondering how far I'd have to go to pass under it. Before I knew it, we were at the train station.

"My place might be outside the range of your pass. It's not that far, though…"

"Oh, don't worry about it."

"I haven't said where we're going! Do you have the fare?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. I've got a bit extra charged to my IC card, and I've got my wallet with me."

"Oh, okay. Then we're good to go!"

We tapped our IC cards and passed through the gates.

The train pulled in as we got to the platform, so we hopped aboard and took a ride. At the terminal station, we changed trains and rode for a little longer.

I let Kurumi lead the way. We were on an unfamiliar train on an unfamiliar line. I knew where we were going, but it felt like a journey without a destination. It was kind of fun—it gave me a weird high, like I was on an adventure.

It looked like Kurumi was even more worked up than I was. She was sitting next to me, grinning from ear to ear.

"What a rush! It's like we're eloping!" she said.

"Eloping? That's going a little far, don't you think?"

"Is it? I thought it was very fitting. That's how *I'm* feeling, anyway."

She leaned against my shoulder. Then, without lifting her head, she reached back and yanked out her hairpins, freeing her gray underlayer. I had no reason to push her away, so I let her stay there as I stared vacantly out the windows across from us.

Before I knew it, we were passing through rice paddies on both sides. The occasional houses had tile roofs. I could see mountains against the blue in the distance. It was your classic countryside view. Nothing but deep green, dazzling blue, and clear air. It almost hurt my eyes.

With the two of us on board, the train chugged on through the maddeningly vivid summer scenery. There was hardly anyone around, both inside the train and out, and no one like us.

She's right. Right now, we're doing exactly want we want, how we want, with no one to stop us.

I wasn't sure if that qualified as "eloping," but it had a certain illicit thrill.

When we finally got off, we were at an unmanned station so run-down, it looked ready to collapse. The platform opened right onto the fields. The train pulled out behind us, leaving only quiet countryside behind—nothing but woods and fields.

"You live all the way out here, Kurumi? I had no idea."

"No, I live a bit closer to Tokyo, in a normal neighborhood."

"Huh? What do you mean? I thought we were going to your place."

She flashed me a grin but offered no explanation.

What, is she planning to keep everything secret until we get there? I'm dying here!

I'd just have to wait and see. I had no clue what sort of surprise she had planned, but I was pretty sure it wasn't *actually* going to kill me. Then again, if it was Kurumi, maybe I wouldn't mind too much.

We walked through the countryside for twenty minutes, chatting. Eventually, we turned onto a narrow side street, and she said, "We're here."

The house was even older than the ones we'd passed on the way there. It had a tile roof and sliding screens. It was very traditional, almost nostalgic.

"You live here?" I asked.

"No. It's an old café run by a relative."

"Oh, yeah? I thought it looked pretty clean. So we're here for tea?"

"Uh, not quite. Let's head inside."

Kurumi pulled out a key and unlocked the door. It slid open with a rattle.

We took our shoes off and stepped in, and she revealed the whole story.

"I'm actually staying here alone—just for summer vacation. My aunt said, 'It's hot, and we never get customers, so I'm closing up the shop' and lent it to me."

Aha. So that's what she meant when she said we'd be all alone.

"I knew things weren't adding up. I thought you were talking about your family home."

"Yeah. Your confusion was too cute, so I wanted to keep your head spinning."

She stuck out her tongue. She was far cuter than I was, so I felt inclined to forgive her.

Honestly, I was relieved not to be at her actual house. If I met her parents and had to explain our relationship, I wasn't sure I could.

I couldn't tell them I was her accomplice, but I couldn't pretend to be her boyfriend, either. And yet the idea of acting like we were *just* friends or that she was *just* my underclassman got under my skin, for some reason…

I wasn't processing my own feelings properly, and I wasn't sure even Kurumi would get me on this one.

Making sure my shoes were lined up neatly, I stepped into the old house.

There were white sliding doors all down the hall. Kurumi opened one, revealing a spacious living room with a wooden floor.

The place was more like a typical café than I'd imagined. The tables and chairs had a modern warmth to them. There were three tables for two, and several seats at the bar by the kitchen. The place could accommodate a decent number of customers.

I assumed it had been remodeled. It held on to the charm of an old house but still managed to look stylish.

"I'll turn the AC on," said Kurumi. "Sit anywhere you like."

"Thanks. You've just reminded me of the first time I visited the Stargazing Club."

"Ah-ha-ha. You're right! Oh, will coffee work?"

"Yeah. Anything's fine."

Kurumi started bustling about the kitchen, so I took a seat at the counter nearby. There was a rush mat on it, speaking to the care that had gone into the design.

"Natsume! How many syrup pods? Any milk?"

"Nothing. I'll take it black."

"Wow, acting like a real grown-up. I'll take three of each!"

That was clearly too many. But before I could say so, she came back with iced coffee on a wooden tray. She set out some coasters, put the glasses down on top of them, then took a seat next to me.

"Here you are. Thanks for waiting."

"Thank *you*. I'm pretty thirsty."

I took a sip and felt the cold bitterness slide down my throat. I wasn't a connoisseur by any means, but it tasted good to me. This *was* a café. Of course, I had no way of knowing if I was drinking the same coffee they served.

I put down my glass and glanced around the empty shop.

"I feel like a high roller who's rented out the place."

"We basically have. I'll be the only one here all summer long." Kurumi put the glass to her lips, then gasped. "Oh! Hey, Natsume. Since I've got the run of the place, wanna make this our summer HQ? The school's banned us from using clubrooms, so it's a bit risky to keep meeting up there."

"True. Especially after yesterday. If you're down with it, I am."

"Cool. Might be a bit of a commute, but I'm sure you'll survive."

A twenty-minute walk was nothing, and I could easily cover the added fare by scrimping a bit on meals. There was no need for her to worry about that.

"Okay, if this is our new base," she began, "then let's get down to brass tacks."

The biggest problem on our plates—certainly bigger than choosing our base of operations—was Nanaougi.

Kurumi pulled her Notes on Revenge out of her backpack, opened it to a blank page, and straightened up.

"About Nanaougi… What do we do? Right now, we're just kind of watching and waiting."

"Yeah. Not sure what else to do. I've got no clue what she'll do next, but it doesn't sound like she's planning to turn us in. All we can do is keep an eye on her, then drive her off at the end of summer."

"I figured. Argh, it's gonna bother me all summer, festering in the back of my brain!" Kurumi toppled over onto the counter.

I knew where she was coming from. Nanaougi was definitely a thorn in our side.

"Our resistance movement is not a place for top-ranking students to amuse themselves," Kurumi said firmly.

"Yeah, that's exactly my problem with her, too," I grumbled.

Nanaougi had paid lip service to hating this school, but she was fundamentally different from us. We were freedom fighters. She was just a hedonistic hooligan. We weren't doing this for *fun*, or because we were *bored*. We were sticking to our principles against foes who would not listen.

What I'd seen of Nanaougi over the past few days hadn't indicated so much as a hint of that drive—that emotional core. She was flippant, just here for the lulz. I couldn't imagine her ever taking this seriously. Her ideals would never align with ours.

My glass was sweating as I tipped it back. The ice cubes shifted audibly.

The irritation I felt toward Nanaougi had given me an idea.

"…Kurumi, let's keep on attacking the school."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. I never intended to stop." She blinked at me.

Crap. I got ahead of myself and failed to get across what I meant.

"Sorry, I was trying to suggest that we pour even more energy into our activities."

"More energy? What would that entail, exactly?"

"Well… How about we try to do something bigger than what Nanaougi has planned."

That got Kurumi up off the counter. "Aha! Now *that's* an idea."

"Nanaougi said she's gonna try to impress us. I didn't really care for that."

"Nope! It got right under my skin. She clearly has a low opinion of us." Kurumi pursed her lips and nodded. "So you wanna show her that this is *our* movement?"

"Yeah. Not just because she pissed me off; I mean, if she's actually trying to impress us, then she's gotta be attempting something bigger than what we've done so far. That means that if we do something even bigger first, she's got a higher benchmark to clear."

"True. We can just say 'That wasn't as dramatic as what we did.'"

"Yeah. The terms of our agreement mean that Nanaougi will back off as long as she can't dispute the results. If our attack outdoes

hers, then it should be easier to deny her entry."

"An excellent point. We don't want to get into some empty argument about whether her attack was impressive or not; it'd be best if we can demonstrate our superiority with *action*."

Outdoing Nanaougi's attack was both beyond the scope of our resistance and playing right into it. We'd be showing the better students what drove us, what made us scream. We'd make them see we weren't just playing a game. That was a valid reason to carry out an attack—and a core part of our motivation.

"We genuinely hate this school and want to raise hell here."

"Yeah, we do. We're driven by something *real*." Kurumi's lips curled into a smile. "All right, that's our next goal. We'll do something bigger than whatever Nanaougi has planned!"

"That settles it. Let's show her we mean business."

"Exactly! I can't wait! Let's get down to the nitty-gritty."

*

We got so into our scheming that evening crept up on us.

Feeling hungry, we headed out to the nearest grocery store. Kurumi said she'd cook something, so I took her up on the offer.

Discussing the potential menu, we made our way around the store.

Every piece of music they played over the loudspeakers was something I'd heard before. On the way back, I carried the bags.

Kurumi stashed the ingredients in the fridge, and then we thought up what she could make with them. Kurumi did the cooking, finishing up at around six.

We sat down at one of the two-seater tables for a combination lunch and dinner.

"Here you go. Dig in, Natsume."

"Thanks for going to all the trouble."

We put our hands together, then reached for our chopsticks.

She'd made ginger-fried pork on a bed of shredded cabbage, served with white rice and miso soup with eggplant.

I'd been hungry for quite a while, and seeing the spread only further whetted my appetite. I grabbed a slice of meat and carried it to my mouth. After that, I shoveled in some rice, then took a sip of soup.

It was all good. But it wasn't *just* good. Was there some sweetness to it? No, that wasn't the right word. I couldn't put my finger on it. There was a depth to it, or a warmth. It went beyond the actual temperature of the food.

It was clearly different from the restaurant food and premade dishes I usually ate.

This wasn't just delicious—it was deeply satisfying. The meal warmed me to the core.

"Kurumi, are you, like…a really good cook?"

"Uh, I think I'm pretty average. I just follow the recipe."

Maybe my hunger had just made everything taste way better than usual. I ate some more, trying to figure out the mystery, and Kurumi started giggling.

"Were you always such a big eater?" she asked.

"Uh… I dunno, am I eating a lot? I may have lost myself in the food."

"You sure know how to flatter a girl. Fine, you can have seconds."

Clearly tickled pink, Kurumi grabbed my empty plate and went back to the kitchen.





I ended up having thirds, too. My belly should have been swollen, but somehow, it all settled perfectly into my stomach.

Still sitting across from each other, we put our hands together again, signaling the end of the meal.

"Thanks a lot," I said.

"Sure! It was no problem at all."

She'd cooked up a fantastic dinner. I felt like I'd just eaten the most delicious meal of my life. We had some popsicles for dessert, then did the dishes together.

As we relaxed, it grew darker and darker outside. It was now past seven.

"It's getting late, Kurumi. I'd better head home."

"Oh, already? You don't have to. Or do you have a strict curfew?"

"No, it's not strict at all. In fact, I've never had one."

"Hmm… So your parents let you do whatever you want?"

"Hardly. It's just that they're almost never home, so no one ever thought to establish any rules."

"You don't say? Hmm."

Kurumi's voice dropped. Had my story depressed her? Maybe I should've kept it to myself.

"I just figured I should leave before the last train."

"Huh? It's only seven. The last train isn't for a while yet."

"When in unfamiliar territory, it's always best to play it safe. There's not many trains this far out, and it could get dicey."

Some country stations ended service as early as ten.

I thanked her for the meal again, then got up and headed for the door. I put my shoes on and grabbed my bag, checking my pockets to make sure I had everything.

Good, nothing missing. Time to go.

The sun was setting, and the streets would be dark soon.

"Well, Kurumi, thanks again."

I put my hand on the door, and she came out to see me off.

"I know the way," I said. "No need to walk me to the station."

She didn't respond.

"……"

I turned back to see a tense expression on her face. She wasn't just sad to see me go—this was more than that. Kurumi's brow furrowed, and she gave me a searching look.

"What? Something wrong?" I asked.

"…Natsume, just a thought…but do you *need* to go home?"

"Huh? Don't I?"

"If there's nobody waiting for you, why go home? There's nothing stopping you from staying longer."

"Well… But like I said, if I miss the last train…"

Kurumi pouted. "I know that! But who cares? Let the last train go!"

"And what, camp out in the fields?"

I was totally lost. Kurumi's cheeks turned red, and she averted her eyes.

Not facing me, as if tossing the words over her shoulder, she muttered, "I'm saying you could just stay here."

"……"

Seriously? Is that what she meant? …I had no idea.

I considered it, absently playing with my hair. I understood what she was saying, and she *did* have a point. I had no family waiting for me and no one to yell at me if I stayed out. No one would even notice. And Kurumi was living here alone. No parents to impose on.

If Kurumi said I could stay, then I could stay.

…But, like, staying over at a girl's place? Just the two of us?

Was that kosher? Was that allowed? Really?

"N-Natsume, say something! You're killing me."

As the wheels in my head churned, Kurumi pushed me for an answer, her face still beet red. *I know! I'm trying to decide. I'm working through it!* The debate in my head raged for well over a minute, and finally…

"…Isn't it kind of a problem for a teenage boy to sleep over at a teenage girl's house?"

Kurumi rolled her eyes at me and let out a deeply disappointed sigh. “You’re still stuck in that stodgy mindset?”

“I mean…it’s a big deal! You’ve gotta have reservations!”

“Ugh, enough! Fine, I’ll beat that old-fashioned attitude right out of you.”

Kurumi fixed me with a glare and stepped in close. Still in her stocking feet, she got down into the entryway. Then, without a second’s pause, she stole my lips.

“Mmm… *Smooch*… God, you’re *such* a handful, Natsume.”

It was a rough, passionate kiss, like our lips were groping each other.

“Mmm… Hey… Why are you…?”

“It’s fine. *Smooch*… Now shush. No protesting… Mmph…”

Her moist lips ran roughshod over mine, and I just stood there. Her breath tickled, her grip on my back was tight; I didn’t fight her. For the sake of my honor, let it be known that I wasn’t expecting anything. I would never.

“Mmm… *Gasp!*”

Kurumi pulled away, like surfacing from a pool, and the kiss ended.

I was hot. My head was on fire, but my thoughts were clear. She’d cleared my mind.

“Hah…hahhh… That was unexpected.”

“Hmph. It’s your own fault!”

Her face was right there—eyes of black quartz, peering into my soul. I couldn’t run from them.

“So, Natsume? How do you *really* feel?”

“……I’d like to be with you some more, so can I stay?”

“Hah! You can *move in*, if you’d like.”

……So anything goes, then?

Fine. I get it. At this point, I might as well go along with whatever she says.

To hell with petty concerns. We didn’t need to be *sensible*. We’d abandoned all that a long time ago.

I took my shoes off and stepped back into Kurumi's house. I put my bookbag down, then placed my wallet and cigarettes on the table. I loosened my tie and took it off. Then I undid the top button of my shirt.

Kurumi watched my every move, her gaze intense.

"Heh-heh… Resign yourself, Natsume."

"To what?"

"I've got two futons, but I'm only taking out one."

"What? Why? Don't be mean."

"But don't you worry, I thought this might happen, so I came prepared. I swallowed my shame and bought some! Though I had to guess your size."

Wait. What would she be ashamed to buy that came in sizes?

…Did she mean…?

"…Kurumi, you mean *that*?"

"Inappropriate relations are a form of rebellion. We already agreed to that."

We had. But were we really going *there*?

My heart was racing. I knew my cheeks were burning up.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I took in her slender shoulders and her breasts, quietly calling attention to themselves. There were her supple thighs, neither too thick nor too thin. It was all so dazzling, I felt like my retinas were on the verge of burning out.

I forced my mouth to open and, with my last shred of reason, squeezed out, "…Shouldn't you save that for someone you really care about?"

"Natsume, I care more about you than about anyone else in the world. More than anyone else in my life." Kurumi's smile was as innocent as it was alluring. "Or do you not feel the same way? Don't you care about me?"

"…No, I'm with you. No one matters to me more than you do."

"Then what else is there to think about? This is what I want. It's what *we* want. Even if what we want is all too normal,

extraordinarily commonplace, all we need to do is yield to the impulse and fall together. I think there's real value in that."

She was overcomplicating matters, but I got the gist of it.

This might be a tawdry form of rebellion, an inappropriate relationship, a cheap gesture of love. But if we made the choice ourselves, then that made it worthwhile.

There was no use worrying about morality, sense, or what other people would think. None of that mattered.

Kurumi's eyes closed halfway, and she put her hand on my cheek.

"Natsume, resign yourself."

"…Yeah, okay. I'm in."

Her hands went around my neck, and I felt her breath on my ear. She pushed me into the futon, straddling me and undoing my buttons. I felt her weight beside me.

"Tell me, Natsume. It's just you and me, and we've got the whole night ahead of us. How far are we gonna take this?"

Kurumi had never blushed harder, and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

It was early August, and I was just realizing for the first time the base physicality of the world. Now I knew that some summer nights got even hotter after dark.

We were no longer free of sin. This act had no punch line, no wordplay.

My fingers locked in hers, and we went wherever the night took us.

That was all there was to it.

*

I was woken by an incredible, humid heat.

I looked over to check the time but found no clock. Instead, I saw an unfamiliar wooden ceiling awash in gentle sunlight.

Oh, right. I clutched my head.

That base physicality had been no dream. It had led right into the next day—today.

"……"

I remembered everything. *That's right, I spent the night at Kurumi's house.*

"Spent the night" hardly summed up what we'd been up to, however.

…Welp, it was done now. Too late for regret.

I decided to get up and turn on the AC before this heat killed me.

I tried to leave the futon, but my abs failed to lift me. I felt heavy. It was slightly hard to breathe. *What's going on? Is something wrong with me?*

I moved my neck and inspected myself.

The moment I worked out what was going on, the last shred of grogginess left me, and I was instantly wide-awake.

I'd failed to sit up because Kurumi was sleeping with her head on my bare chest.

"Kurumi. Yo, Kurumi, wake up."

"Mmm… Hng… *Zzz*…"

"Yo! Please! Wake up! I can't move!"

"*Yawn*… What…? Is it morning?"

Kurumi slowly sat up on the futon, legs akimbo. She ran her fingers through her gray-and-black bob, then blearily rubbed her eyes.

"Mmph. Morning, Natsume."

"…! …M-morning."

I successfully sat up myself, but my eyes were now swimming around the room. I couldn't look directly at Kurumi, mainly because of her…attire.

Kurumi was currently wearing *only* a dress shirt, and it was quite disheveled. One shoulder was almost entirely exposed, and her thighs were on full display. I could see everything up to just below her *you know what.*

It was scandalous. This was too much, too early. I had no idea where to look.

…To be fair, though, it was a bit late to be acting like this after last night.

Something else was bothering me, too.

"Kurumi, have you seen my shirt? I swear I was wearing one, but I don't see it anywhere."

"Oh, am I wearing it? These shoulders are very loose. This is probably yours."

"Okay, then. So why are you wearing it?"

"Um. I can't sleep without something on."

That's no reason to steal clothes from the dude sleeping next to you. I could catch a cold!

"Oh? Hey, this shirt smells like you. *Sniff, sniff!*"

"St-stop that! Don't smell it! Give it back!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Oh no! Natsume's trying to undress me!"

Kurumi put her hands over the buttons and huddled up inside my shirt.

What now? I couldn't exactly take further action. My hands drifted aimlessly for a second, and her grin got meaner.

"Oh? Giving up? Just gonna let me keep your shirt?"

"…Be reasonable."

"You saw it all last night. Is undressing me yourself too high a bar?"

"…Shush."

I had just learned that there were things in this world you never got used to. I would probably always find this kind of thing mortifying.

Kurumi cackled for a bit. Then she stood up, still wearing my shirt.

"Welp, I've replenished my Natsumelytes, so better get the day rolling." She stretched her arms out toward the sunny window. "You go wash up. The washroom's behind the middle door down the hall. Make yourself at home. There's shampoo and towels if you need them."

"U-umm. Sure. Thanks."

"I'll be making breakfast. Hmm, what should I make?" Kurumi trotted off toward the kitchen.

As she moved, her shirttails danced up, and I caught a glimpse of two pale cheeks.

I did not see any underwear. She'd really *just* been wearing my shirt.

I pretended I hadn't seen anything.

…Will I ever get that shirt back?

*

I took a shower and washed my face. When I came back to the living room, I found an appetizing spread waiting.

Kurumi had made scrambled eggs and bacon. There were two rolls set out, with butter and jam at the ready.

I sat down and waited for Kurumi to get out of the shower.

Once we were both at the table, we dug in. Forks in hand, we talked about the food. "Very fluffy," "I got the expensive eggs," and so on and so forth.

Halfway through the meal, the topic drifted to our resistance.

"So what are you thinking?" Kurumi asked. "Do you have anything in mind?"

"We can't do anything half-assed, not if we're up against Nanaougi."

"But our first goal must be to remain undetected…which makes everything harder."

For a minute, the only sound was silverware clacking against plates. It didn't seem like either of us were ready to make a decision.

"We could wait and see what Nanaougi does, and then do something bigger right after…," I mused. "But she gets on my nerves, so I'd like to beat her to the punch."

"Exactly! Our pride is at stake here!"

Still, I didn't want to get sloppy. Changing the school was still our main goal.

"I guess we'll just keep an eye on what's happening at school and try to decide on something as quickly as we can. I think our best option is to react to what's going on at school and choose something we'd like to do in response."

"Yeah. A well-timed attack will be even more *sensational*." Kurumi nodded, stuffing a roll into one cheek. This made it hard to understand what she was saying, but I seemed to have guessed correctly.

"We'll have to continue attending summer lessons and keep an eye on Nanaougi, too," I said.

"Mm, fair enough. Then let's finish up and get ready."

Once we cleared our plates, it was time to head to school. We put on our uniforms and pocketed our valuables. Everything was shipshape. As a sidenote, I was not wearing the shirt Kurumi had woken up in, but a fresh one. It was easy to work up a sweat in summer, so I always kept a spare in my backpack.

I'd been saved by my daily efforts at good hygiene. It would *not* do for me to roll in, wearing a shirt we'd wrinkled up together. Everyone else would smell something going on—literally.

"I'm ready if you are," said Kurumi. "Got everything?"

"I'm good. Since I ditched in the middle of class, I only brought my phone and wallet."

"True. Then let's head out."

Bags on our shoulders, we moved to the door.

I figured I should probably go first, to give her room to lock up. With that in mind, I put my shoes on and reached for the handle.

"Mm!"

I heard a noise behind me and found Kurumi glaring at me, a pout on her lips.

"What's that look for?" I asked.

"Come on! Don't play dumb, Natsume. You've gotta give me a goodbye kiss!"

I was not playing dumb. I hadn't seen this coming at all.

"…Isn't that for when we're splitting up? We're leaving together."

"What? Don't go splitting hairs on me. That hardly matters here!"

"No need to bite my head off…"

"Come on, Natsume! Mm!" Fuming, she puckered her lips. She clearly wasn't going to back down.

Fine! If she's going to insist, I'll do it. Even though it's embarrassing.

"I'm bending over. Go on."

"Very well. *Smooch*."

Kurumi put her hands on my jaw and kissed me lightly on the cheek. I was surprised by the lack of lip contact.

She blushed at me. "Would you rather it was on the lips? I'm afraid that'll have to wait…until tonight."

"…Listen to yourself."

She made it sound like I'd be staying over again. Not that I was opposed to the idea.

*

After a few days of watching and waiting, a minor incident occurred. It happened just as we were getting anxious to nail down our next plan.

I was in third period, and the teacher was just wrapping up our homework progress check and getting to the actual lesson.

Just then, Class 2-5 was shaken by a single person's simple mistake.

"…Hey! Hey! What the hell?!"

The teacher was yelling at a student three seats in front of me. I peered ahead and soon realized why he was so furious.

The student was sleeping. Not just nodding off, either. Fatigue must have caught up with him; he was lying flat out on his desk, draped over his textbook, sound asleep. That would do it.

The discriminatory policies our school ran on—the SaiHigh Laws—declared sleeping the worst sin of all. Even the least awful teachers would never stand for *that*. They were guaranteed to force the

sleeper awake, chew their head off, and dole out some punishment or other.

They might force them to stand in the hall, or forbid them to sit down, or make them kneel for the rest of class. Corporal punishments like that were on the light end. The worst outcome was having to write an apology essay. The choice came down to the teacher's mood… What would we see today?

I gulped and kept watching. What transpired was my personal worst-case scenario.

"Dammit! Wake up, you piece of crap! You gonna sleep all day?!"

A series of loud thuds, like mortar shells, rang out. The raging teacher was kicking the sleeper's desk from the side. In the end, it fell over. The student's textbook and pencils went everywhere. With nothing to keep him upright, the student lost his balance and was dumped onto the floor. Then, as if the mess at his feet wasn't enough, the teacher dropped some printouts on top of it.

"What the hell is your problem? I'm taking the time to teach you, and you dare act like this? Your parents pay good money for these classes! How could you do this to them?!"

"…Sorry."

"Screw it. That's enough. I can't stand the sight of you. If you're not motivated, why should I care?"

He gathered up his things and left the podium. When he got to the door, he threw it open and stormed out of class.

There it was. The worst of all the teachers' stunts: boycotting their own classes.

I couldn't stand the sight of *this*. Did our teacher realize how flimsy an excuse that was?

Let me spell it out for you, just so we're clear: We were paying money for lessons the teachers weren't attending. How could *they* do *this* to our parents?

Maybe if they were teaching little kids, they could argue that storming out would teach them the value of taking classes seriously. But we were in high school. We could think for ourselves—for better

or worse, we were set in our ways. What would this boycott accomplish?

And summer lessons were supposed to be voluntary. Did this make sense from a business perspective?

Boycotting had been reduced to a routine expression of anger. It literally served no purpose other than to protect the faculty's pride. It was completely ridiculous.

And it wasn't just the teachers whose actions had become standardized.

"…Let's all go apologize together. Come on."

The class rep led the way, and students started filing out of the classroom.

They'd go to the teacher and say, "We're so sorry, we'll take class seriously, please come back and teach."

Screw that. We all knew how it would go. All of this was just a waste of everyone's time.

"Natsume, come on," Tanaka said, getting to her feet.

I really couldn't be bothered…but I didn't want to be the only one not playing along. I forced myself to get up and joined the end of the procession.

In the hall, I took out my phone and sent Kurumi a text.

"Got a plan of attack."

As I was about to put it away, her reply came.

"You okay?"

…Oh, what's this? Not "What is it?" or "Go for it!" but concern? Nice one. She totally blindsided me.

To a stranger, her response might not make much sense, but to me, it felt natural.

No matter how awful this school might be, if Kurumi was worried about me—I could handle it.

*

To be blunt, Kurumi and I were living together and making it work.

Since the day I first slept over, we hadn't fought or even had any misunderstandings. We were just living together in that old house, in total harmony. Our life outside of school felt right—it fit us like a glove.

"…It's getting late."

It was evening, and the silhouettes of the mountains were framed against the red light of the setting sun.

I was sitting on the porch, enjoying the evening air, listening to a far-off public safety broadcast. It was urging children to get home before dark—probably some standard broadcast specific to this area. Shortly after I moved in, I'd heard, "Good children should be at home," and felt like it was scolding me. But after a week here, I'd gotten used to it. I'd decided I wasn't a good kid and didn't need to go home.

That wasn't a thought I could have managed before meeting Kurumi.

Was that growth or decline? I felt it was a bit of both, or possibly neither. The needle hadn't tipped one way or the other, making it impossible for me to say.

Maybe I'm just tired today. I should head inside.

"Natsume, are you free?"

Just as I lifted my legs onto the porch, Kurumi poked her head out of the kitchen.

"Yep. Got a chore for me? I already scrubbed the bath."

"Oh, I wasn't planning on putting you to work."

I'd struck first and come up empty. If not help with chores, then what did she want?

While I pondered that, Kurumi came over to me.

She was light on her feet, wearing her house clothes—a skimpy T-shirt and dolphin shorts. Each step she took made her gray-and-black hair flounce.

"Eh-heh-heh. Natsume, if you're free, let's have some fun."

"Hmm? Uh, sure, but…what? You in the mood for some—?"

"N-not *that*! Nothing sexy."

Red-faced, she slapped my shoulder. *What? I still haven't said anything.*

"Not that kind of fun! I'm talking about these, here!"

With a "ta-daa!" Kurumi pulled something out from behind her back. It was a colorful bag, like a candy variety pack.

"What do you say?" she asked. "I bought a pretty big one!"

"…Sorry, what are those?"

"*Gasp!* You're kidding?! Fireworks! Isn't it obvious?!"

She looked at me in disbelief. *Sorry, I really had no idea.*

My head was full of images of huge, gaudy explosions against the night sky. Wiping these from my mind, I examined the packaging again and finally grasped just what kind of fireworks Kurumi had bought. All alone for most of my life, I'd never had any experience with the handheld variety.

"I spotted them at the grocery store and snatched 'em up! Sounds like fun, right?"

"Well, sure. I've never tried them, so I wouldn't know."

"What?! Is that even possible?! I find that hard to believe."

Was it that weird? There must have been plenty of people who had never encountered handheld fireworks.

She saw me slump and cleared her throat, refocusing. "Very well! If that's the case, all the more reason to make up for lost time. Looks like I'll be giving you another *first time*… Oh, I guess kissing makes three."

"…Shush."

"Aha! Made ya blush! You're so cute." Kurumi waggled her brows, smirking.

Perhaps I'd left myself too exposed around Kurumi… Though to be honest, I didn't really mind.

Whatever the case, it was time to get ready for some fireworks. We hopped off the porch, moved some stuff out of the way, and got a bucket of water ready so we could douse any rogue flames. Fire was the last thing we wanted, so we also made sure the ground was damp around us.

Now we just needed something to light them with. Kurumi had brought a bucket-shaped candle, and I pressed my lighter up to it.

It was getting pretty dark out, but this little flame cast a gentle glow.

We were ready. Honestly, I was getting pretty excited, but when I glanced at Kurumi, she had a solemn look on her face.

"Doing it the regular way is awfully dull," she said.

"…Is there another way to do it? Dual-wielding?"

She ignored my question, leaving my amateur ass behind and darting around the side of the house.

I heard her rummaging around. Then she came back, dragging a drum can behind her.

Kurumi looked something up on her phone, then started modifying the empty can, banging on it and opening holes.

I was totally lost, but in five minutes, her alterations were done, and the can had been placed in the center of the backyard.

"All finished? What's it for?"

Lit up in the flickering candlelight, Kurumi's grin looked especially elfin.

"A basic burn barrel. I found instructions online."

"Oh, the kind you make a fire inside? I've seen those. What's it for?"

"We're gonna burn our summer homework! We'll light the fireworks with that."

…Was she serious? That *was* pretty irregular.

Kurumi brought a few workbooks and some newspaper from the house and shoved it all in the can. I took out my lighter, and we lit a single sheet of newspaper, then dropped it in.

"We won't be able to turn it in after this," I said. "What'll you do after vacation?"

"Who cares?"

Kurumi flashed me a grin. And a moment later, the heap of homework went up in flames. Rows of math formulas turned black, melting away in the dancing flames.

"Looking good," said Kurumi. "Now, let's get these fireworks started!"

She pulled one out of the packet and dipped the tip in the can. It soon lit up, and there was a colorful spray of light.

"Well? C'mon, join in, Natsume! This is a sparkler!"

She was holding a stick with a red flame burning at the tip and white sparks bursting out around it. It was certainly pretty. I began to feel that lighting fireworks from our burning homework was an important ritual for the two of us. The sight had a kind of magic about it.

The sparkler soon died down. Kurumi dropped it in the bucket of water, and it hissed.

"Your turn, Natsume."

"…Gimme a sec."

I hopped up on the porch, then went back inside and got my homework out of my bookbag. I rolled it all up and dropped it in the can, and the fire grew even brighter.

"Own it, Natsume," Kurumi said, with a smile like a naughty child's or a girl's in love. "Now go on. Don't keep the fireworks waiting! We've got a bunch to get through!"

"Yeah. Thanks."

I took a sparkler from her and held it over the can. The tip of it lit up.

Kurumi and I stood side by side in the yard, burning sparklers together. The smell of the smoke tickled my nose. It felt like the stuff summer dreams were made of.

"Natsume, what should we do for our next attack?"

"Good question. I wonder. I'm sure the teachers won't take it lying down."

"Guess we've gotta think long and hard. Fortunately, we have plenty of time to scheme."

Our fury was the real deal. We were going to change Saigou High, and we couldn't let Nanaougi get in our way.

Keeping our eyes on the flames, we spoke of nothing else.

*





Itemized receipt:

Errors were discovered in the summer curriculum breakdown. This missive is intended to correct them.

- Total tuition fee

Summer curriculum: 156,500 yen

- Breakdown

Educational materials: 12,500 yen
Lecture stipend: 86,640 yen
Insult fee: 50,160 yen[1]
Self-study charge: 7,200 yen[2]

[1] Based on an estimated average of twenty-two minutes per class spent on insults, scolding, and dehumanization.

[2] Based on a weekly average of one to two lecture boycotts carried out by instructors.

The school advertises summer lessons as half the price of cram school, but is that the whole story?

The average cram school summer lesson fee is 1,933 yen per hour. Discounting the time spent on insults, Saigou High's summer curriculum costs 1,894 yen per hour.

By that math, the difference in tuition fees is a mere 39 yen. Wouldn't we all be better off attending cram school lessons taught by talented teachers, free from the stress of insults and scolding?

*

Between the insult broadcast and the Heads on Pikes incident, the school was on the lookout for our meddling.

The faculty was conducting random inspections of students' belongings, and teachers were patrolling the halls in shifts during self-study periods and breaks. They were doing what they could to ensure no students did anything out of the ordinary.

Unfortunately, those efforts were not enough to stop us. Or rather, they weren't enough to scare us into backing off. We figured out an attack we could handle in secret and put it into action. We called this operation "Insult Receipt."

We were taking aim at Saigou High's claim that their lessons were cheaper than attending a cram school. We did the math on how much of our classes were spent on insults and scoldings and obtained a working average. Then we ran that data against the total cost of the program, calculating how much of our money went to verbal abuse. Then we itemized that and distributed copies throughout the school. We were using the magic of math to make it clear just how lousy this program was.

We got clever with how we posted the receipts. This time, we put them in hard-to-find places—one a day, in toilet stalls or in cleaning closets.

That meant it took a while for the teachers to catch on. It also ensured they had no clue when it had started. By the time they found out about the receipts, it was too late. Quite a lot of students had seen them. That was our intent.

Our attacks went on for a week. We took turns, posting the receipts little by little. And the results were mostly as we'd hoped.

During a break, I asked Tanaka about it.

"Tanaka, you heard anything about this receipt thing?"

"Oh… Um, I think I saw one. People are talking."

"Any idea when they started showing up?"

"Good question. My friend mentioned it a couple of days ago…"

She clearly didn't know any more; it seemed our scheme was a success.

I kept my head down and heard people saying things like, "50,000 for insults is bullshit" and "What do you say we go to a real cram school next year?"

It was music to my ears. I hoped more students would work out how messed up this place was. I hoped those suspicions and frustrations would spread like poison until the summer curriculum died off completely.

*

We'd finished carrying out our crime before the faculty even caught on.

After school on Saturday, I posted the last receipt in a self-study room, and we were done. I fled the scene, making sure nobody saw me.

It was time to go home. Kurumi and I planned to celebrate our success.

I deliberately took a well-populated route past the faculty office toward the entrance, figuring it would be less suspicious.

"…Hmm?"

But something on the way caught my eye.

Nanaougi was walking with a short female instructor. They weren't saying anything, but their expressions were grim. That made me keep watching, and what happened next surprised me.

They went into the student guidance office.

Had Nanaougi gotten herself in trouble? Students with bad grades were often summoned there, but Nanaougi had the best scores in class. That couldn't be why.

Had she gotten caught trying to pull off a bigger attack than us? That would be a shame…but she hadn't earned my pity. She'd talked big about impressing us, but maybe this was all she was capable of.

"…Whatever," I muttered under my breath.

I saw them head into the office, then turned on my heel to leave.

But just as I looked away, something made me turn back. As the door closed behind them, I'd seen something I couldn't ignore:

Nanaougi was holding one of our insult receipts.

ACT THREE

It was Sunday afternoon, and I'd given Kurumi a brief report on Nanaougi's actions over lunch. I was assuming she'd shown the receipt to that teacher in an attempt to block our attack. Given how she'd cleaned up the Heads on Pikes display, this was no surprise.

"Hngg… But what does it all mean?!" Kurumi said as she chewed over the information in the seat across from me. She'd made club sandwiches for lunch. Careful not to let anything fall out, she munched away, scowling. "Didn't she promise to impress us with some big incident this summer?! Yet there's no sign of her pulling anything off. What's her angle?"

"I am not a mind reader."

In hindsight, her cleaning up the mannequin heads was a baffling choice. She already knew we were behind the attacks and that she planned to help us. Why go to the trouble of erasing the graffiti and collecting the heads? It wasn't adding up.

For all her claims of wanting to join up, everything she'd actually done had been to hinder us.

"Hmm… Maybe she's actually planning to rat us out," Kurumi suggested.

"I dunno. That doesn't seem very likely, but…"

If she wanted to snitch, she could have just shown the school that photo. She didn't really have any motive to erase the graffiti or to show them the receipt. Was she scared that I would leak the

recording I'd made as leverage, and trying to earn the faculty's trust just in case?

No, that didn't make sense. That recording wasn't much of a threat at all. Even if we could prove she'd asked to join us, Nanaougi could say she'd just been playing along. No one would hold it against her. It was practically worthless. Nanaougi was bright enough to work that out, so I found it hard to believe the recording was motivating anything she did.

And in that case, the only thing I could think of was…

"Maybe Nanaougi knows we're planning something big and is afraid it will ruin her chances of joining us, so she's trying to stop us ahead of time," said Kurumi.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

Let me break it down: If she ran interference and stopped us from attacking, that would lower the bar for her and make it harder for us to refuse her. To that end, she was trying to block our moves without revealing our identities.

…Could that really be it? It made sense, but I couldn't say for sure if it was really true.

Given her personality—extremely confident and overbearing—I found it hard to believe she'd do something like that to earn points with the faculty. It made more sense for her to try to win on her own power, without using any underhanded tactics.

As it was, our attacks were working, but this business with Nanaougi was making it hard for us to celebrate.

We silently stuffed our faces with Kurumi's sandwiches.

"That reminds me," Kurumi said. "Which teacher was with Nanaougi in the student guidance office? That might be a vital clue."

"True. Uh, hold on, who was it again?"

I tried to remember. She'd been distinctive enough, and I soon recalled her name.

"I'm pretty sure it was Kanae Ookuma. The short lady who teaches second-year world history."

"Ookuma… Oh, I might know her."

Most people did.

Ookuma was super tiny, under one hundred fifty centimeters tall. She could pass for a little kid but was always in a suit. A big gesticulator, her long brown hair was always whipping all over the place. She really stood out in the faculty lineup.

"Is she Nanaougi's homeroom teacher?" Kurumi asked.

"Nope. I don't think she's ever been a homeroom teacher. She was only hired this year. I think I heard she's only twenty-three."

"So she's brand spanking new. Hrm… No clue what to make of *that*."

The more I thought about it, the weirder it got. She wasn't the student counselor, the head teacher for our year, or Nanaougi's homeroom teacher. But why would she go to the guidance office with anyone else?

Ookuma and Nanaougi had no connection I could see. If memory served, Ookuma didn't teach any of the better classes. Not only was she not Nanaougi's homeroom teacher, she didn't even teach any of her classes. Given that Nanaougi was not in any clubs or on any committees, that ruled out Ookuma being her adviser, too.

Crap. I can't see any point of contact.

It was always possible they knew each other outside of school. Maybe they were relatives or neighbors or… But I'd never heard any rumors like that. I was totally lost.

My brain was overheating, so I drank some orange juice to cool down—and that jogged my memory.

"Wait, when Nanaougi was cleaning up the mannequin heads, she told Ookuma she wanted to talk with her later."

"Then Nanaougi definitely knows her."

"Well… This was just after the attack, so it's hard to say for sure."

Perhaps at the time she'd planned to discuss our activities with her.

Argh! I'm not getting anywhere. That only deepens the mystery!

For a while, Kurumi and I became sandwich-eating automatons.

"I feel like we're overthinking things," Kurumi said at last. "Maybe she just hit up the first teacher she saw."

"Could be."

But it was hard to imagine Nanaougi doing anything by chance.

Our beliefs and actions hadn't changed—but maybe we should lie low for a bit.

As I thought this, I had no idea just how soon my next meeting with Nanaougi would be.

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Saigou High might be hell on Earth, but even *they* hadn't done away with holidays entirely.

Obon came in the middle of our supposed vacation, and Saigou High's summer curriculum took a one-week break.

Around this time of year, I always went to visit my family's grave. I wanted to bring my elder sister an offering of incense and flowers.

That day, as the sun beat down on me, I left Kurumi's house alone and made the trip back to my own neighborhood. I was headed for a tiny temple twenty minutes from the station on foot with a little cemetery next to it.

I'd avoided the busiest day, so the crowds were sparse.

I borrowed a pail and filled it with water, then hauled it and a scoop down the gravel path between the gravestones.

When I splashed water over the grave, the Shinohara family name glistened in the light.

"…I'm here again," I said, putting the flowers I'd brought in a receptacle by the grave. I lit the incense and laid it sideways.

Kneeling down, I put my hands together, offering a prayer for Shion Shinohara—formerly Shion Natsume. She was four years older than I was, and she'd passed away as many years ago.

She'd thrown herself onto the tracks before an oncoming train. I'd heard that her suicide had stemmed from trouble with friends, but I didn't know much more than that. It wasn't that no one knew, however. *I* simply hadn't been told.

Our parents had divorced eight years back, and we hadn't been living together. We'd been too young to stay in touch on our own, so we hadn't communicated at all. There was a four-year blank in our shared history, even back when she was still alive.

Our mother had parental rights to her, so my sister was part of her family. The two of us were basically strangers. And that meant I couldn't get anything more than the most basic information.

I didn't hold that against anyone. That was just how these things went. It wasn't like knowing more would bring her back; fretting over it did me no good.

"……"

I closed my eyes and offered a silent prayer. The smell of lavender from the incense was quite strong.

My sister always used to look after me. That was why I came to see her every year. Before the divorce, when our parents were fighting, she often sat with me. She didn't do much more than that. She was just there with me—but that had been everything. We looked a lot alike, and when I saw her expression, just as sad as my own, it showed me that I wasn't alone.

I owed her a lot, and so I made sure to visit her every year.

Our dad certainly wasn't going to come. If I didn't visit, it felt like my sister would be utterly forgotten.

After a minute of silence, I stood up.

I cleaned up the incense and took the pail and scoop back to where I'd found them. While I was there, I washed the dirt from the flowers off my hands. The cold water felt nice.

After shutting off the faucet, I took out a handkerchief and dried my hands.

Then, just as I turned to leave, a rainbow orb passed right in front of me.

"Whoa!" I yelped, bending backward.

It was a soap bubble. One had just blown by, taking me by complete surprise.

Who was blowing bubbles in a graveyard? It made no sense. Then again, it *was* Obon, maybe someone had brought little kids along.

I looked upwind, searching for the source of the bubbles. And what I saw made me gasp.

But that was only natural. It was weird enough to see bubbles in a graveyard, but the person blowing them was even more unexpected.

There was Nana Nanaougi, sitting, knees up, on the stairs nearest the cemetery faucets. She had a blue bowl in hand and a yellow wand in the other. It was *her* blowing the bubbles.

"…Nanaougi."

She looked up, like she'd just spotted me. She broke into a smile, like she was delighted to run into me.

"Yoo-hoo," she said, waving. "Fancy meeting you here, Ren. Nice day, isn't it?"

I returned this greeting with an impassive stare.

Let me be clear—I was pretty appalled. She'd come all the way *here* just to contact me? I didn't get the bubbles, either. What was that about? She must have zero common sense. It was almost frightening.

"…What do you want?" I asked. "If you have something to discuss, there are better places."

"Huh? I don't want anything. I'm here to visit a grave. This is pure happenstance."

I almost called her a liar to her face but caught myself and swallowed down the words. The grave behind her read "Nanaougi."

That was hardly a common name. The idea that she'd followed me and just happened to find a grave with her same last name on it seemed a lot less likely than the alternative: that her family and my mother's just happened to have graves at the same temple.

I supposed I'd have to take her word for it. We went to the same school, so it wasn't that weird for her to live nearby.

I made a face, then shrugged and let the topic drop. Instead, I bulldozed through the awkward atmosphere with a complaint.

"Who blows bubbles in a graveyard?"

"Hmm? Is that bad? I'm making sure not to get the graves dirty."

"It's pretty bad. In fact, it's totally lacking in common sense. Just think about it."

"You say that, but my grandma always used to get bubbles for me, so I thought it would be nice to show her…"

She trailed off, and I found myself unable to say anything further.

Come on. I can't argue if you bring up your dead grandma…





Maybe she was making it up. But in that case, there would be no reason for the bubbles.

I needed to calm down. They say that if you hate a monk, you'll come to hate even his vestments. It wasn't a very fitting turn of phrase to use at a temple, but perhaps I was being a tad too hostile toward Nanaougi.

This time, my suspicions were unfounded. I resented it, but manners dictated that I apologize.

"…Sorry for laying into you. My bad."

"No problem. Gimme a kiss, and I'll forgive everything."

"……"

"Ah-ha-ha, I'm just kidding. Don't look so lost!"

Nanaougi threw her head back in a fit of laughter, then she blew some more bubbles at me.

How could I not look lost? Everything she said sounded like she meant it.

…So be it.

Unlike the time she tried to hit on me, this encounter was a genuine coincidence.

Perhaps this was the ideal time to run into her. There was no one else around; it was a good chance to ask her about why she'd been in the guidance room with our receipt.

I figured she'd just brush me off, but it was better to ask than to just go on wondering.

Keeping a reasonable distance, I said, "Nanaougi, I saw you going into the guidance office with a copy of our receipt."

"Oh, yeah. I saw you on the way in. I remember."

"Well, great. Then what's the big idea?"

"Hmm? What are you implying?"

This was less "I don't get it" and more "spell it out for me." She already irritated me, and now she was answering my questions with her own.

"…You were talking to a teacher about the receipt, right? We kept that attack on the down-low so the faculty wouldn't find out. Why would you bring it to their attention?"

"I guess I stumbled across it and figured I'd better let them know."

"Why? …Are you trying to throw a wrench in our plans?"

"Of course not. I know you're behind it, but I haven't told anyone. Besides, your attack was already over by then, right? By that point, showing the receipt to a teacher wasn't going to do anything. No harm, no foul. If I was trying to mess with you, I'd do something else entirely."

She had a point…

"Then what *were* you doing? You're deliberately beating around the bush here."

"What does it matter? What I'm up to is of no concern to you two…*yet*."

That was a loaded statement. But she clearly had no intention of elaborating further.

She turned away and started blowing bubbles in the other direction. What was her deal?

God, I'm about to snap. I knew this is how it would go. There was no point in continuing.

Giving up, I tried a different angle. "Nanaougi, do you even *want* to join us?"

"I do. Of course I do. Why are you asking such an obvious question?" She cast me a quick glance, then shrugged. "I want to be part of this. Right now, if possible."

"It sure doesn't seem like it. You promised an attack but haven't done anything, and I can't get a read on what you're up to. Honestly, I don't have a single reason to trust you right now."

"Now, now, don't blow your top. I've got my reasons." She shot me a sardonic smile, then went back to her bubbles.

Clearly, she did not plan on answering my questions.

This was going nowhere. There was no point in trying to feel her out any further. And it wasn't just wasting my time—this whole

conversation was wearing me out.

To Kurumi and me, Nanaougi was just an obstacle, an unwanted impediment. She kept her distance, not making it clear whether she was friend or foe, but still knocking at our door anyway. It was the most irritating combination possible.

"Seriously, just…don't mess things up for us," I said.

"I swear I won't."

I couldn't trust her, but I chose to end the conversation there and head out.

But just as I turned my back…

"Whoa, it's Nanaougi! She came this year, too. I can't believe it."

…a new voice made me pull up short.

Three girls were standing on the sidewalk, peeking in through the temple gates.

They seemed like strong-willed individuals, but you couldn't tell from their fashion. Their hair was kept black, and their clothes and makeup were just polished enough to avoid embarrassing themselves. They were normal girls, like you might find anywhere.

…No, wait, I've seen them somewhere before.

I squinted, taking a closer look, but I couldn't quite place them. Was it my imagination? They'd called her name, so they must know Nanaougi.

"Nanaougi, are they…?" I began, turning back. Then I trailed off.

Her eyes had gone cold. She was glaring daggers at the girls.

Okay, that is…certainly not a look you give your friends.

"Brought your boyfriend this year? What, is he your bodyguard?" one of the girls called out.

"Having a hot date in a graveyard? Totally tasteless. He's gonna break up with you for sure."

"Or maybe not. Anyone weird enough to go out with a gifted wonder like her probably doesn't care."

They were running their mouths off, really yukking it up.

"We've got college exams coming up, and you're out playing games with your boy toy."

"Let's hope that talent doesn't dry up on you. Or maybe it already has."

With that parting shot, the girls headed on down the road.

…That was nasty. What the hell is their problem? Just listening made me sick.

Nanaougi waited until the graveyard had gone completely quiet again, then she sighed.

"…This is why I didn't come on the fifteenth," she muttered, before turning to me. "They're not a very pleasant bunch. Sorry you had to hear that, Ren."

"…Who were they? People you know?"

"Afraid so. We've been together since grade school. They went to the same cram school as I did." She shook her head, her long hair rippling. "They weren't like that before. It started when we got to Saigou High. I have no idea why they're so hung up on me."

"Huh? They go to our school?"

"Yep. They're on the student council. Can you believe mean girls like that are representing everyone? You gotta laugh."

"…Oh, right."

Now I remembered. All three of them were on the Saigou High Student Council. They'd given a speech in front of the whole student body during the election. That was why they'd seemed familiar.

Eyes still on the deserted temple entrance, I considered this.

Council members represented all of us students, and that was how they acted. Nanaougi had a point—it really spoke volumes about our school's character.

Unsure what to say next, I decided to try something. "…They were really looking down on you. Are you just gonna take it?"

I was expecting her to brush me off. "Let 'em vent" or something like that. I waited, but no such answer came.

"Nanaougi?" I asked, turning around.

The look on her face was still ice-cold. When she caught me watching, she took a deep breath.

"Hell no. I'm not gonna take it," she spat.

Her voice was like wind escaping a dark cavern lined with icicles—cold and white, with no trace of human warmth.

What was this feeling?

Her voice, her face, her gaze, her whole vibe—it reminded me of something.

I dug into my memories and found the connection far easier than I'd expected.

Of course. It was obvious. She was just like Kurumi.

In this moment, Nana Nanaougi reminded me of Kurumi Hoshimiya.

"I want payback."

I could hear Kurumi's voice, seething with fury. Right now, Nanaougi was the same.

But why? Why was I connecting them?

Was this…?

"…Oh well," Nanaougi said, flashing me a grin. "This is nothing new, and it's not just them. It doesn't matter."

"…Do you really mean that?"

"Sure. I was just messing with you. Don't look so lost."

I wasn't buying it. Even I wasn't dense enough to just take her at face value. But this wasn't the right time to dig further. And I didn't think she'd let me, either.

To shake off the gloomy mood, I changed the subject. "Shouldn't you have denied the boyfriend bit, at least?"

"Since it was you, Ren, figured I'd roll with it. It's like I stole you from Kurumi—pretty thrilling."

"…Maybe those girls had a point. You *are* tasteless."

"Cheating is the ultimate thrill! It's like swiping pudding from the family fridge."

"Please, those are hardly comparable."

With that, the conversation died, and I took that as my cue to leave.

I headed down the gravel path toward the temple gate. When I got there, I looked both ways, then went out into the street.

I glanced back once as I left.

Nanaougi had that yellow wand to her lips, sending bubbles up into the summer sky.

Bob, bob. Bloop, bloop. Rainbow orbs drifted through the hot air. They wandered aimlessly on the breeze, popping as they overlapped with the clouds.

…Everything about this was different. I knew that. But right now, she seemed just like me, smoking on the school roof.

*

Later that same day, I had dinner with Kurumi.

We'd finished eating, cleared the dishes, and were letting it digest, when Kurumi, who was sitting across from me sipping barley tea, suddenly looked up.

"Oh, right, Natsume. Did you find the thing?"

"The thing? Oh, *that* thing. Yep, just a sec."

I headed to the front door and came back with the paper bag I'd left there. Inside were the textbooks for the summer curriculum and test questions from second term. They were all from the previous year.

Kurumi had asked me to bring them. When I told her I was going to swing by my neighborhood to pay my respects, she asked me to check and see if I still had them.

I took the tests and textbooks out of the bag and sorted them by subject on the table.

"Math, English… Wow, you've got every subject," she said.

"Yeah. I double-checked before packing them up, so there shouldn't be anything missing."

"Nice, Natsume. You always come through!"

I'd just stuffed all of it straight into my closet, so it would've been hard to lose anything. But I enjoyed her compliments, so I kept that to myself.

"What do you need all this for?" I asked. "Gonna use it to prepare for your tests?"

"Ah-ha-ha, obviously not. You're a riot."

"How so? I don't think I said anything funny."

"Oh, please. Natsume, you know how we roll."

She had a point. People who set their homework on fire and used the flames to light sparklers *would* see preparing for tests as a big joke. It was all a matter of perspective.

I smiled wryly, and Kurumi looked away from me and started flipping through the summer textbooks.

"You see," she said, "I heard some sinister rumors about Saigou High's summer lessons."

"Of course. They're being held at our garbage school. I can't imagine there's anything good about them."

"That's certainly true. But these rumors sounded like good fuel for an attack."

"…Meaning?"

Kurumi put her index finger to her lips and hummed. She seemed to be picking her next words carefully.

"Apparently, summer curriculum problems are used almost verbatim on the next term's tests."

"…They are?"

"Oh my. I gather you hadn't noticed?"

She put the summer textbook next to the list of test problems, lining them up side by side.

"Like right here. See the second problem on this math test? Now look at the problem on this page of the summer textbook. They're virtually identical—this one is just slightly rephrased."

"Yikes. You're right. I had no idea."

When I looked at them together, the effect was shocking.

Kurumi was right—the test had straight up copied a bunch of problems from the textbook. Every subject had matches far too close to write off as simple references. Numbers, formulas, solutions—all of it was identical. There were no twists at all. Anyone could pass these tests if they just memorized the answers in the textbook. In

fact, rote memorization alone would pretty much guarantee you a perfect score.

The summer curriculum was meant to lay the groundwork for the second term. It made sense for the textbooks to have second term problems in them, and those same problems were then used on the tests. I could see it all right before my eyes.

"Natsume, since you had this stuff at home, you must have taken summer lessons last year, too. You really had no idea?"

"I was still studying my butt off, so I had no trouble solving everything myself. I didn't even notice."

"Hmph. Well, you don't exactly have friends, so I suppose you wouldn't know."

That was an unnecessary addition, but I couldn't deny it. I didn't have *a single friend* at school.

"I guess, in hindsight, the teachers *did* go on about how summer classes would fully prepare us for the second term's tests. Is this what they meant?"

"Yep, they're telling the first-years that now. Not in so many words, of course."

It was just like how the teachers always placed extra emphasis on material that was going to show up on the test.

So they can't admit it, but they're still essentially telling us what's up. Cowards…

I compared the test questions to those in the textbook, turning it all over in my mind.

What a load of BS.

This was like handing out the test answers to anyone who attended summer classes. That might seem contradictory to our school's meritocracy mentality, but to my mind, it made perfect sense. Grades were everything at Saigou High, but none of it was for the sake of the students.

Why did the teachers constantly nag us to study? Simple. They wanted to improve the school's reputation so they could turn a profit.

With private schools, reputation was everything—the more students applied for admission, the more money the school made. They talked about improving grades, but all they really cared about was fleecing more families for tuition fees. The flip side of this meritocracy was pure capitalism.

Those who attended summer classes would get the same problems on their tests, and their grades would go up accordingly. That made it look like summer classes dramatically improved students' GPAs—like the program was a resounding success. That was how Saigou High drew more customers and increased their profits.

Kurumi flipped through one of the textbooks and scowled. "I really don't like this system. There are always students who can't attend the summer lessons for financial reasons or whatever. And then they're left at a huge disadvantage. It's not right."

"Yeah. I completely agree with you."

Saigou High set the line for failure at half the average score. Since anyone who had attended summer lessons already knew the answers, they all scored much higher, raising the bar for a passing grade.

To exaggerate only slightly, that meant students who *didn't* attend were put at an increased risk of being held back, and through no fault of their own. That was just plain unfair. And if they didn't like it, then they could fork over the money for summer classes.

All this made it abundantly clear that the school only saw its students as bags of money.

"Yeah. the more I think about it, the more sinister it gets," I said.

"Exactly. So what do you think? Can we use this for our next attack?"

"Mm. I like it. I have a bone to pick with this system, too."

"Okey-dokey. That settles it! Let's throw a rock at 'em!"

Kurumi snapped her fingers, and I nodded.

No arguments here. We wanted to focus on issues with the summer lessons right now, and the sinister overlap between the

summer textbooks and the second semester tests was ideal ammo.

"How do we stage it? Any ideas?" I asked.

"I thought about it, and I figured we could reference the textbooks and create some problems very much like what will be on the tests. Then we distribute those to students free of charge."

"Free? But what if the actual test has different problems?"

"Who cares? If SaiHigh's summer program is truly worthwhile, attendees will be able to solve everything even if the teachers change stuff up. Then there should be no problem. Right?" Kurumi's lips curled into a mean-spirited smile.

If the school didn't react, it would mean a fair test where no one could buy good grades. If the school *did* react, it would prove how worthless the tests were. This strategy packed a good punch of irony. I liked it.

…Or, well, I supposed I still had some concerns.

"Distributing problems isn't really an *attack*. It feels more like charity work."

"Hmm. Yeah, it lacks a certain satirical edge… Fair enough! Then let's put a header at the top, reading, 'Second Semester Midterms Leaked?!' or something like that."

"'Leaked,' huh? Even though we made the problems up?"

"That's what the question mark is for! We won't be lying."

She was suggesting the same kind of deceptive language people used in the titles of online articles and videos.

"And, uh… We could add a line casting doubt on the necessity of summer lessons. That'll make it more obvious what we're pissed off about."

"I see. So while we're handing out problems, we'll also be stirring doubts about the school's policies."

With that strong a message, it would make for a provocative attack.

"Yeah, I think it's a good plan," I said. "To borrow your word: It's *sensational*."

"Hmm? Are you making fun of me?"

"Not at all, not at all."

"You totally are." She laughed and jabbed me with her elbow.

With that, our direction was set.

"Now the only question is when to carry this out and how to get the problems to the students who didn't take summer lessons."

"I've got an idea for that," Kurumi said. "There's a day everyone comes to school right after the Obon break, right? We'll pass 'em out then."

"Sounds good. I'd like everyone to see our work, if possible."

With that settled, there was nothing else to say. All that was left was to get everything ready in time.

"Okay, then let's look over last year's tests and write some problems!"

"Sure. I'll grab the textbooks from this year, too."

We stayed up late that night, scowling at our textbooks and writing up test problems.

Right around midnight, I got to a good stopping place, glanced at the clock, and thought, *In a way, we kind of wound up using this stuff to prepare for our tests after all.*

*

We successfully generated enough test problems before the end of Obon break.

We managed to cover English and Math for first-and second-years, but we couldn't exactly get our hands on the third-year textbooks, so we were forced to leave them out. Other subjects were heavily dependent on rote memorization to begin with, so we ignored those. We didn't have enough time to make tests for every subject anyway.

Those we did finish were pretty well done. Considering how things had gone the previous year, we were confident a lot of our problems would be on the actual tests. Of course, that wasn't very difficult, considering they were using problems right out of the summer textbooks.

Once we'd written up all our problems, the next step was to print them. We laid everything out using a computer and made the booklets as compact as we could. We were aiming for low costs and ease of distribution.

We had two subjects each for both years, but we didn't need to mimic the format of the actual test booklets. Instead, we shrank down the font and used as little paper as possible. As a result, we didn't have to spend too much.

With that, we finished preparing our materials.

At last, the big day arrived, and we put our plan into action. Just like last time, the faculty were on the lookout. We had to be cautious. We hammered out a detailed plan of attack, then we made our move.

We needed to distribute our booklets to every first-and second-year classroom, but we didn't have enough time to go around handing them out to everyone individually. That would greatly increase our risk of being seen, too.

So the first thing we did was to come up with a trick to save distribution time. We decided to wrap rubber bands around bundles of booklets, then toss them into each classroom from the hall. That would make our work simple and fast.

Our next concern was the order of distribution. The first-and second-year buildings were pretty far apart, so we'd have to think through our route. We considered how many people in each class showed up early to study (among other factors) and figured out the path that would be least likely to get us spotted. We'd already determined each teacher's patrol routes during the receipt incident.

Lastly, we made sure we would have ample chances to hide, in case a teacher spotted us. The plan was to dash into a bathroom or whatever was convenient at the slightest hint of danger. We would do everything we could to avoid being caught in the act.

Since our goal was to help out students who hadn't attended summer lessons, we wanted to make sure we hit every class equally. That made everything harder and ramped up our stress.

We had a few scares where we almost ran into a faculty member, but, in the end, we managed to escape unscathed.

Working together, Kurumi and I managed to pull off yet another attack. And when we were done, we waltzed right back into the school, like we'd just arrived, and went about our usual routines.

Word about the booklets began to spread, starting with the students who'd shown up early to study. By the end of the day, some people had worked out that the test problems in the booklet matched those in their summer textbooks. I heard at least one mutter, "If they're making these, why did I even bother with summer lessons?" Students who hadn't attended sounded genuinely grateful.

And so the test problems made their way through all the students in both years, more or less evenly distributed. We had successfully eliminated the immediate advantages of attending summer lessons.

Now it was just a question of whether the faculty would find out and of how they would respond if they did.

Midterms were in September. We'd just have to wait and see.

*

Alongside our attack, I was running a plan of my own: keeping tabs on Nanaougi.

Our latest scheme of passing out test booklets was a lot like our last one involving the receipts. I thought that chances were high her response would be similar, too.

I felt like I needed to know more about her. What was she really after? What was that cold gleam in her eyes at the graveyard? I wanted to unravel the mystery surrounding her motives.

The moment Kurumi and I put our plan into action, I began watching Nanaougi to see if she'd do anything unusual. I'd pretend to go to the bathroom, then swing by Class 2-1 instead, or act like I was stopping by the faculty office only to scope out the guidance room.

And sure enough, after school on the day of our attack, my hunch paid off.

I spotted Nanaougi in the hall, holding one of our test booklets. She was with a couple of teachers, walking slowly. The first was Ookuma again. The other was the head teacher for our grade. That alone told me this was a response to our attack.

Was she friend or foe? I thought it was high time we settled the matter.

I decided to follow her, hoping to figure out her goal. I tailed them, pretending I was simply on my way out of the building. I stayed far enough back to avoid suspicion, but close enough that I wouldn't lose sight of them. Fortunately, they turned a lot of corners, so I was able to avoid discovery.

For a while, they moved against the flow of students, heading away from the crowds. Then, a few minutes later, they stepped into a room. But it wasn't the student guidance office this time. Instead, it was an empty classroom at the far end of a building that didn't see any use during summer lessons.

If they just wanted to chat, the guidance office would have sufficed. There was no need to go this far out of the way. They were probably about to have a conversation they didn't want anyone to overhear. And if Nanaougi had dragged two teachers along, it had to be something important.

This was what I had been waiting for. I felt certain whatever I learned here would explain Nanaougi's baffling actions and why she was so eager to get in touch with us.

I slipped into the adjoining preparations room. There were no other students in this area, so it was nice and quiet. If I listened closely, I should be able to hear what was being said.

Just in case, I took out my phone and started recording. Then I put my back to the wall and pricked up my ears.

"Teacher, enough is enough." The first thing I heard was Nanaougi's voice. She sounded pretty upset. "This only happened because you use the same problems every year."

I heard pages flipping. I'd seen our test booklets in her hand, so I figured she was showing them to the teachers.

"I borrowed test problems from a third-year student, and they're exactly like the ones in this booklet. The problems in the summer curriculum textbooks are identical to the ones on the tests—why?"

"It's hardly a mystery," said a young woman. This was most likely Ookuma. "It's a courtesy to those who attend the summer lessons. It's school tradition. That's just how things work here."

"And maintaining that rotten tradition left you exposed to student pranks. Now the whole school is riled up. Can't you see that?"

"I can… That's why we put measures in place to stop this from happening…"

"But it still happened."

"…Well," Ookuma hemmed.

Nanaougi kept pressing her point. "I think it's high time you abandoned this tradition. That'll resolve the students' frustrations, and then they'll settle down. Problem solved."

"But the students expect the textbook problems to show up on the test…"

"All you have to do is warn them that it'll be tougher this year. What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, hmm. Maybe, but…"

Even from the next room, I could feel the weight of the ensuing silence.

"Why are you so angry, anyway, Nanaougi? I hate to put it this way, but you've got good grades. What do you care what's on the test?"

"I said it before. I don't like it when there's unrest at school. And besides, if other students are raising their scores by just copying answers from the textbook, it devalues my own efforts."

"Right…"

Ookuma had made an attempt to deflect, but Nanaougi shut her down.

"The point is, you need to make proper tests this year. Okay?"

"Well, um… I can do that for my subject, but…"

"Why just your subject, Ms. Ookuma? Why not all of them?"

"Er, um… Because I'm not the one making the other ones…"

"That's not my problem."

Nanaougi's words cut through the surrounding air like a blade, provoking another long silence.

Here, for the first time, I heard a gruff male voice. It belonged to the last one taking part in this discussion: the head teacher for our grade.

"Nanaougi, the faculty will handle this matter. For now…"

"I wanted to discuss this with Ms. Ookuma because she's closer to my age. I'm not talking to you."

"U-understood. Feel free to discuss the matter with her again later. But for today…"

He was clearly trying to talk her down, repeatedly urging an end to the discussion. They went back and forth a few times, but it was like listening to a member of some customer support team trying to deal with malicious harassment. Everything he said was toothless.

After a while, the door opened. I heard Nanaougi excuse herself and realized that was the end of it.

…What did it all mean? I'd expected to get to the heart of the matter, but when I peeled back the curtains, what I found had only left me more confused.

She didn't like unrest at school? It would devalue her scores if everyone else raised their grades by copying the textbook?

Nanaougi had said both those things…but did she really mean them?

I didn't believe her. She had an arrogant streak, and she excelled at everything she did. A bump in the average score would hardly amount to a blip on her radar. There had to be something else going on.

She'd mentioned that she chose to talk to Ms. Ookuma because the teacher was closer to her in age. I imagined they'd had a similar conversation about the receipt… But I didn't have enough information to draw any conclusions.

While I was considering this and that…

"…?!"

…I saw a shadow stop near the classroom's entrance, right next to my hiding spot.

Crap! She found me! I barely stifled a yelp.

But it was futile. She knew I was there.

Framed by the light of the hall, Nanaougi was looking right at me. She flashed me a grin, then whispered, "'Sup, Ren?"

My cover was totally blown. She knew I'd been eavesdropping.

And that meant she'd known all along. When had she noticed? No one had spotted me while I was tailing them…or had she just *let* me think that?

"Did you know I was in here the whole…?"

Before I could finish, Nanaougi knelt down. Her slender frame slipped right up to mine, completely ignoring the concept of personal space.

Her eyes glowed with a bewitching light, mere centimeters from my own. Something was definitely up.

…What the hell is this? Is she about to grab a fistful of my shirt?

I was sitting on the floor, so I couldn't really get away.

I stiffened up, ready for anything…

"…Mm?! …Mmmph?!"

A sweet scent wafted past my nose as something soft touched my lips.

Wait. Stop. Again? I'd been sure we were done with this. At the graveyard she'd sworn she was joking!

I was confused, but what she'd done was obvious enough.

She'd kissed me. Nanaougi had wrapped her hands around my head and stolen my lips.

"Stop…mmph…"

"Mmm… Just shush… *Smooch*…"

Nanaougi was working my mouth over with the help of her skillful tongue control.

It felt weird. Like she was invading my body and swallowing me whole. Our lips were locked, but in a way that made me feel like

some larger force was dominating me.

I tried to fight, but her tongue was too sensual, and I couldn't muster any strength.

The teachers were still in the next room over. I couldn't risk making a sound.

The tension and titillation were frying my synapses.

I could feel the heat of my breath reflecting off her face.

"Mmm… *Gasp!*"

After a while, her moist lips reluctantly peeled away. After several seconds of frenching, Nanaougi finally released me.

"…Whew, did that feel good?" she asked, letting herself fold up against me.

It was almost like an embrace. I could feel the weight of her breasts pressing against my chest. A dangerous notion I couldn't let myself dwell on.

"…Where'd that come from?" I asked.

I couldn't exactly pry her off me, so I settled for grumbling.

"You were talking too loud." Nanaougi sat up, putting a finger to her lips, shushing me.

She kissed me to keep me quiet? Couldn't she just tell me to shut up…?

She put her arms around me again, this time so we could whisper in each other's ears.

"Ren, don't worry. Everything I told them was a lie."

"…It was? I'm confused. What's going on here?"

"Now, now. You'll soon find out. Just…don't paint me as the villain yet."

I had my doubts about her, but I wasn't trying to make her into a bad guy.

Was she friend or foe? Was she trying to stop us or not? I had no idea, so I wasn't sure how to treat her. But complaining wasn't likely to make her cough up any answers.

"Okay. I'd better get going before they notice anything." She pulled back and got up, before dusting off her skirt. "Oh, right. Ren,

you keep listening."

"…Huh? Why?"

"Well… That's hard to say. But judging from the looks on their faces when I left, I think you might hear something interesting. Later!"

With that, she turned around and slipped out the door.

Interesting how? Throw me a bone, here!

I felt like I was being made to dance on the palm of her hand, and I didn't appreciate it. But if I left now, I might well bump into the teachers as they wrapped up their discussion.

I figured it was best to stay hidden until the coast was clear. I wasn't sure what I'd overhear, but I might as well find out.

I leaned back against the wall and started listening.

I heard voices—the two teachers who'd stayed behind.

"…Argh, Ms. Ookuma, Nanaougi is a top-tier student. And her parents are donating a lot. I warned you not to brush her off."

"I didn't…"

"You did! Nanaougi could get into any college she wants, public or private! What if this affects her exam scores? You have to treat her with kid gloves." He was trying to stay civil, but his tone was pretty overbearing. "At least pay lip service to her requests! The way you talk to her…it's so disrespectful. Is that how you'd speak to the daughter of an aristocrat?"

"Well… If I treat certain students differently, it's kind of…"

"*Tch*… I can't believe you. Gimme a break. Are you even listening to yourself?" The male teacher clicked his tongue and turned aggressive. "This is a private school! Our reputation hinges on which universities our students get into. Of course we bend over backward for the students who are gonna bring us bigger profits! Get that through your thick skull!"

"……"

"Nanaougi's a prize student. That's why we let her dye her hair blue. And when she's got problems, I get off my ass and hear her out. Got it?"

"…Sorry."

I could barely hear Ookuma's whisper through the wall. But it was clear she had some thoughts about the situation. Her voice shaking, she kept talking.

"Er, um. If you'll excuse me, wasn't this about reusing questions from the summer textbooks on our second semester tests? If we'd been doing things properly, the school wouldn't be in a state of unrest, and Nanaougi wouldn't have a problem."

"Oh my god, you are driving me up the wall! How do you not get it?!"

"Get what?"

"Students attend the summer program *for* the advantage on those tests. Attending forces them to study. How is that a problem? Did I say anything wrong?"

"Um, no…" Ookuma's voice was fading out again.

"First it was creepy doll heads, then that ridiculous itemized receipt, and now it's test booklets. What a load of headaches. I keep telling you to get this sorted! Ms. Ookuma, you're in charge of second-year summer lessons, right? Figure something out!"

"I'm doing what I can! I set up those patrols and everything!"

"And it didn't stop a damn thing! I didn't tell you to *try*. I told you to put an end to it! You're not a student anymore!"

"S-sorry."

"Students shouldn't have any doubts about the summer program in the first place! We've gotta keep them convinced that all they need to do is keep forking over the dough. You've gotta tighten the reins!"

I was ready to punch the wall. Just what did he think we students were here for? The things he was saying were completely inappropriate for a teacher.

"Ms. Ookuma, you need to hurry up and get this under control. For the midterms, make up your mind whether you're going to rework them or talk Nanaougi into agreeing to go forward as usual. You hear me?"

"Make up my mind? How…?"

"Think for yourself! I know you're from a third-rate college, but you should be able to manage *that*. What a moron."

I heard the classroom door open, then slam shut, followed by someone stomping down the hall. It seemed the head teacher had stormed out.

…Was this what Nanaougi had wanted me to hear? I'd rather have stayed in the dark. The whole thing was deeply unpleasant. My stomach was seizing up. I felt queasy.

I wanted to run right back to Kurumi…but I couldn't. It would be too risky to go back into the hall before Ookuma left.

Fine. Guess I'll have to wait her out.

Just as I steeled my nerves, I heard a soft voice. It was barely audible, but it echoed strangely loud in my ears.

"*Sniff*… Mmm…hahhh… Urgh…"

Moaning? No. That was the wrong word. Even I knew what kind of sound this was. And that was probably why it felt so loud.

"Unh… *Sniff*… Ahh…wahhhhhh…"

She was crying. The head teacher had made Ookuma cry.

"Urgh…augh… Ahhhhhhh…"

She was trying to be quiet, but she was sobbing her eyes out.

Lots of other sounds mingled into the sobs: paper falling to the floor, a hand slapping a desk. I could hear her stamping her feet.

"I know damn well who's in the wrong here…," she muttered.

Her tears carried on for a while longer. I was stuck listening to her cry.

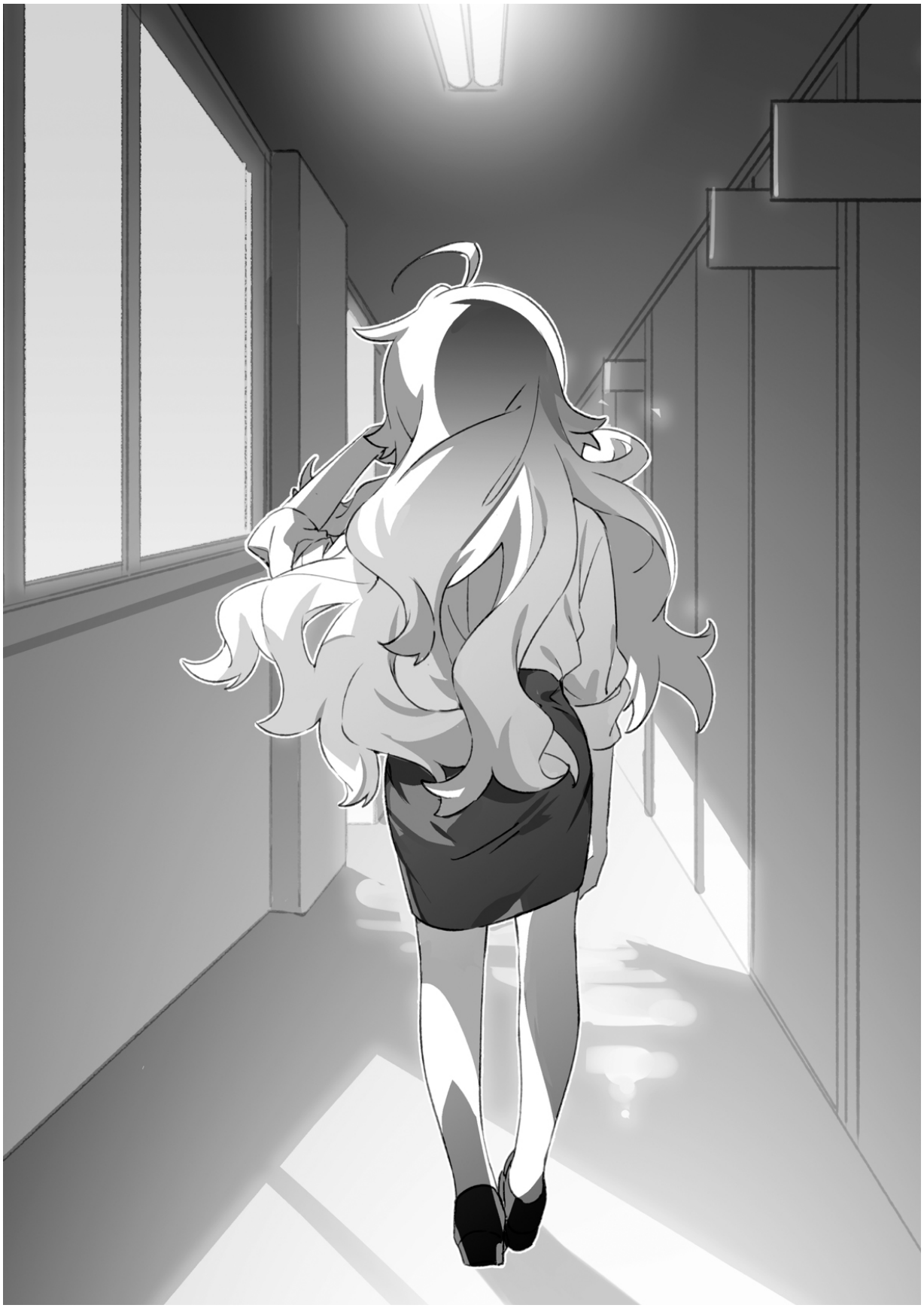
I didn't know the first thing about Ookuma. But I could clearly imagine her scrunched-up, tearstained face. The pain in her voice was just that vivid.

After a while, the door opened. Her footsteps as she headed out were soft and weak, nothing like Nanaougi's or the head teacher's.

"……"

Before I knew it, I was leaning out the door, staring after her.

A tiny figure was trudging down the long, empty hall, vanishing into its depths. I could see her nice suit and her long, wavy hair, swinging forlornly.





When I looked at her, I saw a human—a real flesh-and-blood person. I felt ashamed about the way I'd dismissed her as just another teacher who happened to be short and a woman.

I knew one thing for sure. She was not our enemy. For all we hated her, she was in the same boat.

"…What the hell?"

Ookuma was long gone, and there was no one else around. I could leave, but I found myself still sitting there in the quiet preparations room.

My feet felt heavy, but my heart was even heavier. It felt like the dim classroom had filled with oil and I was trapped at the bottom. A sick feeling welled up inside me, and I didn't have to wonder why.

This sucked. I hadn't heard a grown-up cry since my mother broke down during the divorce eight years ago.

Adults only cried when they were pushed to the brink. Like when they felt they had to choose divorce, no matter what it did to their kids. When they had nowhere else to turn; when reality clashed so hard with their ideals that they didn't know what else to do; when their reason failed them and passed over into raw emotion—only *then* did their tears flow.

And who was it that drove Ookuma that far into a corner?

We had. This was on us.

We'd spent our summer vacation trying to outdo Nanaougi and venting all our frustrations with Saigou High's awful summer program. And as a result, we'd brought trouble crashing down on Ookuma's head. We'd pushed her until all she could do was cry, until her emotions burst through the dam of her reason.

I know. I get it. I should just blame the school for everything. I should laugh it off and tell myself that it serves her right.

Kurumi and I had vowed to take revenge for our personal grievances and bring a warped kind of justice to this school. And to do that, we'd followed our instincts and done as we pleased.

Even now, I didn't doubt the things we stood for or the methods we'd used one bit.

Ookuma had joined in the verbal abuse. She'd done bad things, too. We weren't about to let a few tears stop us. We couldn't afford to.

…And yet none of that made me feel any better.

That was probably because I knew what we were doing wasn't black and white.

I thought I'd understood that. I'd come here to eavesdrop on Nanaougi and figure out what she was after, but what I'd wound up hearing had upset me more than I ever expected.

God, I'm still so weak.

I longed to run back to Kurumi and lose myself in a kiss. It was all I could think about.

"…Guess I'll head back."

I got up and took a deep breath to settle myself down.

For now, I'd pretend I hadn't heard anything.

Back on my feet, I stepped into the hall…and found a little notebook lying on the floor.

I picked it up. It was a standard planner, like you might find anywhere.

What was it doing here? Did someone lose it?

Planners like these had a place to write your name, in case they got lost. It wouldn't take me long to track down the owner. I figured I might as well return it.

Without any further thought, I flipped open the notebook…and instantly regretted it.

"Hoo boy."

A chill ran down my spine. If only I'd left the notebook where I'd found it.

Now I couldn't just look away.

From the lost planner, you ask?

…No. From the human being named Kanae Ookuma.

*

Though I felt a bit guilty about it, I took the planner with me back to Kurumi's house.

I figured I'd better tell her about everything that had happened that day, and to do that, I'd need the planner as evidence.

I left school and took a train to the terminal station. Following the flow of the crowd, I made my way to the platform and onto the next train, my body moving on autopilot. After another ten or so minutes, I was at a familiar, run-down station.

I walked down the country road under the sunset, passing through rice paddies and past corrugated roofs, averting my eyes from the bent-necked sunflowers. At last, I reached an old house with the lights on inside.

I opened the front door and smelled miso soup. I could hear the rhythmic chopping of a knife coming from somewhere in the back. Only then did I finally relax.

"Oh, Natsume! Welcome home. You're late today!"

A mass of gray-and-black hair swiveled around as I stepped into the living room. Kurumi had poked her head out of the kitchen. She had an apron on over her uniform.

"…Yeah, I had something to take care of. Sorry I couldn't leave with you."

"Well, I'll let it slide this time. Oh, we're having roast beef. It'll be done soon, so give me a moment. If you could go ahead and scrub the bath, I'd be super grateful!"

"Oh, sure. I'll get to it."

"Whoo! You're a lifesaver."

"It's the least I can do. Thanks for all the cooking."

She merrily told me it was no problem, then shot me a big grin. I began to feel bad for lifting her mood. It was like I was buttering her up before a blow. What I had to discuss tonight would lower anyone's spirits.

I put my things down and took a seat.

I took a deep breath, then pushed through my reluctance. As she turned back toward the stew, I called out to her.

"Um, Kurumi. We need to talk."

She stopped dead in her tracks, and her head swiveled around by itself, like she was a broken windup doll. Her eyes had gone wide.

…Did she figure everything out from my attitude alone? She's just too good.

Initially, I was impressed by her seeming ability to read my mind. But as it turned out, she was way off base.

Kurumi started quivering, her voice full of anxiety. "Y-you're not… trying to break up with me, are you?"

"……No way. Why would I be?"

"That was totally the vibe here!"

Was it? I didn't have a clue. I had no experience with these things, after all.

Besides, we weren't even dating in the first place, though I decided to leave that thought unspoken. Our relationship was undefined—too messy to put a label on.

And more importantly, this was no time for such a frivolous conversation. Not for me, anyway, and I suspected Kurumi was the same.

"I've just…got something I wanna discuss about our resistance movement."

"That…doesn't sound like you have a new idea for an attack, huh?"

"Yeah, this is different. Do you have time to talk? I know you're in the middle of cooking."

"The meat's resting at the moment, so I'm good. Just give me a second to turn the burner off."

With that, she ducked back into the kitchen before reemerging a moment later.

She took off her apron and dropped it on the table. Then she pulled out a chair and sat down.

An oppressive silence fell as we faced each other across the table.

"Um, so, Natsume, what's on your mind?"

"Right… Just… Where do I begin?"

If I tried to summarize, she might not understand me. So I decided to start from the top—with how I'd tailed Nanaougi to get a read on her motives.

I explained how she'd demanded the teachers do something about our attacks, without mentioning our names, and how she'd said she didn't like when there was unrest in the school, then swore she was lying only moments later. I left out the kiss—that was unrelated to the topic at hand—but I told Kurumi everything else.

Kurumi sat, her cheek resting on one hand, and listened avidly.

"So that's why you're back so late?" she asked. "You could have said something."

"Sorry about that. I didn't have time and didn't think I'd need to."

"Fair enough. That's just how you are." She pursed her lips at me, looking sullen.

Okay, so maybe I had some things to improve on. Noted.

"So?" Kurumi said, urging me along. "You tailed Nanaougi but don't have much to show for it. That can't be all you had to say."

"Uh, no, it isn't. This is about what happened next."

Yeah. Frankly, the stuff with Nanaougi was beside the point. We had more important things to consider—bigger problems to face.

Fighting the urge to sigh, I got to the point.

"While I was eavesdropping, I heard Ookuma cry."

"Huh? She was crying? The teacher?"

"Yeah. And it's our fault." The person we needed to think about wasn't Nanaougi, but Ookuma. "From what they said, she's in charge of the summer curriculum this year. And since we've been relentlessly attacking it, everything came crashing down on her."

"Oh… So her superiors are demanding she do something about it?"

"Exactly. She even said, 'I know damn well who's in the wrong here.'"

"Huh…"

I couldn't tell if Kurumi was lost or just sulking. I'd probably had the same look on my face when I heard Ookuma crying.

The silence lasted several seconds, but eventually Kurumi collected her thoughts and began to speak, words flowing out of her.

"I get it. I know what you're trying to say and how you feel about it. It's hard not to sympathize with Ookuma—or with anyone driven to the point of tears."

"…Yeah."

"But it's *just* sympathy, right? You can't believe that Ookuma is some great person. She's teaching, just like the rest of our school's faculty, participating in a fundamentally immoral system. Honestly, she deserves to cry."

It wasn't just Kurumi's expression; she was thinking the same way I had, too.

That's right. Exactly. I'd thought the same thing, told myself the same excuses. But in the end, I couldn't convince myself—not after learning the truth about Kanae Ookuma.

"Take a look at this, Kurumi," I said, taking the planner out of my pocket and sliding it across the table.

"What is it?"

"A planner. It's Ookuma's. I found it on my way out."

"What's this gonna tell me?"

"Trust me. Look at the last page."

Kurumi picked it up and flipped through it. Soon, her hands stopped.

I could tell she'd forgotten to breathe.

A natural reaction.

At the back of the planner, past the calendar section, was a space for miscellaneous notes. In it, Ookuma had written down a bullet point list enumerating all aspects of Saigou High's discriminatory system…and an account of one person's suffering at the hands of this awful school.

*

Notes on My First Year of Teaching

On School Life

- Always assert dominance over the students. Acting like their friend is weakness.
- Chew out students with bad grades. Show no mercy. It's their fault.
- Treat students in the better classes with kid gloves. Their success is invaluable.
- Keep students on a direct path to passing their entrance exams.
- Clubs are a privilege. Work with advisers to encourage bad students (anyone with failing grades) to drop out.
- Confiscate all cell phones spotted on campus. Make the owners come to the faculty office and apologize.

On Classes

- Keep things tense by scolding students. Do not let them talk among themselves.
- Make an example of students who fail, writing their names on the board. (Make them want to pass.)
- If anyone falls asleep, dole out some form of punishment.

On Homework

- Start classes by checking progress.
- Call out the names of anyone below 50 percent submission. (Use full names.)
- Make anyone below 25 percent stand up in front of the class.
- Anyone close to 0 percent requires personal attention. (Use the student guidance office, with at least one other teacher attending.)

On Summer Lessons

- Ensure the majority of students in your homeroom attend. (The quota is 85 percent.)
- Keep a list of non-applicants on the board. We do this every year.
- Hint that students might fail or be held back. Suggest they'll be left behind if they don't attend.
- Teacher evaluations will be affected by participation rate.
- The teacher in charge of summer lessons should keep tabs on all classes and report to the head teacher for their grade.

This is messed up.

I don't want to yell at students. But if I don't, the head teacher yells at me.

Is this the norm at private schools? I don't know, but I'm miserable.

Can I just quit? But I was so happy to find work; how can I just give up?

Getting chewed out by the head teacher, shouting at the students… What am I even doing? What's the point?

This is killing me. Please just leave me alone. Don't force me to do everything your way and take all the blame.

I don't want to tell kids to drop dead. I don't want to hear it, either. I wish *I* were dead. I wish I were dead.

*

"……"

Kurumi just sat there with the planner in her hands.

She'd read it. All of it.

Her eyes darted up and down, scanning back and forth across the page.

Her reaction came as a relief. She must feel the same way I did. We'd been on different pages once before, but not this time. *Thank God.*

I'd been thinking the same thing on a loop the whole way home, and just as I'd planned, I laid it on her. I spoke slowly, so as to avoid any potential misunderstandings.

"Kurumi, before we started venting our frustrations with the summer program, and before we decided to outdo Nanaougi, our goal was to ensure that no one else wound up like us. Right?"

"…True."

"Before vacation—when we planned the attack on the festival—I got that wrong. I thought 'like us' meant everyone in the lower-ranked classes. That's why I suggested calling off that attack and wound up hurting you."

"…Yeah."

"I don't want to make that mistake again, Kurumi. So this time, I'm asking you properly."

"……"

"This is a teacher suffering under Saigou High's rules, her boss screaming at her. Is she 'like us'? Is she the kind of person we want to save?"

Kurumi looked me right in the eye and began flapping her lips soundlessly. She had something to say, but she couldn't find the words. She would start to say something, then swallow it back down, over and over again.

After a long time, her shoulders slumped, like she'd given up. A self-mocking smile crossed her lips, and she took a deep breath.

"Wow… That's a tough one. You may well be right."

"…I was afraid of that."

The idea had never occurred to me. Or perhaps I'd just never let myself consider it.

I'd convinced myself that all teachers were bad—that they didn't matter.

But reality was never that easy. There were teachers forced to follow the rules laid out in this planner. They suffered pangs of conscience, but their bosses browbeat them into reluctantly matching what the rest of the faculty did.

We took these teachers, trapped in a bind between their job and their morals, and pummeled them with our attacks.

I had no regrets. I didn't think what we'd done was wrong. I was sure of that. And yet…

And yet there was one thing I had to admit—an unshakable fact.

Kanae Ookuma was legitimately a victim of our attacks.

We'd been striking out against the very idea of school, and we hadn't really considered how scary it was to actually hurt *people*. Now we were being forced to confront that, and it hit me like a knife to the heart.

"Problems like this, that aren't black and white, are the toughest to deal with." Kurumi put the planner down and sighed. "Who is our real enemy? I don't think it's Ookuma. But it probably isn't the head teacher, either… If I had to give an answer, I'd say we're up against the school itself."

"…Yeah, I agree."

"But in that case, what *should* we be doing?"

Her words floated gently through the air but hit me like a stone. They resonated with me so strongly that it hurt.

She was absolutely right.

From the moment we leaped off the roof, we were past the point of giving up on our attacks.

But we had reason to sympathize with Ookuma. She was caught between a rock and a hard place. Her situation wasn't black or white, and that sucked. These shades of gray were making me sick.

We didn't want to hurt anyone like us. The concern we'd pushed aside once before had come back to haunt us. This was no time to worry about Nanaougi.

This teacher had longed for the release of death, just as we had. We couldn't simply ignore her.

We had a choice to make.

ACT FOUR

I wish I were dead. Dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead.

It's been four months since I started working at Saigou High, and I, Kanae Ookuma, am at the end of my rope.

Everyone is always on edge, and the mood is always oppressive. My coworkers will show me how to do things, but no one is ever nice. There are lots of people at my job, but no humanity. It's a horrible place to work.

Teachers hurl insults at students. And they do the exact same thing to me, the new hire. It's hard to tell if I'm a teacher or a student, whether I'm a grown-up or a child. It makes me feel ill…

And worst of all, I'm being forced to be cruel, too.

I don't want to scream insults. I don't want to intentionally hurt anyone.

Why? Why is it like this? Am *I* the crazy one? In hindsight, maybe this is God's way of punishing me for my lies.

I'm an ugly person. I grew up lying myself blue in the face.

When did my life first go off the rails…? That's right. It must have been when I first noticed the difference between myself and those around me.

It happened shortly after I started high school. I played basketball in junior high. But my height didn't budge, and I had to bow out in high school.

On a global scale, it's not a very unique story. But for me, it was a huge problem. And it opened my eyes to how much everyone else was changing.

They were getting taller. I wasn't.

Their breasts were getting bigger. Mine stayed the same.

They were finding boyfriends. I wasn't interested in anyone that way.

They were getting into fashion and makeup. I still liked games and candy.

I couldn't make myself change. I just didn't know how to grow up.

Then, in our second year, the teachers asked us about our plans for the future.

Even now that I'm a teacher, it seems like a brutal practice. People who can't keep up with those around them don't have any idea what they want to do, or even what they *can* do.

I had no clue. But everyone had to turn the form in.

I had a scheduled meeting with the guidance counselor, and reality was closing in. With everyone around me pushing me into a corner, I gave up thinking.

I made something up, just to get through it. I said I wanted to be a teacher.

I knew what the job involved. It was a fine occupation, and no one would object to me pursuing it. For someone like me who couldn't grow up, it was the only way I could silence the adults around me.

"Ookuma, what do you want to do?"

"…I want to teach."

"Really? Well, I know just how to help you get there. First, for college—"

And so my lie became the truth. I had always liked looking after people. So I told myself that teaching was what I was meant to do.

For better or for worse, my grades were solid enough. I graduated college, completed my student teacher program, and found a job.

I became a teacher, thinking I knew what I was getting into. But in reality, I didn't know the first thing… I'd said teaching was my

dream, but even now, I have no idea what the job is supposed to involve.

Once I started working at Saigou High, it felt like everything I'd taken as normal was turned upside down.

This school is obsessed with grades. They don't give a damn about the students. In fact, to make them study, those in charge recommend we treat the kids like so many sheep.

Is this normal at a prep school? Is it normal to be so obsessed with profits?

Does someone like me have any right to scold the students? Is yelling at someone for bad grades remotely justifiable? Does that even count as teaching?

Students' tearstained faces haunt my dreams. They're crying because I yelled at them for not scoring high enough.

I'm trapped in this place, with no clue which way is up.

I'm lost, with only one thought on my mind: Am I the kind of grown-up I wanted to become? The thing I wanted so badly that I lied about it?

*

Kurumi's roast beef was fantastic.

After dinner, we had tea. Then we did the dishes, scrubbed the bath, cleaned up the table, and spread out the futon.

This was our usual post-dinner routine, and we went about it without much thought, in total silence. Talk had left our lives. With everything so quiet, it felt like Kurumi's house was no different from any of the old, abandoned ones dotting the rice paddies along the road.

It was strange. We hadn't fought, and yet a hush had descended over us.

"……"

We'd normally sit and watch TV, but instead, I headed out to the porch. I was hoping the evening air would clear my head.

I opened the sliding glass door and felt the wood grain under my feet as I stepped out. Then I sat, dangling my feet over the edge of the porch, and looked up at the sun setting behind the mountains.

It was getting dark earlier in the day.

Country life didn't change much. There wasn't anyone around, and time seemed to pass by slowly.

People built their lives around that public safety broadcast. If it said, "Good morning," they got up. If it said, "Good children should be at home," they started dinner.

And the regularity of that life made it easier to notice things like the shifting sunset.

The sun hid itself behind the horizon, and the veil of night fell over the world.

A gust of summer wind blew by, and cicadas began to sing in a nearby grove of trees.

Shrill like bells, yet fundamentally different. If the sounds of the large, brown, and robust cicadas reminded me of the gloom hidden behind summer's brightness, then these evening cicadas suggested the beginning of a long summer night.

It was an unpleasant sound. When I closed my eyes, I felt like I was falling into darkness—that same sticky darkness I'd felt when I was eavesdropping…

"Hey, Natsume, what's this?" Kurumi's voice pulled me back to reality.

I half turned to face her. She was holding up a printout, waggling it for me to see.

"Sorry, I left that out. It's the schedule for the summer curriculum."

"Yeah, I can see that by looking at it. I mean this bit at the bottom." She pointed to the very last row—the one for August 31, the last day of summer lessons. "What's this 'Wrap-up Assembly' at the end of summer vacation?"

"Uh. It's, you know, a party to celebrate the end of the program."

"A party? Oh, wait. I feel like our homeroom teacher said something like that on the first day, that if we take things seriously, there'll be a fun reward at the end."

A fun reward? That was certainly one way to put it. But in reality, only part of it would be any fun.

The Wrap-up Assembly was a Saigou High tradition. And naturally, it was beyond awful.

"They call it a party, but it's not like what you're thinking. It mostly involves students from the better classes giving study tips to those from the bad ones."

"Oh, I get ya. Is it optional?"

"All students in the lower-ranking classes have to go. Those in the higher-ranked classes are free to skip it."

"Wow. Are you kidding me?" Kurumi scowled. "So we have to sit and listen to people we don't even know humble brag at us? Could anything be worse?"

"Humble brag, huh? I guess so. Stroking the good students' egos may well be the goal. At the very least, it reinforces their deification."

Last year had sucked. People from the same grade were lording their success over their peers and going on and on about mock exams and flash cards. Some dudes refused to talk to anyone but the cute girls. It was super gross.

I mean, all I had to do was let them talk at me while I smiled and nodded, so it was better than *classes*. And the school even provided drinks.

Kurumi dropped the schedule and sighed. "God. How do they even dream this crap up?"

"Not everyone hates it. Some people might find the advice helpful."

"I don't care about *them*. What matters is whether I have to suffer. From my perspective, I'm the only one observing this world, so anything I don't like is as good as trash."

This was why I admired Kurumi Hoshimiya so much. I'd spoken knowing she'd snap back like that.

I took a breath, then said the other thing on my mind: "…If you're that against it, do you wanna crash the party?"

We'd need something big to take down an event this major.

Normally, we'd both be on board right from the get-go, and we'd start planning right away.

"Crash it…? You mean an attack? Right…um…"

But Kurumi wasn't saying yes or no. She was frowning, her eyes locked on the schedule.

I knew why. She wasn't against the idea of an attack; she was just hesitant. The party was part of the summer curriculum. If we attacked it, the damage would all come down on Ookuma. The head teacher would scream his head off, and she'd wind up in tears again.

Imagining that made Kurumi loath to carry out an attack.

Another silence descended. I glanced out the window and found the sun almost gone. It was high time we turned the lights on. I wanted to brighten up the place before the darkness consumed even my mood.

"This party sounds awful. Part of me does want to crash it. But…"

Waiting hadn't helped her make up her mind.

I was disappointed. Not in Kurumi but in myself. I'd wanted Kurumi to decide for me. If she made the call, no matter what got destroyed and who got hurt, I could go along with it.

But if she couldn't decide, then I had no idea what to do, either. The way I was relying on her was shameful. Whether the change was positive or negative in the long run, I needed to toughen up.

"Natsume, can you be my moral compass for a few minutes?"

That was a strange proposition.

I looked up and found her clearly at her wit's end. "Um, hang on, what do you mean?"

"Our goal is to mess up this crappy summer program. We shouldn't be concerned about who gets hurt in the process."

I quickly caught on. She wanted me to play the good cop.

"Um, right… *Ookuma's planner proves at least one teacher is suffering. She had concerns about this school's methods. She's just like us. We shouldn't be making her cry.*"

"Even if she's being forced into it, she's still hurling verbal abuse at students and perpetuating this horrific learning environment. That alone makes her a viable target."

"Those tears weren't fake. I don't want to hurt her. We should think twice about sacrificing her for our cause. This could make or break our resistance."

"…I hoped this would clear things up, but no such luck." Kurumi was speaking normally again.

Her shoulders drooped. I wasn't surprised. I was pretty certain we both felt exactly the same way here. And because of that, neither of us had an answer.

"Do you think a kiss would solve it?" she asked.

"…Probably not."

We kissed anyway. Still, we couldn't reconcile our sense of justice with our nagging hesitation.

*

The next day was a Saturday.

Ookuma was absent. She'd called in sick.

All her history classes were changed to self-study periods.

*

At last, it was Sunday, the one day we got off during the summer lessons.

Kurumi and I slept in, so our breakfast was also lunch.

After eating, we did the dishes and swept the floors, then we killed the afternoon in front of the TV.

We sat across from each other at the dining table, flipping channels whenever bad news came on, mostly watching passable variety shows. Neither one of us had left the house all day.

Since we had the day off, we could have gone out somewhere, but neither of us were in the mood.

The weather wasn't being very cooperative, either. High winds had kept the house rattling all day. The clouds were thick as pea soup and looked ready to dump on us at any second.

At one point while channel surfing, we'd heard someone on a news show say a typhoon was approaching. Then again, it was August—the season for such things.

I had a headache, and I was pretty sure the drop in barometric pressure had caused it.

"…Guess we'd better take the laundry inside," Kurumi said, putting the remote down and standing up.

"Yeah, I'll help."

"Will you, now? Sure you don't just wanna scope out my underwear? Perv!"

"I make an offer out of the kindness of my heart and get this in return."

We were smiling. We were used to this sort of banter. But our hearts weren't in it today.

Couldn't we at least get some clear skies?

Kurumi started toward the laundry lines in the backyard, then froze, with one hand on the window.

The doorbell had rung.

"Who could that be? At a time like this…" Kurumi swung around and headed for the front door.

It was her job to handle visitors, no matter what. This wasn't just simple division of labor, it was to avoid anyone finding out about me.

I was only staying because Kurumi said I could. The actual owner of this house—Kurumi's aunt—didn't know I was here. Most grown-ups would have an issue with two teenagers living together, and we didn't want to deal with that.

As it turned out, our precautions had been justified.

"Kurumi, I know you're here! Open up!"

When she heard a woman's voice from outside, Kurumi gulped.

As I stood there wondering why, she tiptoed to the door, then hurried back. She had my shoes in one hand and was clearly freaking out.

"N-Natsume, grab these and hide!"

"Huh? Why? Who is it?"

"My mom…! Get out of here! Now! If she finds out we're living together, God knows what she'll say!"

"Oh, I see the door isn't locked. Didn't I warn you about that? I'm coming in!"

I had no time, and I couldn't afford to make a sound.

Kurumi shoved the shoes into my hands, and I dived into a nearby closet.

Instantly, I was enveloped in dusty darkness. I curled up in the fetal position and somehow managed to fit. Breathing quietly, I heard the floor creak through the closet's sliding door.

"Oh, it's actually pretty clean in here. I thought you'd be messier."

"God, Mom. Why'd you just burst in? Why are you here at all?"

"I saw the news about the typhoon and brought you some food."

"I've got plenty! I stocked up."

It was clear from their exchange that her mom hadn't spotted me.

It was a close call. Kurumi was well aware of how risky our living situation was, and she'd had me keep my things in another room. That saved our bacon.

Totally ignorant of my presence, Kurumi's mom started chatting, catching up with her daughter.

"There was a mandatory day this week, right? How was it? You went?"

"…Yeah."

"I'm glad you had second thoughts about dropping out, but I don't want to force you into anything. I put you in the summer program just in case, but you don't have to go if you're not up to it."

"I know that."

"Your brother went to a fine college, but that's got nothing to do with you."

"……"

Kurumi has a brother? Oh yeah. She mentioned it in her Notes on Revenge.

Nothing to do with her, huh? Kurumi's mom sounded like she was being nice, but was she? Arguably, even bringing it up was like comparing the two of them.

What did Kurumi's silence signify?

I wasn't really sure. I'd never had a mother look after me, let alone compare me to my sibling.

"Argh, Kurumi! Why do you look so gloomy? I keep telling you it's fine!"

"……"

"When you were little, he was quite the rebel. Far more trouble than you are now. Always calling me names! Compared to that…"

"…I get it, he's the best. Just leave," Kurumi snapped, cutting her off.

"What? I didn't say anything like that."

"You're always saying it."

"I'm trying to encourage you! No matter how nice I am, it doesn't do any good if you take it the wrong way."

"I know! Just go away! I'll put the food in the fridge."

"I'm just worried about you. Why are you always so grumpy?"

"This is hardly the time for that! I'm fine! Come on, go home."

I heard footsteps moving away. Kurumi must have been pushing her mom toward the door.

"Are you eating properly? You can't survive on instant noodles!"

"I know! I'm cooking!"

"School's starting up again soon. You'll have to come home soon. Don't leave packing to the last second. I'll bring the car around to pick you up."

"…I know."

With that, the front door closed.

I slid the closet open a notch and listened for the sound of a car driving away.

Kurumi had successfully sent her mom packing, and without getting caught.

I emerged from the closet and dusted myself off.

"Sorry about that, Natsume."

"No big deal. Glad we weren't discovered."

"…Yeah." Kurumi looked even more downcast now. "Summer's almost over," she said, heading for the back porch, eyes on the view outside.

The sky was dark. There was a light drizzle, and the laundry was getting damp. I went out and started taking it down, still at a loss.

What should we do now?

We had sympathy for Ookuma's predicament. But nothing our resistance had done up until now was actually bad.

We needed to figure out if Kanae Ookuma was like us or not, to determine if we were right to feel sorry for her, or if there was no need.

As summer wrapped up, where were we headed?

After hearing Kurumi and her mom talk about practicalities, my concerns felt especially hollow.

*

That evening, a typhoon hit the area hard, just as the news had predicted.

It brought howling winds and heavy rain—a disaster that injured people and damaged homes. There was nothing especially notable about it. Such things happen at least one a year; they're awful, but commonplace.

The news had promised this one would rage on through the night, so we'd taken some precautions, such as closing up the shutters and bringing in the potted plants—if those flew away, it would be bad news. We'd put our heads together and done everything we could think of.

…But it was a very old house, and it was hard to feel secure. The windows were rattling so hard, it felt like they were about to break. I

hoped the roof wouldn't tear off. It seemed unlikely, but I couldn't help feeling anxious.

Still seated at the dining table, I turned the TV way up, hoping to drown out the wind. There was no need to watch coverage of the typhoon, so I flipped to a program featuring cheery celebrities visiting shops on a bright, sunny day. For the first time, I was grateful they filmed variety shows like this in advance.

"What should we do for dinner?" Kurumi was standing in the kitchen with her apron on. "We were so busy preparing for the typhoon, I haven't even started cooking."

"Then no need to make anything. We've got frozen food and the like."

"…Yeah, we do. But cooking might help me distract myself."

"In that case, I'm happy to wait. Take as long as you like."

"You sure know how to butter a girl up. Why does that just make me feel guilty?"

Kurumi drifted back to the table and flung herself over the top of it. The round back of her head was right in front of me. She wasn't wearing her newsboy cap, but her dyed underlayer was exposed for all to see. I reached over and rubbed her head. She made a pouty face but let me do it.

"Natsume, do you think we'll feel better once the storm passes?"

"Good question. I hope so."

"Will the clear skies give us the answers we want?"

"…I think it's safe to say they won't."

I thought back to when I was sitting in class, right after my first meeting with Nanaougi. Anxious, I'd looked out the window and seen big, white clouds against a pure blue sky. Watching them made something clear to me: There are no easy answers, no directions written in the sky. And that's why I can't just sit here, waiting for them.

Ever since Kurumi and I joined forces, we'd lived on our own terms. That meant we had to make up our own minds about where we were headed, just like how we'd decided to live here together.

The choice was ours, and so we had to bear the responsibilities that came with it.

…We knew all that, and yet we were still stumped. That was the whole problem.

"What do we do?" Kurumi mumbled into the tabletop. I rubbed her head again.

We had all the lights on, trying to brighten up the room as time steadily ticked away. Maybe we'd be happiest if time stopped altogether. I felt like my empty thoughts were melting into the thick, humid air.

"I can try my hand at cooking," I offered. "Maybe helping me out will distract you and be a little less stressful."

"Hmm… Maybe. If you're up for it, I am."

In that case, I'd better open the fridge and see what we have. I can find a recipe on my phone. Something simple.

I got up to do just that…

…and the doorbell rang. The sound was almost lost in the wind. We both swung around to face the entrance.

"What?" said Kurumi, surprised. "Who could that be, in this weather? A delivery guy?"

"I don't remember us ordering anything."

"Neither do I. Maybe it's a business order for the café?"

Ordering supplies, maybe? But who delivers packages this late?

And venturing out in weather like this was taking your life in your hands.

"…Maybe it's someone in need of help," I suggested.

"Oh, crap. Then I'd better go see what's up." Kurumi stood and headed for the door.

It was hard to imagine anyone going out in a storm like this, so I figured nine out of ten, it was someone related to Kurumi coming to check on her, like her mom had.

They might push their way in again. Maybe I should hide myself.

I grabbed my shoes—we'd left them by the porch—and headed to the closet.

But as I reached for the door, something stopped me.

"…Aiiiiee! H-hey! Natsume! Help!"

Kurumi had just let out an alarming shriek.

I raced down the hall to the door.

An intruder? If they slipped in during a storm, it could delay any calls for help.

What was I doing? I should have been prepared for that!

"What is it? You okay, Kurumi?!"

I turned the corner…

…and found Kurumi gaping at someone.

The person in question was certainly crazy, and arguably, she *was* an intruder.

It was Nana Nanaougi. She was in uniform, grinning merrily at us.

"Good evening. Nice weather we're having!" Her ponytail swayed as she looked at each of us in turn, flinging water all around.

She had no umbrella, not even a raincoat. Her whole body was soaked. Her blouse clung to her body, showing off every curve. How was it even possible to be so wet?

And why was she here? How did she even find out about this place?

I could feel my head filling with question marks.

This was Nanaougi, no there was use overthinking things. I had to start with the questions I could get answers to.

I grabbed Kurumi's hand and pulled her behind me, then faced Nanaougi down.

"What do you want? How'd you find this place?"

"Now that would be telling. But if you promise not to get mad, I could share."

"Sorry, I'm already mad. Those conditions are untenable. Just fess up."

"Whoa, you're scaring me. Fine, fine, here goes. Ren, do you know what this is?" She pulled a round item out of her breast pocket. "It's a GPS tag. Link it to your phone, and you'll always know where it is.

They’re meant to help you avoid losing things, but…you can guess how I used it.”

“…You stashed it in my things? When?”

“Last time I was in contact with your bookbag, Ren.”

When was that? I hadn’t met with her at school very often. When had she had the opportunity to touch my bookbag? I couldn’t remember a single incident.

“Wow, you’re dense. Maybe this’ll jog your memory?” She narrowed her eyes, then repeated a line she’d said to me once before, copying every word exactly: *“If you’re seeing a girl, you’ve gotta dress for the occasion! At least dust off your bookbag.”*

…I remembered. It was the time she’d hit on me as I was leaving school.

I went back to the room where I kept my things in and checked my backpack. There, I found another GPS tag, just like the one she’d shown me, inside the back pouch. She’d pulled one over on me. I didn’t use that pouch, so I’d never noticed.

It all made sense. That was how she’d tracked us to the Stargazing Club, too.

I went back to the entrance and tossed the GPS tag at her.

“You’re quite the stalker. This is definitely illegal.”

“Ah-ha-ha, illegal? You’re one to talk.” Nanaougi caught the tag in one hand and slipped it into her breast pocket. It struck me as weirdly badass. She was as crafty as ever.

“I get how you tracked us, but why come all this way?”

“Well, to talk, obviously. Can I at least come in? It may be summer, but it’s pretty cold standing out here in the wind while sopping wet. I’m liable to catch pneumonia.”

“…You’re the one who went out in a storm. Why’d you pick today?”

“Isn’t it obvious? So you couldn’t just run me off.”

“Whaaat?!”

I scowled at her, but she just winked back.

"Ren, Kurumi, let me in. You don't have it in you to send me away now."

"…Why not?"

"I'm here to talk about Ookuma."

That took both our breaths away. Ookuma was the very problem we were currently trying to solve. But why would Nanaougi bring her up here and now?

Even as I wondered this, another part of me thought it made perfect sense.

Of course. Nanaougi was the first to contact Ookuma.

How much did she know, and what did she want from us? I was curious. Maybe this was something we needed to hear.

Kurumi and I glanced at each other.

"And if you don't let me in, I'll die before I get home."

"…The bath's the door on the left."

"Oh, sweet. You're so nice, Kurumi! Thank you!"

With a look, Kurumi and I had decided to let her in. We were reluctant, but I knew this was our only option.

I mean, we weren't heartless enough to send someone out to die in a typhoon. That was the whole reason we were struggling in the first place.

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Kurumi and I waited in the living room while Nanaougi took a shower.

"Thanks for the bath. I was about to catch my death of cold."

She emerged wearing nothing but a towel, steam rising from her shoulders.

I wasn't sure where to look. Kurumi would stomp on my foot if I stared, so I quickly turned away.

"Hey! Why aren't you dressed?!" exclaimed Kurumi. "I left you a change of clothes!"

"You left me one of your shirts, Kurumi. It was too small. Especially around the bust."

Kurumi made a face and clicked her tongue loudly. She looked pretty scary.

"…You can borrow one of my shirts till your clothes dry out," I said. "Men's shirts may be cut differently, but if the size is big enough, it should fit. Does that work?"

"Nice. Ren's shirt! The one folded in the basket back in the washroom, right? I'll slip right into it."

"I wore that shirt, Natsume. You're gonna let another woman use it?"

"The situation leaves me with no choice. And it is *my* shirt."

"I see," Kurumi said, and clicked her tongue even louder. *Why's she so scary?*

Nanaougi vanished, and we heard her turn on the hair dryer. She had long hair, so this took a while. Kurumi and I were stuck twiddling our thumbs.

A solid twenty minutes later, Nanaougi came out wearing only an oversized dress shirt.

"Augh, Nanaougi! Why nothing down below?!"

"Hm? Ren's shirt is long enough to cover me. I figured it would be plenty."

"No, um… Ugh… It's really not, but I guess it'll have to do."

Kurumi sighed, then buried her cheek in her palm, deciding arguments were futile.

It was the right call. Nanaougi was an unpredictable maniac. Anything we said would bounce right off.

Nanaougi pulled out an unoccupied chair and sat down at the table. Three of the four sides were now occupied, with her sitting between us.

We straightened up, our eyes on Nanaougi.

"So," Kurumi said. "You're here about Ookuma. Can you elaborate?"

"Um, well. I figured it was about time."

"Yes…? About time for what?"

"Nanaougi, what have you been up to all summer?" I asked. "We need some straight answers."

"Don't come at me from both sides! I'm sorry, I mean it… And I'm here to explain." Her smile was a tad softer than her usual. "Learning about Kanae Ookuma has your heads spinning, right?" She sounded like she was just making sure. "She's pretty far gone. Like, headed for a mental breakdown."

"A breakdown? I heard she was crying…"

"Because of you. Your attacks drove her to it."

"……"

"But at the same time, I played a part in cornering her."

I didn't have time to ask how. Nanaougi kept right on talking.

"Ren, Kurumi, I imagine you're stewing over whether it's acceptable to keep hurting Ookuma now that you know how much the darkness of Saigou High gets to her."

"…Did you plant a bug on us, too?"

"I'm not nearly as big on eavesdropping as you are, Ren… But I take it I hit the nail on the head. How do you think I knew? Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"……"

"Because I manipulated you into this position," she hissed, her voice going cold.

Then she snapped back into the same cheery tone she'd started with.

"Should I run down the whole timeline?" she asked. "It all started the day I dropped in on the Stargazing Club. I wound you up, promising to pull off an attack you couldn't dismiss out of hand. I wanted to make sure you'd keep the attacks coming all summer, to compete with me."

"Hang on, we're going that far back?"

"Yep! In fact, I'd started putting my plan into action even earlier… By the time you put up those mannequin heads, it had already begun." Nanaougi smirked. Her words seemed almost rehearsed. "And just as I'd intended, you were spurred into action. Maybe you'd

have done all that even without my meddling, but either way—your resistance thrived."

We *had* been trying to outdo Nanaougi. And that meant we'd been dancing on the palm of her hand…

"And so, every time you hit the school, I'd go to Ms. Ookuma to discuss what was going on. I brought her the receipt and the test answers and formally discussed them with her."

So that *was* what they'd been discussing in the guidance office and that classroom far from the main building.

"Ms. Ookuma is in charge of the summer curriculum. I knew that if any problems cropped up, it would fall to her to handle them. So I turned up the pressure. 'The school has to do something. I don't like this unrest. You're the only one I can go to.' Very unreasonable."

"Yeah, you're a top student; she can't simply dismiss your concerns."

"Exactly! But a new teacher can't do much about this school's issues." Nanaougi's grin grew positively vicious. "Ms. Ookuma wound up caught between me and her boss. And you two weren't letting up. In the end, she cracked under the pressure and started spiraling."

"……"

"Kurumi, you said she was crying?" She looked at Kurumi but got no answer, then shrugged and carried on. "Well, whatever. Once Ms. Ookuma fell apart, the rest was easy. I just had to find a chance to pass her planner to Ren, manufacturing this exact situation."

"So *you* dropped that planner?"

"I did! I happened across it a while back. Reading it is what made me decide to target her. So? With me so far?"

Kurumi and I exchanged glances, then looked at Nanaougi dubiously.

"…We get the gist."

At least now we knew what Nanaougi had been up to all summer. And to an extent, we understood how we'd ended up here.

But a critical piece of the puzzle was still missing, still hidden from us.

Why had Nanaougi made Ookuma suffer and made us doubt ourselves? What was the point of building her plan around Ookuma?

"We've heard the setup. Now give us some answers." Kurumi took a deep breath, fixed Nanaougi with her fiercest glare, and asked, "What are you really after?"

"I've been telling you ever since we first met. My goal is to launch an attack that'll convince you to let me join your resistance."

"Making Ookuma have a mental breakdown is your 'attack'? Don't make me laugh. We're not out to bully specific individuals."

"I know that. I'm not doing this because I want to make Ookuma miserable. My 'attack' isn't over yet. We're just entering the final phase. This is the good part!"

"…Meaning?"

Nanaougi flashed us her most indomitable grin yet.

"Meaning, I intend to save Ms. Ookuma while hitting the school as hard as possible. If I pull something like that off, will it impress you?"

That was the goal she'd been working toward all summer. It was what Nanaougi had been after from the start: an attack that would force us to recognize her.

It was something neither Kurumi nor I could possibly have come up with.

"Let's *recruit* Ms. Ookuma," declared Nanaougi. "And if I can make that happen, let me join up, too."

ACT FIVE

Recruit Ookuma.

Nanaougi's idea was wild. Absurd, even. But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made.

I mean, if she was on our side, then Ookuma would be getting payback on this crappy school. How else could you save someone "like us"?

And if we had a teacher on our side, then we could hit the school even harder. It would really increase our range of options, allowing us to strike at the school internally.

We could save someone in our predicament *and* hurt the school where it counted. If Ookuma joined us, it would completely erase Kurumi's and my reservations.

Putting aside feasibility, the plan itself was perfect. It was galling, but I figured that was the best way to resolve our current problem.

And if we left her crying alone like that…well, that would suck.

After a brief deliberation, Kurumi and I decided to go along with Nanaougi's plan.

"Very well. If you can recruit a teacher, we'll approve your membership," Kurumi said.

"Thank you very much! So, about that. Can I enlist your help on the actual recruitment? Don't worry, even if we fail, your faces won't be exposed."

At this point, I was no longer worried about Nanaougi trying to trap us. Even if she was, we had no choice but to believe her. Her plan was just too good.

"…Very well," said Kurumi. "I'll help any way I can. Natsume, are you in?"

"Yeah. No use stewing over it. Let's do this."

"Then it's settled! Let's get to the nitty-gritty. Of course, it's not all that complicated…"

Summer vacation was wrapping up, and we'd struck a new deal with Nanaougi.

We would be working to flip Ookuma to our side.

Nanaougi would handle the negotiations, while Kurumi and I helped prepare what was needed to make things go the way she planned.

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A few days after the end of Obon break, the big day arrived.

Our stage would be the far end of the third building—the same empty classroom where Ookuma had cried.

We couldn't afford anyone else hearing Nanaougi and Ookuma negotiate, so we needed a place where they could talk in secret, but where a teacher would feel comfortable going. This classroom was the best fit.

"All right. Ren, Kurumi, stick to the plan."

"Yeah, will do."

"Got it."

Nanaougi waited in the classroom at the end of the hall, while Kurumi and I stood by in the room next door.

We'd already used Nanaougi's name to call Ookuma here. It was almost the appointed time. But would she show?

For a few minutes, we held our breaths.

Then we heard tiny footsteps coming down the hall. They were headed our way, and they drew to a halt on the other side of the wall from where Kurumi and I were hiding.

"…Nanaougi, what's this about?" said a voice, echoing through the darkness. It could only be Ookuma's.

She sounded way more strung out than last time. She was exhausted and feeble. It was as if she was trying to hide how sick she felt inside.

Had the head teacher chewed her out again? While we weren't looking, she'd been driven even further into the corner.

"Is this another discussion about people breaking rules?" she asked.

"More or less. Come on in."

"Stop this already… Why does it have to be me…?"

"Didn't catch that, Ms. Ookuma."

"…Never mind. What is it this time? Let's make this snappy."

Their footsteps moved into the classroom next door.

It was time. The second the door closed, Kurumi and I slipped out into the hall and did our part.

We burst into the classroom, Kurumi through the right door, and me through the left. We closed the doors behind us and stood in front of them, our legs firmly planted, sealing the exits.

"Whoa, what's all this…?!"

We'd slammed the doors quite loudly, and Ookuma wheeled around to face us.

She looked stunned. Her eyes were wide. A perfectly natural reaction.

We were dressed rather outlandishly. I had a fox mask on, while Kurumi was wearing one with a cat design. Our role here was to keep Ookuma from leaving the negotiations—and to prevent any third parties from entering. We had no need to reveal our faces, so we'd covered them.

The sudden arrival of two very suspicious students had clearly rattled Ookuma.

"…Hey, Nanaougi, who are these people? Are they with you?"

She sounded mad, but Nanaougi didn't waver. She pulled out a chair, sat down, and elegantly crossed her legs. Maintaining her

unflappable attitude, she deflected the question.

"Pay them no mind. They're just guards. Forget about them."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean? What's going on here?"

"Teacher, this time I want to have a private conversation with you as a person. Take a seat. You'll want to hear this."

Ookuma looked between Nanaougi and the two of us at the door. She was silent for a while, like a prey animal taking stock of their natural predator. This was clearly the last thing she'd expected, and she wasn't sure how to react.

Eventually, she realized silence would solve nothing and slowly took a seat.

The room was dimly lit as Nanaougi and Ookuma faced each other down.

"Nanaougi, what's the big idea? I assumed we were here to talk about school discipline, or the recent attacks… You know, like usual…"

"Earlier, I said 'more or less.'"

"……"

"Allow me to apologize. By that, I meant 'not really.'"

Nanaougi flashed a grin, and Ookuma tensed.

The scene was set. From this point on, it was all up to Nanaougi. She'd had this planned out since before summer vacation. Now she just had to follow through.

She took a breath and commenced her negotiations.

"Ms. Ookuma, I called you here to put an end to this farce."

"…What farce?"

"It's simple, really. I thought I'd tell you the identity of the culprit behind these attacks."

"…What? The culprit? You know who's doing this?"

"I do. In fact, I've known all along."

"Who?! Tell me! If they stop making trouble, everything will be easier!"

Ookuma was almost on her feet, but Nanaougi waved her back down.

She was about to name names. In any other situation, Kurumi and I ought to be desperate to stop her, but we didn't budge. She'd briefed us ahead of time, and we knew where this was going and what she'd say next.

"Ah-ha-ha, you're pretty eager, Ms. Ookuma. All right. If you want to know that badly, I'll tell you." She paused and put on a malicious grin. Then she lied like she was born with a fork in her tongue. "It was *me*."

After several seconds, Ookuma piped up, her voice strained. "… Um. What?"

Nanaougi continued, piling it on. "The leaked test answers, the insult receipts, the creepy doll heads with the graffiti, and the insults broadcast over the PA system—that was all me."

"…Huh?! That doesn't even make sense! You can't be behind this!"

"On what basis? I'm confessing to my crimes."

"I mean… I mean, every time there was an attack, you came to me, demanding I put a stop to it! You're in the good classes! Why…? It doesn't make sense!"

Ookuma's voice was getting pretty loud, but Nanaougi didn't bat an eye.

"This school's a cesspit. Half the classes are wasted on checking homework progress, no actual teaching is done, and the administration tries to make us pay extra for anything and everything. Not a single thought is spared for the good of the students."

"Er, no, wait… That's not…"

"I know you can't agree because of your position but spare me. You know it sucks here. Start by admitting it."

"……Well, um…"

Ookuma got very quiet and avoided Nanaougi's gaze, a guilty look in her eye.

Given what she'd written in her planner, we knew she agreed. Besides, while she may not have wanted to, but she'd hurled a fair number of insults herself.

In order to keep things moving, Nanaougi acted like Ookuma had agreed with her.

"I despise this school. They don't provide a proper education, and yet they flaunt their best students' successes as if the credit is all theirs. It's despicable. But if I complain about the better classes receiving preferential treatment, it'll go in one ear and out the other. I'm comparatively better off, so no one will listen to me."

Of course, even if those of us in the lower-ranking classes—the actual victims—said something, the faculty wouldn't take that seriously, either. But that wasn't the point, so I kept the thought to myself.

First we'd have to change the school itself. Right now, the important thing was to spell that out for Ookuma so she understood.

"That's why I decided to resist. I wanted to bring to light this school's flaws, show how awful the environment is, and demand reform. I figured it would make the place better."

"…That's why you've been staging these attacks?"

"Yes, exactly." Nanaougi nodded confidently. "It's a classic con. My attacks directly targeted the school's failings. The only way to stop the attacks would be for the school to change. I was trying to put that idea in your head, Ms. Ookuma. Hoping you'd see the dangers and urge for reforms from within."

"No… Wait… If you wanted reform…" Ookuma's eyes swam. She was confused. "…Why come to me? There's lots of other teachers."

"Someone who's taught here for years and gotten used to things wouldn't lift a finger to change it."

"…I—I guess that makes sense…" Ookuma nodded a couple times. She muttered, "But isn't this a little much?" Still, she seemed to see the logic.

This would do. As long as we'd convinced her, that meant we'd cleared stage one.

Nanaougi's fake story went like this: She'd staged attacks targeting the school's failings to raise awareness of them. Then she'd

approached a new teacher—Ookuma—demanding help with the unrest in the hopes of prompting reform.

Feeding this story to Ookuma was all a setup. The real test came next. Would Nanaougi be able to talk her into joining us?

She let out a dramatic sigh and shrugged—all theater. "But I'm afraid talking to you got me absolutely nowhere."

"…!"

"I waited and waited, but the classes and faculty stayed exactly the same."

Ookuma hung her head and bit her lip. "That's not true," she said. Her shoulders quivered, and her voice was hoarse. "I tried to keep order."

"You set up patrols. But that was just addressing the symptoms. You didn't do a thing about the real problem—the school's systematic abuse and discrimination."

"Well… Maybe I didn't, but…"

"You made empty promises and didn't try to change the school at all. You're well aware of how dark this place is. You know it's messed up, and yet you pretended not to see."

"I didn't…! I did what I could…!"

Even from our places at the doors, Kurumi and I could tell her breathing was getting shallow. Her gasps echoed through the dimly lit room.

"You didn't. You haven't acted as you should have—not as a teacher, *or* as a grown-up."

"…Stop."

"You know how wrong it all is, but you let the school and your bosses control you. How many students have you hurled abuse at? Think back."

"…Don't do this…!"

"I'll be honest, I'm disappointed in you. I didn't think it was possible to be such a common, useless adult at your age. Deplorable. Truly deplorable."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! Stop! Don't say that! Don't blame me for this! Hah…hahhh… *Cough, cough*… Urppp…"

She was coughing and spluttering, but Nanaougi was merciless.

"I thought you'd get it, Ms. Ookuma. But you're just like the others. Just one more piece of crap in this toilet of a school."

"I don't *want* to scream at students! I choose my words carefully and try not to be too mean—and I don't take it out on their possessions like the other teachers do!"

"You know full well how messed up the others are, screaming anything and everything at students, breaking their belongings… But you pretend not to notice. What good is that?"

"No! I mean… I mean… What can I do? New hires can't do anything!"

"And you call yourself a teacher? You call yourself an adult?"

"I know! I know that none of this is right! This horrible school has no right to exist! I know that better than anyone! Aughhhhhh!"

Ookuma clenched her jaw and grabbed fistfuls of her hair. She'd been wearing the mask of a teacher, and now it came tumbling away. It was downright terrifying how accurately Nanaougi had predicted this.

"I can't…stop it! What do you want from me?! Why come after *me*?! Did you just bring me here to tell me how disappointed you are?"

"Ha-ha. Don't be silly. Of course not." Nanaougi got up and stepped closer. She held a hand out to Ookuma—just like Kurumi had done to me. "Ms. Ookuma, I want you to join me."

"Hahh…hahh… Huh? Join you? How?"

"I'm leading a resistance to change this school. And I want you to help."

Ookuma froze, eyes wide.

Ten seconds passed, then twenty. She sat there, frozen, there for some time.

But she couldn't stay that way forever. When she started breathing again, she was shaking her head.

"Th-that's ridiculous. Nonsense!"

"Oh? You won't lift a finger for your students? You know how messed up this school is, but you won't work to change it? When it comes down to it, you refuse to help, huh? You really are a shitty adult."

Ookuma's face crumpled again. "Why would you even want my help?!"

"If I had a teacher on my side, I could stage even bigger attacks. Big enough to shake the higher ups—the whole system. I could finally force the school to change." Nanaougi's smile radiated confidence. It was like she'd already won. She thrust out her hand again. "Make up for your sins. Join my resistance and change this school."

"…Hng… Hahh…hahh……"

"I know you hate this place, too, Ms. Ookuma. Help me."

Ookuma's eyes were all the way open, almost bugging out as she stared up at Nanaougi. She must be seeing spots before her eyes. The school's darkness had crushed her, and Nanaougi had chased her into a corner. She probably didn't know which way was up anymore.

Now that Nanaougi had reminded her of who was right and who was wrong, could she find it in herself to cast out reason and join us?

Nanaougi's whole plan came down to this.

And finally, Ookuma gave her answer.

"…Ha-ha. What are you talking about, Nanaougi? That's not even funny." She gave a hollow, empty chuckle. "Help your resistance? Why would I do something so stupid? Have you lost your mind?"

"Oh, please, Ms. Ookuma. Are you still stuck on that? You know—"

"There's plenty of students working their butts off here! You and your silly games are harming them! Uh…like the student council! They're good kids!"

That line made Nanaougi flinch.

Ookuma didn't notice, she just kept running her mouth. "You're in a good class, Nanaougi. Drop this nonsense and get back to your studies. Please. The whole second year is depending on you, and I'm not even exaggerating. You know that!"

"……"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear any of this. Just go back to being a regular student. Got it?"

Acting like she'd recovered her composure, Ookuma gently pushed Nanaougi's hand aside. "You're in high school now. Don't like it? Too bad. Deal with it. It's time to grow up."

She got to her feet and sailed right past us.

"You two," she said, turning to us, "don't let her talk you into any more foolishness."

Then she pushed me aside and left the room. Her footsteps vanished down the hall, leaving only silence.

Nanaougi hadn't moved since she first flinched.

"…Nanaougi?" I called. It was as if she'd only just remembered how to breathe.

"Ah… Sorry, I lost her," she muttered, glancing at the open door and shrugging helplessly.

It was now official: The plan Nanaougi had worked on all summer had ended in failure.

*

This is good. I've made the right choice.

I can't join a resistance. I heard nothing. I saw nothing.

The head teacher said it himself. Nanaougi's important. I have to treat her with kid gloves.

My choice resolved this whole matter. It was perfect.

Right at the last second, I somehow got my mouth moving. I made a bunch of excuses and wrapped things up nice and tidy.

I have to focus on the exams, on my future, on profits.

All of this is for the students.

That's what proper grown-ups do, right?

*

"Ah-ha-ha… My bad. I totally blew it at the last second."

We'd just let Ookuma slip away.

Kurumi and I took our masks off as Nanaougi gave a sheepish laugh.

"I thought I had her on the ropes. Guess I misread her. I have pretty good grades in modern literature, but understanding real people is way harder."

"…Them's the breaks."

I felt like she'd done pretty well. Teachers and students just lived in different worlds. Recruiting Ookuma had always been a tall order. Adults were bound to think we were just goofing around, that it would be stupid to take us seriously.

"What'll happen to me now? I confessed to all those crimes! Think I'll get suspended?"

"From what Ookuma said, I doubt it. Besides, you're a good student."

"I wonder. Well, not that it matters." She hung her head for a second, then leaned back and stretched. After that, she turned to us, cocked her head, and flashed us a grin. "Shame I don't get to join you, but I hope you two will keep fighting."

"…You're sure? Anything we do will get blamed on you."

"Whatever. If you get your revenge, then I'll be satisfied."

I wasn't sure what she was thinking. I'd never been able to figure her out.

…No, I was just telling myself that. The truth was, I didn't want to admit it.

To be honest, I'd noticed some time ago that Nanaougi wasn't just in this for shits and giggles. My main evidence was our graveyard chat. I'd asked if she was just gonna take it, and she'd spat, "*Hell no. I'm not gonna take it*." I remembered the look in her eyes. I had a feeling *that* was the real Nanaougi.

…But that didn't matter anymore. She wasn't joining us.

I glanced out the window and saw a clear, blue sky. Green leaves were rustling in the wind. The sun was setting in the west, casting shadows across the veranda. In the distance, I could hear the cries of cicadas. Summer was coming to a close.

We'd failed to recruit Ookuma. Our issues remained unresolved, and it looked like this story would end without a clear resolution.

"…I'm pissed." Kurumi's hiss broke the silence, like a drop of water on a still pond.

"At me? …Sorry," Nanaougi said.

Kurumi shook her head. "Nope. At this Kanae Ookuma lady." She was glaring at the open door, speaking loud and clear. "What was that about? Wasn't she supposed to be hurting? She wrote all that stuff in her planner and even cried, and she's still looking for an easy out? I'm absolutely furious."

"…Kurumi?"

"'Deal with it'? Screw that. I was a fool to ever have sympathy for that piece of shit." Kurumi swung around to face us. "Is that how adults act? Is that where we're headed? …No way. I refuse."

Her eyes gleamed red, like they had back on that sunset roof. They glowed with the light of vengeance.

"I've got an idea for an attack. Natsume, Nanaougi, I need your help."

*

The date was set: August 31, the last day of summer vacation.

Kurumi, Nanaougi, and I reached the gym early.

"Whoa, look at this. Quite a venue."

We stepped inside, scoping out the place. Colored tape festooned the ceiling; cloth covered the walls dotted here and there with paper flowers. Rows of tables were set out, ready for party food.

This was all expected, of course. The last day of summer vacation was the Wrap-up Assembly—a party in name only, designed to reinforce the worship of the better classes.

This would be the site of our next attack.

"They're just reusing decorations from the Culture Festival's closing ceremony," I said. "They didn't even take them down."

"Aha. That explains it," said Kurumi. "This school cuts every corner!"

Behind us, Nanaougi snorted. "You can say that again."

I agreed entirely.

"We bought a bunch, but will it be enough?" asked Kurumi, cat mask on as she peered into a plastic bag. It was filled with the equipment we'd need for our attack.

"I think so. The real question is, will we have the time to use it all?"

"Fair point. We'll just have to work fast!"

I know that. Don't up the ante by spelling it out.

Like Kurumi, I had on a mask—one with a fox design. I sighed quietly so she wouldn't hear me.

"I'll be as quick as I can, so go break a leg!" she said.

"Don't expect much! I'm no athlete."

Her eyes met mine through the eyeholes of our mask, and she seemed to say "Don't disappoint me."

She clearly wasn't listening. But I *did* plan to live up to my end of the bargain.

"Okay, it's just about time."

Kurumi glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost five. According to the schedule, today's big star would be here soon. But would she really show? Now that Nanaougi had struck out, it was more than possible she wouldn't answer the call…

We waited for about ten minutes. At last, the gym door slowly opened, and in she came—a short woman in a suit, her long, wavy hair swaying.

It was Kanae Ookuma, the woman at the heart of our plan.

"…Augh, you're actually here." The moment she spotted us, her baby face started twitching. "You all again… What's the big idea?" She held up a sheet of paper—the summons we'd left for her. "'If you want your planner back, come to the gym tomorrow morning.

Tell no one, and come alone. If you bring backup, we'll inform the whole school what's written in it.' Explain yourselves!" Ookuma stalked across the gym, voice raised.

Letting her control the conversation would work against us. It was time we got our plan underway. I shot Kurumi a glance, and she nodded.

After setting down the bag, she straightened up. "Then let our attack begin. Nanaougi, secure the escape route."

"Yeah, okay. On it." Nanaougi sped off toward the back door.

Ookuma shot her a dubious glance, then turned back to us. "Judging from those masks, you're the same cronies from last time, right?"

"Far from it. Nanaougi is *not* part of our resistance, and I'm the one in charge."

"Huh? You are? What?" Ookuma reeled.

As she did, we stepped closer. And, just as planned, we tore off our masks.

"Kurumi Hoshimiya, Class 1-6. Nice to meet you, I suppose? I'm the mastermind here."

"Ren Natsume, Class 2-5. We already know each other."

Ookuma froze at this sudden reveal, gaping. But she soon recovered her wits and tried to stare us down. "Why tell me who you are now? Are you turning yourselves in?"

"Not at all. We want to make an impression on you, Kanae Ookuma. Carve ourselves deep into your heart. And to that end, we felt it was best to show ourselves."

"Carve…? What do you mean?"

"We're here to make a request."

Kurumi put her cat-eared newsboy cap on and took another step closer. Ookuma braced herself.

"Ookuma, will you join us?"

"This again? Don't be ridiculous. I'm not getting involved in this nonsense."

"Ah-ha-ha, right you are. I knew you'd say that." Kurumi spun around and moved back to my side. "You're so hung up on being a grown-up that nothing we say will get through. That's why we set all this up—to show a hardheaded teacher our resistance in action."

"What…?"

Kurumi reached into the bag and pulled out the day's artillery. We could hear the pea rattling inside a can of spray paint. The bag was stuffed with cans of every color.

"…What's that for? What are you up to?"

"There's only one thing for bad children to do with spray paint."

Kurumi flashed a mean grin, then danced off toward the gym's back wall, currently festooned with party decor. She shook the can a few times, making it rattle—and then unleashed a spray of black paint.

In giant letters, she wrote, WORLD'S WORST SCHOOL!

"Ah! You idiot! What are you doing?!" Ookuma howled, running over to stop her.

But I wouldn't let her past. I stepped out in front of her, physically blocking her path. I wasn't that big, but she was pretty small. If I crouched and threw my weight at her, I could easily hold her at bay.

"What the—? Let go! Outta the way!"

Grappling, we glared at each other.

"Ms. Ookuma, please reconsider. You don't want to stop this."

"What?! Of course I do! Isn't that obvious?"

"Not really, no. Come, now. Pipe down and watch for a minute."

"What? *You* pipe down! This is against so many rules!"

Ookuma's tiny hands shoved me away, and she once again tried to run over to Kurumi. She'd clearly played her share of sports. I staggered but managed to keep her in check.

"Dammit! Come on! The school isn't going to forgive you for this!"

"Kurumi and I were never expecting them to."

"…What does that mean?!" Ookuma stuck one hand in her suit pocket.

If this were a normal fight, I might have worried she'd pull a knife on me—but this was a *teacher*. I knew better.

As expected, she pulled out a phone. She must have decided this was too much for her to handle alone and was trying to call for backup.

I quickly moved in, slapping her wrist and knocking the phone away.

"Goddamn it!" Ookuma abandoned her phone and turned on her heel.

She was trying to flee the scene—but we were prepared for that.

I gave chase and grabbed her shoulders near the door. I stopped her, then went around in front of her and pushed her back into the gym.

"You're not going anywhere. You need to see what we're doing."

Her breathing was ragged as she glared up at me furiously. "… What's that supposed to mean?" she hissed. Then her voice rose in a roar. "What is your problem?! Why would you do this?! Why a resistance?! Enough! If you hate this school that bad, just drop out!"

"Ah-ha-ha!" Kurumi laughed, still spray-painting more graffiti. "Now who's being ridiculous? Dropping out would just be running away!"

"Then report your concerns to the proper authorities! There are other approaches!"

"There aren't. Even if we reported the school, all it would do is end our misery. It's not enough if we don't get payback! Our hearts demand vengeance!" Kurumi moved to the next section of the wall, shaking the can. "You get that, right? This is our revenge! You dismissed our attacks, calling them absurd—and now we won't be satisfied until we make you understand how we really feel!"

"Revenge, my ass! That won't make you feel any better!"

"Won't it? Maybe if we had a mentor with morals, we'd have worked that out!"

Kurumi's sarcasm made Ookuma grind her teeth. It was a solid dig. I was starting to feel sorry for her.

"Ms. Ookuma, we're way past what you're saying." Kurumi tossed the can aside. "I'm *done* putting up with this crap! *Done* doing what useless grown-ups say!" She rubbed her nose, then spread out her hands. "Behold! Our frustrations have grown so vast, we needed writing this big to vent them!"

The whole wall was filled with protests.

"What do you say? I don't know what this 'Wrap-up Assembly' is supposed to be, but go ahead and hold it like you always do. Ignore the screams of our hearts! I know you're more than capable of that."

WORLD'S WORST SCHOOL! DAILY INSULTS! TEST SCORES DON'T DECIDE YOUR WORTH! NO MORE GRADES-BASED DISCRIMINATION! THIS IS MADNESS! HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER!

Our cries, our motives—they were all on display.

And Ookuma's eyes stuck on one phrase in particular.

I DON'T WANT TO TELL KIDS TO DROP DEAD. I DON'T EVEN WANT TO HEAR THAT. I WISH I WERE DEAD.

Those lines were taken right from Ookuma's planner.

"Heh-heh, well? Doesn't it fit right in with *our* words?" Kurumi rubbed her dirty palms together as she headed back toward us. Flashing a malicious grin, she held out a hand. "Ms. Ookuma, when I saw your planner, I knew. You're no grown-up. You're every bit as starry-eyed a kid as we are. Come on, be bad like us."

"Wh-what? Be bad? I can't…!" Eyes wide, she looked up at Kurumi, then softly shook her head.

Kurumi leaned in close. "Why are you hesitating? You hate this school just as much as we do. Lend us a hand! Change this school with us! Get payback!"

"Payback…? I'm not— I don't…"

"Don't you want it? Vengeance—a whole heap of spite dumped on this twisted hellhole! If you understand where we're coming from at

all, then join us!”

“…No! Lending a hand to delinquents isn’t a teacher’s job!”

“Then what *is* your job? Insulting students? Milking them for money? Go on, fill me in. *Teach me* what your damn job is.”

This brutal salvo left Ookuma twitching.

“Kurumi, you’re going too far.”

“Oh… Sorry! Got a bit carried away.”

At my prompt, Kurumi took a deep breath. Ookuma was staring at her, stunned. Kurumi flashed her a smile that was half mercy, half pity.

“I hate *you*, too! I need to make you understand our resistance is *not* just some game! But I also want to *save* you! Why don’t you get that?!”

“I didn’t…”

“Don’t tell me you can’t because you’re a grown-up, or because you’re a teacher. Spare me the platitudes. I’m talking to you—Kanae Ookuma. Join our resistance. Let’s get vengeance on this godforsaken school together!”

“……”

“Ms. Ookuma, I know you hate the teachers here, too. Nanaougi told you to join us as penance, but I disagree. This is for your own good. Make up your mind. You need this. It’s your salvation! Please.”

“……”

“If you don’t act, you’ll die. Your body or your soul—whichever goes first.”

“I… I…”

No further answer came. Ookuma just stood there, stiff as a board, eyes on Kurumi.

After a long moment, Nanaougi came running from the back door.

“Ren, Kurumi, time’s up! We’ve gotta bail!”

“Fine. C’mon, Kurumi.”

“…Right. Well, Ms. Ookuma. Goodbye.”

We fled using the route Nanaougi had secured, making sure no one spotted us.

We hadn't succeeded, but we hadn't failed either. This was the attack Kurumi had envisioned.

*

"What…? This is a disaster!"

I hear a voice form overhead. Has someone come to rescue me?

I look up and see the head teacher gawking. He must have heard the commotion and come running.

He's staring at the graffiti covering the gym, jaw hanging open.

Thank God. I'm saved.

If he takes over, everything will work out. I won't have to think anymore—about how schools should be or how teachers should act. To hell with it all. I'm only twenty-three—don't ask too much of me.

"Ms. Ookuma, what's the meaning of this? Explain the situation this instant!"

He comes over to me, and I just stand there.

"Students…with cans of spray paint. They ran off…"

"Good God! Why didn't you stop them, Ms. Ookuma?!"

"I tried! There were a whole bunch of them. What was I supposed to do?"

I hear a loud clap. A second later, my cheek feels hot, followed by a rush of throbbing pain.

He hit me. It takes several seconds for me to work out what happened.

"Who cares how many there were?! You see them, you stop them!" he screams, spitting in my face.

"D-don't ask the impossible! I can't work miracles!"

"This only happened because you never control your students!" he roars, raising his hand again.

Another clap, and my ears ring. I'm too stunned to move, one hand holding the cheek he just slapped.

Why? Why is this happening? Why is he hitting me? This doesn't make any sense.

"Argh, this year's just one problem after another! Get it together!"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"*Tch*, I don't wanna hear it. I told *you* to fix this!" Glaring at me, he runs his hands through his hair, not even trying to hide his anger. "Take care of this graffiti. *Now.* Then go find the culprits."

"Uh… They're…"

I know their names. Kurumi Hoshimiya, Ren Natsume, and Nana Nanaougi. I'm about to say as much, but the words stick in my throat. I hesitate.

Looking up at the head teacher, I find other words instead.

"Wh-what'll happen to—?"

"Isn't it obvious? They'll be expelled," he says. He doesn't even let me finish.

I figured as much. Their acts went against rules and ran counter to common sense. Of course the consequences would be dire. I knew they should all face the music.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder—would expelling them make this place any better? Was ridding ourselves of dissent and casting out those who didn't fit in truly the path to peace?

The abuse broadcast at the school festival, the graffiti with the severed heads, the itemized insult receipt, the "leaked" test answers—all of that carried a message about this school's flaws.

Are those students really in the wrong? I'm not sure.

Kurumi Hoshimiya put my own words in with her own feelings of rage against the school. She said they fit right in.

If I really am just like them, then ratting them out to the head teacher would be tantamount to betraying my own heart.

When I say nothing, he sighs.

"Listen, Ms. Ookuma, I don't *really* want to expel anyone."

"…Right! Of course not."

Yeah. I don't want to expel anyone, either.

But that's how things work. Society has rules, and they have to be followed.

"We won't be able to collect tuition from them, and it'll have a negative impact on next year's admissions. Plus, we'll have fewer

bullets to shoot at gates of the tough colleges. There isn't a single upside for us."

"…Um?"

I feel the bile rise in my throat.

Is he talking about our students? Like that, with those words?

I open my eyes wide and stare at him, gaze full of protest. He looks back at me, ice-cold.

"Ms. Ookuma, in this day and age, expelling problem students is no laughing matter."

"……"

"Your failure to keep them under control has destroyed their academic careers."

…What the hell is his problem?

I clench my jaw so hard, my teeth hurt.

Fuck off. Fuck off. This is not *my fault.*

Saigou High is technically a prep school of some repute. We didn't have any students who screwed around in junior high.

Of course.

"World's worst school! Daily insults! Test scores don't decide your worth! No more grades-based discrimination! This is madness! Human rights matter!"

Seeing that graffiti, thinking back on their attacks—I realize something.

It was the school itself that drove those students to do what they did.

So why was I getting blamed for it? This is nuts.

You're the one at fault. It's this school! Your awful system!

You've been doing the same shit since long before I got here. You're *to blame!*

"Now get rid of this graffiti. All of it. We can't start the assembly like this."

He shoves me away and leaves the gym.

As his footsteps fade, something rises inside me.

I've spent my life running away, but I still have a mind of my own.

I can’t put up with this. I don’t want to. I want to erase it from the world.

By the time I realize what I’m feeling is rage, my body is already on the move.

I get to my feet, run, and grab the head teacher.

“Fuck you! Fuck you! Who do you think you are?!”

“…?! Wh-what’s gotten into you, nitwit?!”

“Augh!”

I meant to sock him one. But as I get close, he shoves me away, and I land on my ass.

“What was that about, Ms. Ookuma?” He kneels down and grabs a fistful of my hair.

“Ugh… That hurts…!”

“This is why the students think they can get away with this crap!” he spits.

Then he snatches up a can of paint off the floor. He points it right at my face and presses the button, spraying me with black paint.

“Augh! Ahh! *Cough, cough*!”

“Oh, dear! Ms. Ookuma, you poor thing! You tried to stop some bad students and got spray paint in your face!”

“…?! You…you…!”

It galls me, but all I can do is splutter.

I’m scared. It hurts. I can’t even open my eyes.

“I won’t take further action on this matter. Wash your face and get back to work, imbecile.”

He throws the can at my stomach and stalks out of the gym.

“Urgh…unhhhhh…”

The whole world is black. My eyes are screwed shut, and only tears escape them. I can’t stop crying.

I’ve failed. Again. All I can do is lie here and cry.

“Wah…wahhhhhh…wahhhhhhh…”

My sobs echo through the empty gym.

But as I listen to my voice, it begins to sound like someone else’s.

I know I’m imagining it. I know. And yet—it doesn’t sound like me.

The more I listen, the more it sound like the voice of that girl.

"You hate this school just as much as we do."

Kurumi Hoshimiya. I think back to the words she flung at me.

"It's not enough if we don't get payback! Our hearts demand vengeance!"

…All right. I see. I get it. This is what they meant. This is why they want revenge.

"Let's get vengeance on this godforsaken school together!"

I feel a kind of heat at the back of my skull. An impulse I can't stave off, bubbling out from my core. I can't stop it.

Oh. Kurumi Hoshimiya was right. I never actually grew up.

If that scumbag is a grown-up, then I never want to be one.

Screw that noise. He slapped me! Twice! And now he's gonna pay.

Did it make sense? Was it justified? Sit and spin. I don't give a crap! None of that bullshit matters now!

I won't be satisfied until this godforsaken school pays!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Whaaaaaaat the heeeellllllll!"

I open my eyes and grab the paint can off the floor.

I can hear the pea rattling in the can.

*

The graffiti was still there when the start time arrived, so the Wrap-up Assembly never happened.

Word went around to the homeroom teachers that morning, canceling the event.

The worst summer curriculum in Saigou High history ended with a self-study period, and it was on that note that August 31 ended, giving way to September.


his school
sucks shit



Vacation was over, and normal classes resumed.

September 1, the first day back, ended after homeroom. After class, Kurumi and I went back to the Stargazing Club room. The mood was dire. We leaned back in our chairs, listening to the clock tick.

"…We really did it this time," Kurumi said, not sitting up.

"You mean revealing our names and faces?"

"Yeah. There's no talking our way out of this one."

She put her full weight against the back of the folding chair and spun her cat-eared cap on one finger. She was clearly feeling the pressure. I could tell from the moment I saw her.

"If that turns out to be our last attack, will you regret it?"

"Well… No," she said. "I still think it was the right thing to do." She tossed the cap into the air, caught it, and put it back on. "That attack was like a sparkler. A farewell to the summer. I just couldn't rest until she knew the names of some of the students harmed by this shit."

"Yeah, I'm with you there."

That's why I'd gone along with Kurumi's plan.

Ookuma had dismissed our hatred of the school. She needed to see how serious we were about it—and it wouldn't be enough to state our complaints from a safe distance, protected by anonymity. Kurumi was right—revealing ourselves was a necessary rite we had to undergo.

"…I don't regret it, but thinking about what comes next is still depressing."

"Yeah, I get that, too. I feel exactly the same."

If they knew our names and faces, the school would definitely step in to punish us. Suspension? Expulsion? Given our crimes, we might get even worse.

We'd talked about it on the phone that morning and prepared ourselves, but homeroom had come and gone with no

consequences, and the school day was already over. Now fear was catching up with us; we had no clue what was going on in the faculty room. We knew there was no use wondering, but our brains kept sketching up worst-case scenarios.

"…Natsume, let's make out." Kurumi didn't wait for an answer. She just leaned across the table.

She had a point. There was nothing like making out to distract us from our problems.

"Sure, I was feeling like it myself."

"Yes! Heh-heh. It feels like ages since we kissed in here."

"True. Guess it *has* been a while…"

"…And this might be our last chance."

"……"

I got off my chair and cupped her anxious face in my hands.

As we stared into each other's eyes, our lips touched, our tongues entwined, and then— —the door flew open.

"Ack! Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt *every* time," Nanaougi said, sailing right in without a trace of guilt.

Kurumi pulled away and sat back down in a huff. "…You again, Nanaougi? Knock next time."

"What's with the long faces? Bad news?"

"Not yet, but the teachers will have it in for us for sure," Kurumi said, pouting.

"Because you revealed your identities, you mean?" Nanaougi asked, blinking. "I don't think that'll be an issue."

"What? Nanaougi, don't act like you aren't in the same boat—…"

Kurumi trailed off, freezing up in her chair. My eyes went wide, too.

We had good reason to be shocked.

A short woman in a suit had followed Nanaougi into the clubroom. Long, wavy brown hair swayed behind her. It was Kanae Ookuma—the very person on all our minds.

"…What's up, freedom fighters? Is this your secret lair?" Ookuma asked, glaring through her lashes at us.

"We're doomed! Natsume, our time has come," Kurumi wailed, throwing her head back and looking up at the heavens above. She was practically beside herself.

…I see. So this is how it ends. We'd known revealing names and faces would leave us with nowhere to hide, but…we hadn't expected to meet our fates in the clubroom.

I would have preferred it to happen up on the roof, where I'd first met Kurumi. Maybe that was a bit pretentious, but it was also a sign I'd given up, resigned myself.

However, I soon noticed Ookuma's odd demeanor. She was glaring at us, but she didn't seem angry. Her eyes kept darting to the floor and back, like she was feeling guilty. It really didn't seem like she was here to arrest a couple of renegades.

"C'mon, Ms. Ookuma," Nanaougi gave her a push, and she took another step inside.

For a long moment, she stared at the floor. Then she took a deep breath, looked up, and stared right at us.

"First, let me make this clear—I haven't told the school who did it."

"…Huh? Why not?" Kurumi asked.

"I thought you were just trying to stir the pot," Ookuma said. "But on closer inspection, it's not that simple. Your actions are a cry for help. You're trying to shine a light on how messed up it is when teachers don't treat their students like people. You acted with purpose. Right?"

"Yes, that was the intent."

"…I couldn't justify expelling you for that. So I kept your names to myself. I told everyone I didn't know who was responsible for the graffiti."

Aha. That explains why we weren't nabbed on our way in this morning.

It was good news, but I wasn't ready to celebrate just yet. There had to be more to this, and I wasn't about to take it lying down.

"Letting us off the hook won't make us behave," Kurumi said, taking the words right out of my mouth. "If you're trying to cut a

deal to spare us in return for good behavior, you can forget it. If you let us go, we *will* attack again. Are you all right with that?"

"Go right ahead."

I'd expected her to come back at us with a speech about our parents, permanent records, and futures. But Ookuma just shrugged it all off.

"…You mean that?" Kurumi gaped. "You're okay with us staging more attacks?"

"Yeah, suit yourselves. I'd like to see this school go down in flames." I could detect no traces of uncertainty, and she wasn't finished, either. "I thought it through, and I've got no reason to stop you. I hate this school, too—and I've got it in for everyone responsible for these awful rules."

"Oh! You finally worked it out?! Exactly! You're merely wearing a teacher's mask!"

"Seeing you in action made me realize something. My head's been full of crap about what I should or shouldn't do—I was all hung up on convention. But none of that stuff matters. If you don't like someone, you should just punch them in the face."

"Yes! Precisely! Don't let yourself be satisfied with just scribbling complaints in some planner. Make *them* suffer, too!" Kurumi put up a finger to emphasize her point, and Ookuma nodded along.

She wasn't talking like a teacher at all. She must have had a real breakthrough. When I first saw her planner, I'd thought she was similar to me. But I'd never expected her to change her tune this fast.

Yesterday's attack had been a last-ditch effort, but as long as it had reached her, I was satisfied. She was just one more person who had been captured by Kurumi Hoshimiya's spell.

This was good… Well, to be precise, she'd finally gone *bad*.

While I sat there, impressed, Ookuma added, "So, I'm not gonna rat you out, but I do have a favor to ask."

"Oh? What? You're not gonna follow that up by making us empty our wallets, are you?"

Ookuma winced and waved Kurumi off. “No, no,” she said, looking embarrassed. “Just, uh… Mind if I join you?”

We all tensed up. Kurumi looked at me, and then back at Ookuma.

“Can we get a reason why?” she asked.

“This school sucks ass, and I decided I wanna bring it down, too.”

“…Fascinating.”

“And I have one boss in particular who I want to see *suffer*.”

“The head teacher?” Kurumi asked.

“That’d be telling,” Ookuma said, grinning. She made it sound like she had more than a few axes to grind. “Also…one thing you said really struck home.”

“…Specifically?”

“You said that if you had a teacher on your side, you could pull off something a lot bigger than you have so far. With my help, you could change this cesspit a lot faster.” Ookuma balled up her fist and stared down at it. “I’m a new hire, so no one’s gonna listen to me. They’ve been working here so long, they can’t tell right from wrong, and I wanna pound some morals into them.”

With that, her grim expression gave way to a self-deprecating grin.

“That’s all I got,” she said. “So what do you say? Am I in or out? If you still can’t trust me, I’ll sign a contract.”

I never expected her to go so far. It seemed like she was serious. Kurumi crooked her head, watching my reaction.

“Well, I think that’s a pretty good motive. Natsume, what do you say?”

“Might as well let her in. That *was* the original plan.”

“True. I was thinking the same. There you have it!” Kurumi hopped up off her chair and moved over to Ookuma. Then she flashed a mean-spirited grin and held out her hand. “I approve your membership. From now on, you’re our accomplice. Do your worst!”

“Yeah, I will. Down with grown-ups! Living life the proper way is dumb as hell. I’m over it.”

Kurumi and Ookuma clasped hands and shook on it.

Our whole future had been in doubt, but fortune had smiled upon us. Ookuma's change of heart had brought us in for a safe landing. I was glad this day hadn't ended in the headache I'd initially feared it would.

"We've got a new member, Natsume—let's party!"

"Sounds good. But it's almost time to go home."

"What, you're throwing me a welcome party?" asked Ookuma. "Why not hit up a diner, then?"

"Huh? Uh, okay. Does that mean we're buddy-buddy now?" Kurumi looked slightly taken aback by this closing of the gap.

Then, just as everything seemed settled, I realized we'd left one issue on the table. I looked over just in time to see Nanaougi breaking in to tap Kurumi on the shoulder.

"Does this mean I'm in, too?" she asked.

Kurumi froze up, then turned toward her, eyes like daggers. "What? In your dreams, toots."

"Aww. But you promised I could join if we flipped Ms. Ookuma."

"But it was *our* attack that sealed the deal, not yours, Nanaougi."

Kurumi was not mincing words. She really had it in for her. I wasn't too sure myself, but in the end, I threw Nanaougi a rope.

"Kurumi, would it really be that bad?"

"Wha—?! What ails you, Natsume?! Did she win you over with that kiss?!"

What kiss?! I mean, we did kiss… But that didn't influence my decision!

"Nanaougi exposed her identity before either of us did. I still don't know what she's thinking, or why she's so hell-bent on joining our cause. But it's clear her commitment is genuine."

"Hng… Fine… I'll concede that point."

"And she *did* secure an escape route while we were spray-painting graffiti. I don't think it would hurt to keep her around. At least for a little while."

Kurumi looked back at Nanaougi—well, it was more like a threatening glare. Then, after about twenty seconds, she sighed. "…

Fine, Nanaougi. You can be a *provisional* member."

"Whoo! Thanks, Kurumi."

Nanaougi tried to rub her head, but Kurumi slapped her hand away.

"Stop that! Do not touch me!"

It might be a while before Kurumi warmed up to her; she'd really emphasized the word "provisional."

"With this many people, we really *will* need to hold the welcome party at a restaurant. We can't exactly send Nanaougi home now. We'll need to find a place where we won't run into any other students…"

"We shouldn't run into anyone familiar out where I live," Ookuma said. "Should I make a reservation?"

"Where were you thinking? It can't be anywhere pricey."

"Don't worry about it. I can cover a larger share."

Kurumi and Ookuma put their heads together over a smartphone screen, whooping it up. Neither one of them were very tall, and they kind of looked like a pair of junior high school kids. Not that I was going to tell them that—they'd chew my head off.

Soon, they settled on a destination, and Kurumi turned back to us and raised her hand.

"Okay, so starting around six, we're gonna throw a party for Nana and Koguma!"

"Er, wait, Kurumi, what'd you call us?" asked Ookuma.

"Nanaougi is a mouthful, and *you* don't really feel like a teacher, so I figured I'd better give you both nicknames." Kurumi pointed at each in turn. "Nanaougi's name has a double 'Nana,' so that one's obvious. And Ookuma's name, which sounds like 'big bear,' is clearly not appropriate. I know the second character doesn't really mean 'bear,' but since it sounds the same, I figured we could use 'Koguma' for 'cub.' Neat, right?"

She seemed proud of herself. And by Kurumi's standard, these were decent names. But did they approve?

I looked over to gauge their reactions, but neither of them seemed especially against it.

"Call me whatever," said Nanaougi. "I don't care what name you use."

"I'm fine with it, too. Koguma sounds kinda cute, actually."

…Okay. If they're on board, then I have nothing more to say.

"Incidentally, I'm way too used to Natsume to call you anything else, Natsume."

"That's fine. If you suddenly started calling me Ren, it'd feel pretty weird."

"Oh, would it, now? Then maybe I should sneak attack you with it every once in a while. Just hit you with a 'Ren' outta nowhere!" Kurumi had a hand over her mouth, giggling.

I'm still her upperclassman! Then again, I wasn't gonna object, no matter what Kurumi called me.

"Ahem… So let's make it official! Welcome to the resistance, ladies!"

Kurumi flashed her mean-spirited grin as she raised a fist into the air.

We all formed a circle and bumped knuckles.

It was September. A summer full of expectation had come to an end, and now we were rolling headfirst into winter.

Kurumi Hoshimiya. Ren Natsume. Nana Nanaougi. Kanae Ookuma.

Our resistance had doubled in size, and we were only just getting started.

EPILOGUE

Nanaougi flirtily tried to feed me something, and Kurumi blew her top, while Koguma decided to mix all the sodas in the drink bar like a child.

Those were hardly the only incidents, but overall, the party was a lot of fun.

"Okay, that was a blast, but it's time we went our separate ways."

It was past nine when Kurumi's speech brought the party to a close.

"Okay, I'm on my bike from here," Koguma announced. "Kids, be careful on your way home. Bye-bye!"

We'd moved to the parking lot outside the restaurant, and Koguma hopped on a blue motorcycle and drove away, engine purring.

She's a biker? That's a shocking reveal. Her bike was way too big for her tiny frame. It felt more like *it* was riding *her*. She looked like a little kid on a horse at the fair.

"Guess we'd better head out, too," said Kurumi.

There was no use standing there, staring after the motorcycle, so the three of us started walking beneath the starry sky. We headed down darkened roads to the nearest train station.

Once there, we tapped our transit cards at the gates and stepped into the eerily bright station.

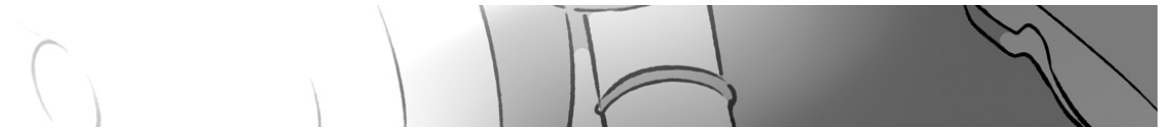
"Natsume, the line we need is over… Oh."

Kurumi had been checking the train info on her phone when she suddenly looked up.

"Sorry," I said. "I have to take line three."

"Right…different trains. Ah-ha-ha… Guess I forgot. Apologies."





I couldn’t blame her. It had been ages since we’d taken different paths home. But with the end of summer vacation, we could no longer live together. It was weirdly unnerving.

We hadn’t had a falling out. The old café was simply open for business again, so Kurumi was no longer house-sitting. For that reason, we had both gone back to living in our own houses.

“I handled it so well when you were packing up and leaving. Somehow, little moments like this are even worse. The sudden realization that I’ve lost you just hit me, and… Augh, I’m gonna cry!”

“I can see the tears in your eyes. Think you’ll make it?”

“If I say I won’t, will you fix things?” She smiled sadly, her voice trembling.

I wiped her tears and smiled back. “Call me if you get the chance to live alone again. I’ll grab my things and come right over.”

“Not just for the night! You have to move in.”

“I know, I know. I will. It’ll be just you and me. But for now, you’ll have to make do.”

“For now…? Eww… Hngg… Okay, fine. Fair enough. But I’m holding you to that promise.”

She got her little finger around mine and sealed the deal.

Our eyes met. She had on that alluring look she’d often give me just before we went to bed. The mood seemed right, and I was considering giving her a kiss when— “Oh, Ren! I’m taking line three, too! The train’s just coming in, we’d better go!”

—Nanaougi burst in between us, completely shattering the mood. Kurumi was aghast.

“…*Tch*, Nana, this is why I can’t stand you.”

“Huh? What? Yikes, Kurumi, you look ready to kill!”

“Nana, get ready. You’re in for some payback—and I don’t mean the kind we’re getting on the school.” Kurumi stalked off toward her train, visibly fuming.

"What put a bee in her bonnet?" asked Nanaougi. "Oh well. Doesn't matter. The train's here! Come on, Ren."

"…Yeah, sure."

Would Kurumi be mad at me later? Was this kosher?

We took the stairs down to line three. Nanaougi was right; the train had already arrived. We waited for a few people to get off, then stepped inside together. There were a few empty seats, but we elected to stand by the doors.

"Today was fun," she said. "Things are getting lively." Nanaougi was leaning against the door, watching the landscape speed by.

"True. It feels like so long ago that it was just me and Kurumi."

"Do you wish you could go back?"

"…Part of me does."

She laughed at that and offered a shallow apology. Then she turned back toward the window. "I can't wait to see what we pull off next."

"……"

I took a good look at her profile. Despite her tone, her eyes weren't smiling at all.

Maybe now I could ask. She'd joined the cause, and it was just the two of us here.

Making it sound off the cuff, I tossed the ball to her.

"Wanna start by taking the student council down a notch?"

The air froze. The train was picking up speed, but I felt as though there was a bubble around us where time had stopped.

After a beat, Nanaougi turned toward me, looking surprised. She blinked a few times, then offered a resigned smile. "Ren, how much do you actually know?"

…Good question. I had a hunch, but not much to back it up. That was why I'd made that pass. When I kept staring at her in silence, Nanaougi looked amused.

"Good. Excellent. I might really be falling for you, Ren."

"……"

"Fine, since you're being such a badass, I'll loosen my lips a little."

But what she said next was completely unrelated.

"I'm well aware I was born talented in every way that matters. But there's one thing for which I have no knack whatsoever. You know what that is?" She phrased it like a question, but didn't pause at all. "Alcohol."

"No knack…for alcohol?"

"Exactly. None at all."

Did she mean she was bad at mixing cocktails?

But then Nanaougi explained, and I saw it was something much more basic.

"I have no tolerance for booze at all. I was born that way. They did a patch test, and my arm turned bright red. It runs in the family; my parents and grandparents are all lightweights."

So this was a physical issue. I'd read somewhere that alcohol tolerance wasn't something you could build up with practice, so arguably, how well a person could handle their liquor was a "talent."

But what was she trying to tell me with this?

"Alcohol is poison—the easiest one in the world to get your hands on. It induces nausea and drowsiness, and it makes it hard to pass even the simplest test problems. That's what it does to me, at least."

"……"

"You remember those loud girls at the graveyard? They're on the Saigou High Student Council now, but before that, we were all at the same cram school. In the same advanced class. We were all shooting for the same high school—one affiliated with a famous college, and we all went to the same test venue."

Oh, okay. I see where this is going. So that's what this is about.

"They envied me. You can guess the rest, right, Ren?"

Nanaougi turned toward me, eyes filled with quiet fury.

"I need payback. For dragging me down into this pigpen of a school."

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for picking up *Recommendations for Bad Children*, Vol. 2.

This is a new writer's debut work, and I have to admit, it leaves a bit of a bad aftertaste. Appreciating a story like that enough to pick up a sequel makes you a person of refined sensibility, and I respect that with all my heart.

What's your favorite song? What was the hardest thing you've been through? Forgive me for hoping you value those sentiments.

Let me introduce myself. I am Setsuka Narumi. My favorite season is summer.

When I finished writing the first volume, I spent some time crying alone in my room. These were neither tears of triumph nor tears of joy, but tears of absence and loss.

I heard back about the price in January. After several revisions, it was published in December.

For almost a year—more than that, considering the time spent on the submission draft—I went about my life thinking only of Ren and Kurumi. And when I was finally done, it felt like I alone was left behind in the real world. And I missed them more than my heart could bear.

There are many reasons why people write—or read—but I have only one: This world is filled with hardship, and I just don't want to

be in it. Ideally, I'd love to live inside a story, thinking only of it. That's all. No, more accurately, that *was* all.

If you, reading this, have moments when you wish to escape reality, then open my books and let yourself breathe. Make use of the place I created so that I might live.

Unlike the tortoise at the zoo, we've got no shells to hide within, no nice zookeepers around to pick us up when we fall. This is the only way we can survive.

Don't worry. My stories and I are always on your side.

Now, on to formalities.

To my editor, thank you so much for your patience revising this manuscript. I was allowed a lot of leeway on both volumes of *Recommendations for Bad Children*, but if it came together as a proper novel, that was entirely down to the efforts of my editor.

To ALmic, the illustrator: Thank you so much for bringing these characters to life. I'm sure many people picked this work up due to the siren call of your art, and I am extremely glad I asked you to illustrate the series.

Finally, for all of you who up picked up Volume 2—I hope that tomorrow will be better than today.

Setsuka Narumi

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