

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR **BAD CHILDREN**



1 Setsuka Narumi

Illustration by: ALmic

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RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR **BAD CHILDREN**



"Your last protest didn't work,
but don't worry—
this time I'll lead the way."

Each time a pin fell, Kurumi Hoshimiya's indomitable grin grew broader. A pale gleam shone from beneath her black bob. The underlayer of her hair was ash gray. Kurumi Hoshimiya had dyed it, then used a bunch of hairpins in the back to keep the dyed portion hidden.

"Well? Surprised?"

KURUMI HOSHIMIYA



"Excuse me, Natsume."

"Huh? Mmph?!"

Something soft sealed my lips.

"Gasp! Kurumi...?"

"Don't speak."

Not another word. Mm!"

REN NATSUME



"Kurumi...!"

"...Oh. Hey there,
Natsume. Long
time no see."

"Festival visitors,
please enjoy the
sounds of daily life
at Saigou High."

The background is a stylized illustration of a school hallway. In the upper right, a sign reads "VENGEANCE UPON THIS SCHOOL!!" with a drawing of a person. Above it, another sign says "NO MORE SWEET Idiots". To the right, a sign partially shows "MASTER OF". In the lower left, a piece of paper titled "NOTES ON REVENGE" is visible. Another paper nearby says "Idiot 2 / 10 Piss off". A third paper has a table with numbers and text: "Class # 21", "English Expressions 1A", "due on", "Go back to middle school", and "do".

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Presented by Setsuka Narumi

Illustrated by ALmic

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New York



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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 1

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PROLOGUE

The deep blue of the summer sky flickered before my eyes. Each time I blinked, the world turned white. I tried to catch my breath and failed. Panic was overheating my body as fear put my pulse in overdrive.

“Well, if worse comes to worst, we’ll die together,” said the girl next to me.

Her face, too, was twisted in fear. Mine was likely no different. We were on the roof, on the wrong side of the fence. Perched on the ledge, one step from death’s embrace.

“Kurumi, you’re okay. You’ll be okay,” I said, gently stroking the back of her hand.

Kurumi blinked at me, then snorted, an awkward smile crossing her lips.

“Heh, trying to imitate me? I’m not the least bit comforted by you rubbing my hand.”

Oh, looks like I blew it. Guess there’s only one thing I can do to ease her mind.

With my free hand, I snatched away her newsboy hat.

I leaned closer, bringing my face up to hers. Our lips met, then our tongues entwined.

“Mm...mmph... Mm...unh...”

This wasn’t just a kiss; it was terrorism. We felt each other’s breath, body heat, and desolation through the wet inner walls of our mouths. I wondered if Kurumi could even pick up my thoughts.

I’d always wanted to be *someone*. I was sensitive, easily hurt, and terrible at dealing with other people. I possessed a frustrating awkwardness I’d long

wanted to slap a label on, whether that label turned out to be the name of some special skill or a medical diagnosis. I didn't care which—I just needed to define this thing I'd been born with.

“Natsu...me! ...*Gasp*. Heh-heh... You sure went for that kiss. Damn.”

A trail of spit dangled between her lips and mine.

I always felt that obscene strand proved that she perceived me as *me*.

“Our time's almost up. Are you ready, Kurumi?”

“I am. Let's do this, Natsume.”

Kurumi nodded, and I put one arm around her. Then I jumped. We launched into the air, then plummeted toward the ground.

This was no double suicide. This was an escape so that we could reach tomorrow alive.

Like our kiss, this fall was our questionable idea of a happy ending.



We fell,
guided by gravity.

Clinging to each other,
as the wind rushed by.

That day, I felt as if
I'd finally found myself.

I felt as if
the girl I fell with...

...had found
the real me.

ACT ONE

In Japan, they say smoke and fools prefer high places. The teachers here unanimously agreed that I was a fool, so I decided I'd once again escape to the closest place to the sky.

The school day ended with homeroom. Once the teacher finished announcements and wrapped things up, we were free.

"There isn't one brain cell between the whole lot of you! Stop playing around! No more clubs! Quit school right now or drop dead! Give me a damn second's peace! Okay, that's all. If you failed to turn in your homework, stay behind."

With that, our teacher stormed out of the room. My classmates started opening their study books, zombielike.

Eyeing them, I quietly rose from my seat. My untouched homework still at the bottom of my backpack, I sailed right out the door. I didn't want to spend another second in that hellhole.

I mingled with the crowd headed for the restrooms. Then, dodging the teachers' line of sight, I followed my usual route.

I went all the way down the hall, then up a dimly lit stairwell. Up and up I went, turning at every landing, until I reached the very top. Once there, I pushed through the steel door.

A pleasant breeze hit my face, and the world opened up before me.

I could see the evening sky above, studded with clouds, and below it an expanse of filthy tiles. Between the two was a line of fencing, only slightly taller than I was.

This was the school roof—a place supposedly off-limits to students.

I stepped through the door and closed it behind me. After settling down against a nearby wall, I pulled a cigarette from my pocket, placed it between my lips, and held up my lighter. The tip of the cigarette glowed red, then black, then white. I breathed in. I didn't fully inhale, just let the smoke play around in my mouth.

"Whew..."

I exhaled, and the smoke escaped upward. The sky was all Halloween tones—orange and navy blending together. The smoke felt like a stain on its innocence, and I relished this act of sacrilege.

I took another drag on the cigarette. Inhale... Exhale...

In elementary school, I learned how not to fit in.

In junior high, I learned how to sleep through class.

And now in high school, I was learning how to smoke.

I'd come up here to the roof to kill time puffing on a cigarette I'd swiped from my dad's study. Some people might look at me and think I'm an idiot. Others might call me a worthless piece of shit.

But the act of smoking meant something to me—Ren Natsume—and I wasn't about to stop breaking the law.

The sun was setting, but I could still feel its heat. Lately, temperatures had been steadily rising.

I think it was around the start of April when I first noticed they'd left the roof door unlocked. I supposed that meant I'd been sneaking up here for a couple of months now.

Time flies, I thought, but this place hasn't changed much.

I was all alone up here. No one else ever came. Up on the roof, time seemed to stop.

"Quit school or drop dead, huh?"

I pulled the cigarette from my lips and let the smoke escape. I exhaled slowly,

like I was breathing out all my stress, letting it thin out and expand until it melted into the surrounding air.

I stared vacantly at the rising smoke. This moment was all mine, no one here to interrupt. How much easier would it be if I could dissolve into the sky just like the smoke from my cigarette? I flicked the ash from the end and brought it back to my lips for another drag.

Just then, there was a gust of wind, and I heard a *creak* from right beside me.

Metal grinding against metal. It was a nasty sound, for two different reasons.

The first was the awful noise itself—and the second was that it meant someone else was up here.

“Shit...!”

By the time the word escaped my lips, it was already too late. They’d already stepped out through the door to my side.

I had no time to hide the cigarette, much less myself. All I managed to do was nod awkwardly in greeting. And as I did, my eyes met those of the intruder.

“Uh... ’Sup,” I said.

“...Come on, now. Don’t give me that. How can you be such a stereotypical slacker at a prep school? I’m shocked!”

Her slippers were red. She was a first-year.

She had long lashes and eyes that gleamed like black quartz. Her hair was black, and her lips a pale pink. A bob cut framed her roundish baby face. She was on the short side and didn’t wear makeup. A basic, natural kind of cute—the little sister type.

Dammit. I’d assumed no one else would ever come up here, and I’d let my guard down. I should have kept an eye out.

She seemed like a good student. Why was she even here? I was relieved it wasn’t a teacher...but what should I do about her?

“...Um,” the girl began, staring down at me. “I don’t mean to pry, but is there a reason you’re smoking?”

“...Er, huh? Um...what? A reason?”

“Yeah. Unless my eyes are deceiving me, you appear to be smoking a cigarette.”

“...Well, yeah. I guess I am,” I said, a little rattled.

The girl fixed me with a grave look.

“It looks like you’re all on your own. You’re not trying to impress anyone, yet you *are* risking being caught by the faculty. I figured there must be some reason, and I’d like to hear what it is.”

Wasn’t she digging a little deep? We’d only just met.

“Who cares? Why does that matter?”

“It’s a simple psychological test. Please, indulge me.”

The girl never took her eyes off me. Her gaze was completely earnest.

Weird... Wasn’t she afraid? Did she really mean to pry an answer out of me?

I supposed it was better than getting yelled at or snitched on, at least. I might as well give her an answer and send her packing.

“The teachers here hang out next to the shoe boxes so they can nab anyone who didn’t do their homework and make them stay after class. So I’m killing time until school hours are over.”

“I fail to see the connection to smoking.”

“.....”

Inside, I was shaking a fist at the sky. What a stroke of bad luck.

Psychological test, my ass. Just leave me alone.

I might as well just tell her. Ignoring her would probably be more trouble than it was worth. I let out a puff of smoke, and then I gave her the real reason.

“Smoking up here relaxes me. I find it refreshing.”

“You can’t even wait till you get home? Sounds like you’re just addicted.”

“I’m not addicted. I don’t even let the smoke reach my lungs.”

The girl gave me a look, as if demanding clarification.

“I hate this school,” I said.

“...Oh-ho.”

“Even a first-year like you must know by now. This place only cares about grades. The teachers spew insults at you if you don’t keep up. Students in the top-scoring classes treat those in the lower-ranking classes like dirt. Here, your academic performance and grades are the only things that count. I can’t stand it.”

“Hmm. I’m with you so far. Please go on.”

“Like you said, this is a prep school—no one else smokes. So if I come up here and pull out a cigarette, I feel like I’ve hit rock bottom, and it puts me at ease. All the teachers who scream at me for failing a few tests or for not turning in my homework start seeming like total idiots. I’m mocking the academic discrimination that rules this school. It lets me vent my frustration.”

I meant every word. That was my shallow, foolish reason for lighting up at school. Killing time until I could leave was just an excuse, a secondary motive. My main motivation was to rebel. It felt good to break the rules behind the teachers’ backs.

Yeah, I know. Smoking is terrible. But I had to relieve my stress somehow.

This stupid high school had me making lots of bad decisions. I faked illness to stay home, flunked tests, and almost got held back a year. It was leading me on a path to ruin.

So why shouldn’t I smoke, too? I wasn’t doing anything else right. How would a few cigarettes change anything?

I wondered if the girl was satisfied with this glimpse into my slacker mind.

She had her arms folded, one hand on her chin—a thinking pose. She nodded several times and muttered, as if talking to herself. “Venting...”

It didn’t take long before her gaze was back on me. She fixed me with an icy expression and nodded once.

“Okay, okay. I think I get the gist, thanks. So you’re a *pussy*.”

“...What? Hey, wait a minute!”

The girl, who had stalked off across the roof, spun back toward me. “What? You want something from me?”

Crap. Her prickly response had baffled me, and I’d called out to her without thinking.

“Uh, just... Um, what was that all about? What do you mean, I’m a pussy?”

“I mean what I said. You hate this school, so you smoke to rebel. But you don’t want to fight the teachers, so you do it in secret. That’s the long and the short of it, right?”

“No... Well, yes. Basically.”

“I get why you can’t stand this place. I fully understand your frustrations with the top-ranked students and the way our teachers talk. I get it! But...” She added a lot of emphasis to that *but*. “All you’re doing is sneaking a smoke. Really? You might as well sit around fantasizing about beating them up. You’re not *actually* doing anything. You’re just sulking, like a pussy.”

“Um, excuse me?”

Her language was so caustic, my brow was starting to twitch.

Maybe I *was* just lashing out at people in my head. But getting called a pussy by a total stranger rankled me. I’d done what I could, fought back the right way.

“Don’t talk shit about people you don’t even know,” I snapped. “Sure, I’m just blowing off steam. Smoking is a feeble way to rebel against this awful school. But I *did* do something real once.”

“Oh? And what was that?”

“...I lodged a protest... I told the teachers it was messed up to hurl abuse at students and put them down just because they got bad grades.”

Her eyes shifted. They didn’t quite widen, but—and I’m not sure if this is the right way to put it—her gaze went from that of someone looking at garbage to that of someone looking at a fellow human.

“Sorry, can you elaborate?” she said.

“Well, lemme see...” I’d blurted all that out in anger, so I figured I might as well tell her the rest. “This was two months ago, at the start of the year. I was all stressed out from being screamed at, so I approached one of the more reasonable teachers. I said, ‘I’d like you to soften your language. If this kind of abuse keeps up, I’ll have to take legal action.’”

“Oh-ho. You said that? And how’d that work out for you?”

“Well, since I’d officially approached the teacher and spoken with them seriously, they agreed to my request and relayed it to the rest of the faculty, just as I’d asked.”

“Mm-hmm. And?”

“From that day forth, the abusive language stopped.”

The girl’s eyes went wide. “What, really? At this school? That’s a miracle. Good for you.”

“It wasn’t.” My voice was louder than I expected. I took a drag on the cigarette and calmed myself down. “The abuse stopped, all right. But *only* when directed at *me*.”

She went quiet, mentally running over what I’d said. After a moment, she seemed to catch on.

“Aha,” she said, grimacing. “So they’re still screaming at everybody else, then?”

“Exactly. The kids in front and back of me are still getting yelled at and told they’re worthless. I’m the sole exception... That wasn’t what I’d been asking for at all.” Two months ago, when I’d realized that, it had crushed me. “They’d heard my arguments, and they hadn’t changed their minds in the slightest. They simply saw me as a liability and started giving me special treatment.”

“Ah... That sucks.”

The girl’s lips twisted into a mean sort of smile, but she didn’t seem to be jeering at me. Perhaps this was her way of offering me comfort.

I closed my eyes and continued. “Things only got worse from there. Since I was getting preferential treatment, my classmates turned against me, and I

wound up an outcast.”

“Oh dear. And right after moving up a grade and changing classes. You were probably the common enemy they all bonded over.”

“Maybe. I wouldn’t know.”

They were all dancing to the faculty’s warped tune; I didn’t give a damn what they thought.

“I smoke as a way to fight back. I protested properly and got nowhere, so I gave up and started smoking. See?”

“Entirely. Thank you. I take back what I said.” She bowed, but the mean smile was still on her face.

“Oh, uh...fine, then. Sorry, guess you just hurt my pride.”

I hadn’t expected a proper apology. What was her deal anyway? She’d maintained a poker face until just a little while ago, and now she was smiling and bowing low. The word *schadenfreude* floated through my brain, but I didn’t feel like it applied to her.

“So even proper protests mean nothing, huh? This place is rotten to the core...,” she said, walking slowly to the fence next to me. She hooked her fingers in the mesh and gazed dismally at the schoolyard below.

As I stared at her profile, I spoke up despite myself. “Tell me something.”

She tilted her head to the side. “What?”

“Why did you come up here? The roof’s technically off-limits to students. You called me a slacker, but you’re breaking the same rules I am.”

“Hardly. I’m not here to smoke.”

“Okay, so half the rules, then.”

“Fair enough,” she admitted, her eyes downcast. “I guess if my sin is the same as yours, so is my motive.”

“You’re being evasive. What is that supposed to mean?”

“I got fed up and fled here.”

“Ha-ha... Then I guess you are just like me.”

I felt like I finally understood what she’d meant by “a psychological test.”

Our eyes met, and a gust of wind blew past.

“Want one?” I asked, holding out the blue carton of cigarettes.

“No thanks,” she said, indifferent.

I was half disappointed, half relieved as I flicked the ash from the end of my cigarette.

“I dunno what happened to you,” I said, “but I bet it sucked.”

“Yeah. It did.”

“Don’t wind up like me. Here’s hoping you get through your three years here without breaking down.”

That was the best I could offer an underclassman who’d picked this dogshit school.

But her next words derailed all my encouragement.

“It’s fine. I’m gonna drop out.”

“Pfff! *Koff, koff!* Ugh, bleh.”

My coughing fit got worse and worse. She’d caught me so off guard I’d accidentally let smoke into my lungs.

“You okay?” she asked, leaning in.

I waved her off and managed to squeeze out, “You’re quitting? You really mean that?”

“Yep. Here, proof.”

She reached into her skirt pocket—I kept my cigarettes in the same pocket on my pants—and pulled out a rolled-up brown envelope. She unfolded the piece of paper inside and showed it to me. The field for her name was blank, but the words at the top clearly read, “Withdrawal Request.”

“...I’ve never seen one of those before,” I said. “Guess that means you’re serious.”

“Like I said, dead serious.”

She put away the paper, clearly failing to understand what I was surprised about. Apparently, dropping out wasn't that big a deal to her.

She was really going for it, then. *Damn. I guess that's why she called me a pussy.*

“The teachers here don't think twice before telling you to drop dead, and they even make derogatory remarks about your appearance,” she said, shaking her head. “No, those people aren't *teachers*. They don't have a shred of humanity left. It doesn't matter how impressive their credentials are. There's nothing anyone could learn from that pack of assholes.”

I mostly—no, I *entirely* agreed with her. *The faculty here should really rethink who deserves to get screamed at.*

This exchange perked me up a bit. I was pleased to know someone else here understood.

“Since they can't teach me anything, I decided to voluntarily withdraw,” she concluded.

“Okay... Well, consider me impressed. I respect your decisiveness.”

“Come on. I don't deserve your praise. I'm *dropping out*, remember?”

Despite her dismissive attitude, I genuinely thought she was amazing.

In fact, after seeing that withdrawal form, skulking around on the roof with a cigarette felt pathetic. I *was* a pussy. A complete loser. *This sucks.*

“...No,” I said. “I think you're really something.”

Let me say it again. From this moment, I began to admire this girl whose name I didn't even know.

But just admiring someone won't change your life or anything. The best I could do right now was stub out the butt of my cigarette in my little portable ashtray.

Once that was done, I put the ashtray back in my pocket and looked up at her.

“When are you leaving?”

“I’m thinking it’ll be right before summer vacation. I’ve got the form now, but the paperwork’s gonna be a hassle.”

“So two more months? Well, uh... Hang in there.”

“But of course.”

She nodded, then turned to look down at the school grounds again. I could see a strong light in her eyes as they reflected the colors of the sky—orange and navy fighting for dominance on their surface. She looked determined but also a little lost.

“.....”

“.....”

As silence fell over us, she pulled a phone from her skirt pocket and checked the time.

“I’m heading out before the school closes for the night,” she said, before turning back toward the door.

“Hey,” I said, calling out to her retreating figure. “Will you come back here?”

She stopped with her hand on the knob, then turned back to face me.

“Do you want me to?”

I hadn’t expected a question. What was the right answer here? I didn’t know.

“Heh-heh, why are you so rattled?” Seeing me at a loss, she flashed me that mean smile again. “Don’t worry. I’m never coming here again.”



The school I attended—Saigou High—was a private prep school.

But it wasn’t just any prep school—it was a *good* one, boasting some of the highest percentiles in the nation. And it was founded by the Saigou Corporation, one of largest businesses in Japan. In other words, it was a big-name school.

They had a reputation for sending students to higher education, too. In fact, they sent ten or more students on to Tokyo’s most famous university every year. They were shooting for twenty this year, and their success rate was

climbing. Their reputation was rock solid.

Saigou High was a top-tier prep school run by a top-tier corporation.

...Or it looked that way from the outside anyway.

In reality, the school was a pointless, inferior institution with no redeeming traits whatsoever. And one student deciding to withdraw wasn't going to change that. The day after I spoke with that mysterious girl on the roof, my school was still run by bile-spewing dirtbags, just like it always had been.

"Okay, let's start first period."

Everyone stood, gave the teacher their attention, and bowed. This was the standard greeting. Once we sat back down, our math teacher blasted us with *his* standard greeting.

"Anyone not done with your homework, stand up."

This was routine for the students, too. The sound of chairs sliding back echoed through the classroom. There were so many people standing, I couldn't see the front of the room.

Thirty-seven students had risen. I knew right away—even an elementary schooler could do arithmetic this simple. Forty minus three. There were forty students in our class, and only three students were still sitting. Only *three* had managed to finish their homework.

Roaming through the room, our teacher sighed. "All right, we'll start from you, on the end. Say what you didn't finish."

The "Unfinished Homework Report" was a fixture of Saigou High.

The student up front explained their progress. They weren't done correcting the quiz from last week. They hadn't finished the workbook from page thirteen to the current page, forty-seven. They hadn't finished Math I from page seventy to the end. Each student rattled this off, totally used to it.

Pacing the room, the teacher responded to each report with spite.

"If you can't finish your homework, quit your club. Your adviser's telling you the same thing! Why are you still playing soccer? Sports are a luxury reserved for those with nothing better to do!"

The teacher's complaints varied from person to person. If they only criticized your membership in a club or a sports team, you could count yourself lucky.

"You still haven't gotten past page sixty in Math I?! Get it together! Do you think if you ignore the first-year material long enough it'll just go away? Quit the crap, or I'll blow your brains out. If you have any, that is. Next."

For most people, it was general criticism and death threats.

"You can't manage your homework, and you haven't even finished your assignments from last summer! You're a total failure as a human. I'd love to see your parents. I mean, with a kid like this, it's a wonder they even function in society."

When it got really bad, they'd extend the abuse to your family.

"Why do you look so confident, moron?! You think I'm gonna let you off with work like this?!"

Sometimes, the teacher would even kick students' desks.

...Man, this school was worthless. Rotten to the core. How many more times would I have to sit through this ritual today? Just the thought of it made me sick.

"Hmph. Put your desk back in line. It's in the way. Next."

Naturally, I hadn't finished my homework, either. My turn came five minutes in. The teacher arrived at my desk, where I was standing, just like everyone else.

"....."

"....."

We stood there for a moment, deadlocked. Our eyes met. He glared at me like I was an insect.

"I have nothing to say to you, Natsume. You may sit."

He spoke with utter contempt, and I sat back down.

I felt eyes on the back of my head but wasn't sure if it was the teacher, unsatisfied that he hadn't gotten to chew me out, or the other students who somehow saw this as preferential treatment. Honestly, I didn't want to know.

The reports went on, as did the abuse. More desks were kicked.

A huge chunk of class time was wasted on this public humiliation, just like always.

“Right, today’s assignment is page forty-seven to page fifty. Those who still haven’t turned in older assignments, stay after school. If you don’t, I’ll blow your brains out, so you better shape up!”

Let me assure you, our math teacher was no special case. This approach was the standard at our “top-tier” prep school.

Every student here had to put up with abuse from basically every teacher. Every one of them had their humanity denied each day. All of them except me, that is. And at this point, none of them even saw the situation as messed up anymore.

It had been a year and two months since I entered Saigou High, but I still couldn’t get used to this madness.



Naturally, there was a reason things had gotten this bad.

In general, Saigou had a good reputation as a prep school. But in our prefecture, things were a little different. Here, it was the first-choice *backup* school.

Any students in this area trying to slip through the eye of the needle and get into, say, a famous university’s affiliate high school would sit for the exams at Saigou, just in case their efforts proved futile. This place was their insurance policy.

As a result, Saigou High had wound up collecting all the losers—students who’d aimed high and come up short.

These were kids who’d spent their lives studying just like their parents wanted, convinced they were gifted. And then, with all that parental pressure riding on their backs, they’d crashed and burned. And now they were filling the halls at Saigou.

In other words, everyone here had a chip on their shoulder.

The faculty had no faith in the students. They didn't believe anyone who failed their high school entrance exams was capable of self-motivated studying, and they didn't expect their grades to improve. So their language got harsh. They chewed the students out and tried to force them to study, twisting their arms in the hopes of getting as many of them as possible into college. After all, the school's reputation was riding on it.

And the students, with their humiliating defeat festering inside them, saw nothing wrong with the teachers' behavior. In their minds, getting yelled at for bad grades was totally normal.

The teachers didn't trust the students, and the students didn't trust themselves.

And all of them were trapped inside the crucible of Saigou High, their values steadily warping. The classrooms, hallways, and even the students' routes to and from school were all shrouded in gloom and stress.

In other words, this school was hell on earth.



At lunch, I headed to the cafeteria for the first time in nearly a year.

I usually just choked down a nutrition bar, but I'd overslept and hadn't had time to grab one at the convenience store on my way in.

But since fourth period had run late, by the time I made it to the school shop, nearly all the food was sold out. I'd had to skip breakfast after waking up late that morning, and if I missed lunch, too, I wasn't sure I'd make it through the day.

I fretted about it for a minute, then turned to the cafeteria—a place I'd long avoided.

Ugh. Guess I have no choice. Luck is just not on my side today.

The cafeteria was on the first floor, and there was a huge line stretching out from the ticket machines outside the door. I had a long wait ahead of me.

Shrugging, I planted myself at the end of the line and patiently waited my turn.

Once I arrived at the machine, I grabbed a ticket for cold udon and headed inside.

I handed the lunch lady my ticket, and not long after, my dish came out.

“Here you go,” she said. “Come again.”

Putting this standard-issue meal on my tray, I headed toward the seating area.

I looked around for an open seat and was reminded of why I’d been avoiding this place.

Saigou High’s lunchroom had an unwritten rule. Specifically, the terrace and the sunny seats by the windows belonged to the students in the top-scoring classes. Everyone else had to use the sunless seats near the counters.

I doubted anyone had purposely established this rule. The students from better classes simply acted like they owned the place, and everyone else shrank away from them. It was just the usual school hierarchy at work—a natural by-product of the Saigou caste system.

“.....”

And this unwritten policy of discrimination was clearly still in effect.

Students in the good seats and out on the terrace were yukking it up, while those on the other side of the room were shoveling food into their mouths like beleaguered office workers exhausted after a long day of work.

If a student from one of the top classes spilled something on an inferior student’s table, they would never help clean it up. They hogged all the condiments and seasonings, and if they didn’t feel like walking all the way back to the counter, they’d simply pile their dirty dishes on the end of one of the lower-ranked students’ tables.

Not one student from the inferior classes dared protest. It was a galling sight, no matter how many times I encountered it.

The faculty had created these performance-based castes, and the students simply followed their example, dividing themselves up accordingly.

The upshot was that everywhere you went in Saigou High, your grades determined how you were treated. Those in the better classes treated the rest of us like garbage, and those in the lower-ranked classes simply accepted it with a sense of resignation. That, or they'd fallen into the trap of thinking they'd one day prove themselves by clawing their way up the ladder. It was an infantile thought, especially when they'd long ago lost their dignity.

Determining class placement based on grades generated competition, and in turn, discrimination. That was Saigou High's dark secret. And nowhere was that darkness more apparent than in the cafeteria.

"....."

I hesitated a few seconds, then headed to the gloomy seats near the counter.

Calculating a person's worth based on grades was dumb as hell, and I would have happily ignored the unwritten rule and sat in one of the good seats. That said, I no longer had the energy to fight such things. I'd given up. We all had to get used to this, and so I was pretending I had, too. That was why I went along with it.

And besides, if my classmates spotted me sitting with the better classes, it might make things even worse for me. I didn't need to stir the pot any more than I already had.

I sat down at the far end of one of the tables, said my thanks for the meal, and started slurping down my udon. If I could get through my food quietly and quickly, I could hurry up and get the hell out of here. I'd try not to oversleep again so I could get my lunch at the convenience store next time and forget all about this place. That would be the best thing for everyone. Little tricks like that helped me limit my stress.

With that in mind, I kept my chopsticks moving. But when I was about halfway through my udon, things took a turn.

"Uh-oh! Looks like we don't have enough chairs."

"Nowhere to sit? No worries, we'll just grab one of these."

I heard a nasty laugh and looked up. There was a group of five girls from the better classes trying to swipe a chair from this side of the room. It wasn't an

unusual sight. But there was one problem—I could see food set out in front of the chair they’d chosen to steal. In other words, that seat had already been claimed by someone who was about to eat lunch.

“Huh? Er, uh...”

And sure enough, a boy came back to find his chair gone. He had first-year slippers on, and he’d briefly left his seat to grab a pair of chopsticks.

He looked around and soon figured out what had happened. Someone had swiped his chair while his back was turned. The place was crowded, and there were no other empty seats.

What’s more, he knew exactly who’d stolen his chair. It was obvious—the group of girls had added it to the end of their table, and it stood out like a sore thumb among the even rows of seats.

But knowing who the culprits were meant nothing. Students from the lower-ranked classes couldn’t fight with those above them. That was the law of the land.

Poor guy. That really sucks.

I ate a little faster, figuring I might as well hurry up and leave him my seat.

But then something surprising happened—the boy went over and spoke to the group of girls.

“Er, um... Excuse me.”

All five girls turned to stare at him.

“...What?”

“That’s my chair.”

The girl who’d answered him seemed to be the group leader. The boy’s voice was barely a squeak. What he was doing had clearly taken a lot of courage.

“Huh? How is this your chair? It was empty.”

“Yeah, but my tray was there...”

At this point, the girls’ leader made a show of checking the boy’s slippers. Then she snorted and sneered at him.

“I see you’re a first-year. You still don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“How this school works.” She turned to a male teacher eating nearby. “Um, excuse me? Over here!”

Looking exasperated, the teacher stood up and joined the argument. “I’m in the middle of lunch. What is it?”

“This first-year is bothering me.”

“She stole my chair!” replied the boy. “My tray was right in front of it!”

The teacher turned to him and sighed dramatically. “What class are you in?”

“My class? 1-4.”

“What? That’s one of the lower-ranked classes. Stop rocking the boat, okay?”

“Um, what? Are you saying I’m the one in the wrong?”

“Yep, that’s exactly what I’m saying. Come over here.” The teacher then grabbed his collar and hauled him out of the lunchroom.

“Bye,” the girl said, fluttering her hand at him. “What a loser. Oh, he left his tray. Better return it for him.”

After that, she went happily back to her meal.

...Disgusting. It made me sick to watch.

Hadn’t they ever heard the story about the frog in the well? They probably had. They were in the good class, after all.

I know, I know. Making a few sarcastic remarks wasn’t going to change anything. They’d just bring up my grades and sneer at me, too. And this was just the tip of the iceberg.

Better students held sway all over the school. Only they could join the student council, for example. It was *normal* for them to run roughshod over the inferior students, and no teacher at Saigou would reprimand them for it. The faculty always gave the same reason: “You’re being put down because your grades are bad. If you don’t like it, study harder.”

Saigou High was a little world unto itself, structured on academic discrimination and unspoken arrangements. These social norms combined with the strict school rules to form a *law*. This was known as the SaiHigh Law, though no one knew who'd named it.

Perfect for a peak prep school like Saigou. So masterfully rotten and discriminatory, it's almost awe-inspiring.

"...Screw this."

Feeling sick to my stomach, I abandoned my meal and got to my feet. I'd just return my tray and go back to class.

"...?"

But then, sensing eyes on my back, I paused.

I glanced over my shoulder, and, to my surprise, I saw the girl who'd come to the roof the day before. She was staring at me, saying nothing, her face blank.

Had she heard me muttering to myself? I was sure I'd been quiet.

"Um...?"

But as I started to speak, she turned away and stalked off toward the gloomy seats.

...What was that all about?



Once the verbal abuse that passed for afternoon classes was over, we were released.

No matter how much I hated this school, no matter how many issues I had with it, there was simply no outlet for my feelings. Once again, I fled the homework police and escaped to the roof.

When I arrived, it was the same as always. I was surrounded by metal fences, too cowardly to climb over them and jump.

I settled down against the wall by the door and pulled out a cigarette. No matter how much I admired that girl, no matter how many times she called me

a pussy—this was the best I could manage.

What would she say if she saw me now? “Smoking again? Not even trying to change?” Probably. And she’d look at me with that same mean-spirited smile. But there was no use thinking about it. We’d probably never speak again.

I exhaled and flicked the ash from the tip of my cigarette.

But then, as I brought it back to my lips, I heard the door screech beside me. Reflexively, I tried to hide. But soon, I realized there was no need.

Speak of the devil. The girl was back.

“Hey, there,” she said with a curt bow. “I haven’t seen you since lunch.”

Well, I’d gotten *that* wrong.

“...I thought you said you’d never come back here.”

“I changed my mind. No—the *situation* changed.”

She didn’t elaborate. Instead, she walked slowly past me and over to the fence. She put her fingers through the mesh, just as she had the day before, and stared out through it like a prisoner longing for freedom. Had she gotten fed up with this school again and come up to escape?

She must have known she’d find me here. And in that case, she probably wouldn’t be mad or creeped out if I spoke to her.

I pulled the cigarette from my lips and attempted some small talk.

“Have you filled out that withdrawal form yet?”

“Oh, yeah. I did. See?”

She pulled it out and showed it to me. The name field had been blank yesterday, but now it read “Kurumi Hoshimiya.”

That must be her name. Kurumi Hoshimiya. Idly, I wondered if I was the first boy to learn a girl’s name from a school withdrawal form.

“You said the situation changed. Were you talking about your withdrawal?”

“Hmm... I suppose you could say that. Or not.”

That was a pretty vague answer, and it got me curious... But I didn’t want to

pry if it was a sore spot. *Maybe I'd better stay out of it. If she wanted to share, she probably would.*

"Right," I said, taking another drag to make the silence less awkward.

I closed my eyes and savored the heat of the smoke, then released it.

But as I flicked the ash from the tip of the cigarette, I realized Kurumi Hoshimiya was staring at me. Her gaze seemed to hold some meaning. It was the same look she'd flashed me in the cafeteria.

"Is there something on my face?" I asked.

"Spare me the gross clichés."

"...Fair. So what is it? Why are you staring at me?"

Hoshimiya's eyes were boring into me like she was my girlfriend about to suggest we break up.

"Sorry, but I've gotta ask. Are you always like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like in the cafeteria. Do you always get that pissed off when you see good students messing with bad ones?" She'd definitely heard me muttering to myself. "Do you get upset like that every time you run into this school's BS?"

"Uh... I'm not really conscious of it, but maybe."

"Doesn't that get exhausting?"

Kurumi Hoshimiya's tone made it clear she wasn't trying to discourage me. She was genuinely curious.

No one had ever asked me that before. But I already knew the answer.

"Yeah, it's exhausting. But what else can I do? It's the hand I've been dealt."

She seemed so curious that I decided to be honest with her. And part of me just felt she was someone I could trust.

"It seems like nobody really picks up on this," I said, "but I've always been sensitive."

"What do you mean, 'sensitive'?"

“I can’t stand being in the room when the teacher is yelling at my classmates. Once, I was waiting for a train when two people started fighting. I hated it. It was terrifying.” This was probably the result of my family issues, but I decided to leave that bit unsaid. “I don’t know how it is for the others, but I can’t handle the tension in this school. Every day people are screaming, or the top students are acting like bullies. It just doesn’t sit right with me. And I can’t suppress my feelings like everyone else seems to.”

For starters, I didn’t share their hang-ups about my academic performance. I was fine with being thoroughly average. All I wanted was to do a little studying, get into a basic college, and find some boring job. To my mind, that was a fine life that no one should look down on.

That was why I had such a hard time falling in line with this school’s culture of disdain, insults, and sabotage. To put it simply, I’d been here over a year, and I still hadn’t been brainwashed.

I just couldn’t believe that grades were the measure of a person’s worth. I refused to swallow the idea that studying was everything and that those who did poorly were worthless.

“I’m too sensitive to just let it go,” I said. “When I see stuff like that, it always gets to me.”

“So you’ve been like this since you were a first-year?”

“Yeah, I guess. And I’ll probably be like this forever.”

Kurumi Hoshimiya’s eyes never left me. She was taking everything I said with utmost seriousness. That was what coaxed me into saying too much. I was starting to feel embarrassed.

I tore my eyes away from hers and put my cigarette back to my lips, trying to cover my humiliation. I really didn’t expect her to respond to my boring life story.

After I’d taken three puffs, however, she spoke.

“...Hey,” she said, and I turned to look at her, startled. “If you could do something about those feelings, would you?”

“...What do you mean?” I asked.

She opened and closed her mouth a few times without saying a word. In the end, she avoided my question in favor of a new topic.

“I’ve got unfinished business here.”

Where’d that come from? Did she mean she had something to take care of before dropping out?

“What? If you’re looking for love, you’re at the wrong school. The official rules explicitly ban dating.”

“...Yeah, I’m aware.”

She shot me a look as if to say, “Be serious, please.”

“Sorry,” I said, shrugging. I was only joking. “I’m listening. Go on.”

“I want payback.”

For a moment, my breathing grew shallow. There was an edge to her tone, like a drawn blade, and I could almost feel it sinking deep into my chest.

“By payback you mean...revenge?”

“Exactly. I don’t need any money. What I crave is vengeance.”

“Hold on. Back up. That’s insane. What do you want to do, exactly? And to whom?”

“My target is the faculty, along with every single person falling in line with this dump’s so-called *laws*. But I’m not sure about the specifics yet.”

I’d been joking, but I got the feeling she was dead serious.

She might not have the details down, but Kurumi Hoshimiya clearly meant business. She was staring down at her fist, unleashing the darkness straight from her heart.

“Ever since I started here, I’ve been the target of endless verbal abuse—treated like I’m not even human,” she said. “It was too much for me, so I made up my mind to drop out.”

“...Yeah, okay.”

“But then it occurred to me. Isn’t dropping out like admitting they won? The abusive teachers are the bad guys. And this discriminatory ‘law’ is the problem. So why should I have to turn tail and flee?” She turned to face me, and I saw the light in her eyes glow against the backdrop of the evening sky. “It’s sickening. These awful teachers get to sit back and enjoy their lives while I have to go? That’s why I want payback. I want to leave my mark here.”

“.....”

“I want to prove that people *suffered* under this tyranny before I give up and go home.”

A gust of wind blew between us.

I got the feeling her words hadn’t quite caught up with her energy. She *wanted* to leave her mark? She *wanted* to prove that people suffered? No. She was *going* to leave her mark. She *would* prove that people suffered. That’s how it sounded to me anyway.

If I stood by and did nothing, she’d probably start something right away. I didn’t know her, but her aura was so grim, it spooked me.

Should I say something? Should I try to stop her?

I hesitated, and words floated into my mind—so I said them aloud.

“You could argue that the treatment we get from the teachers and top-ranked students is our own fault for getting bad grades.”

“Yeah, I guess you could.”

“And we *are* the ones who chose this school. Despite all that, you still want revenge?”

“Yes. I do,” Kurumi Hoshimiya said quietly. “No matter how bad someone’s grades are, it doesn’t justify abuse. If this school told prospective students they consider insults and discrimination teaching, no one would come here. It’s *their* fault.”

“All true, but...”

“And that aside, I *want* to get revenge. Isn’t that enough? You can take all your justifications, grind them up, and feed them to your dog.”

That certainly silenced me.

“I’m not interested in proper protests—in doing what’s *right*,” she continued. “I’ve got a personal vendetta and a warped sense of righteousness—and I’m gonna make ‘em pay.” Her lips curled up into that familiar, mean-spirited smile. “And you don’t mean a word of that stuff. You hate this place just as much as I do.”

“...Fair.”

It was pointless. I couldn’t stop her.

Revenge, vendetta, warped righteousness. I couldn’t argue with any one of those ominous words. Besides, I’d already proved that doing what was “right” wasn’t going to get us anywhere.

“I want to *change* this school so that no one else winds up like me,” she said.

“.....”

“And when I’m sure no one else will end up like you, either, *then* I’ll drop out.”

Kurumi Hoshimiya sure dreamed big. We were two small fish in a big pond, and anything we did would only come back to haunt us. People don’t change. The *world* doesn’t change... I knew all that. Or at least I’d convinced myself that I did.

And yet...for a moment, I put myself in her shoes.

Here I was, buried in homework, unable to improve my grades, being told I was the problem, my nerves gradually fraying under the stress and abuse. And on top of that, any attempt I made to change the situation only made everything worse. In the end, I wound up smoking just to relax.

If she could change things so that nobody else turned into a piece of garbage like me, wouldn’t that be better for everyone?

Before I knew it, I muttered, “That’d be nice... If you could change the school.”

I knew it was wishful thinking, but I said it anyway. I just couldn’t help admiring Kurumi Hoshimiya.

Maybe she really would change this place so that no one else ended up like me. Heck, maybe she'd even find a way to change *me*, too.

That's right, I was starting to have expectations. But I was still a kid—still wet behind the ears. I wasn't ready to take responsibility for what I'd just said.

"If you think so, then help me."

So at her next words, all the blood drained from my face. I'd thought this was *her* deal; suddenly, it was mine, too. I felt a chill settle over my brain.

"...Huh?"

"Help me get payback."

I looked up. Kurumi Hoshimiya was smiling, backlit by the setting sun.

"I was looking for an accomplice," she said. "That's why I came up here."

"Um, er... Hang on, an accomplice?"

"Your story about lodging a proper complaint got me interested, and your bad mood in the cafeteria convinced me. You'll do. Not only do you hate this school, you're motivated enough to take independent action. Cool. Very cool. You're exactly the kind of guy I'm looking for."

"Hold up. What are you even talking about? Wait a minute!"

She was coming on strong, and I had to hold my hands out to push her back.

"Hmm." She pursed her lips and began to think.

For a moment, neither of us moved; then she thumped a fist against her palm.

"Oh, right! Hang on a second, I've got something to show you."

She reached both hands around the back of her head and threaded her fingers into her pitch-black hair. She fiddled around for a moment, working her hands.

"...What are you doing?" I asked.

"Heh-heh, you'll find out soon."

A moment later, something fell out of her hair. I heard the clang of metal on

the ground. I looked down and saw a hairpin. Several more followed—long, thin clips, falling from her hair.

“Your last protest didn’t work, but don’t worry—this time I’ll lead the way.”

Each time a pin fell, Kurumi Hoshimiya’s indomitable grin grew broader.

“We’ll be fine. We can do this. Just follow your gut and say yes.”

As a final flourish, she ran both hands through the back of her hair.

The strands tumbled down, obeying gravity. She shook her head a few times to untangle them, and they formed waves as her hair resumed its natural shape.

Only then did I comprehend the meaning of this process.

“Your hair...”

A pale gleam shone from beneath her black bob.

The underlayer of her hair was ash gray. Kurumi Hoshimiya had dyed it, then used a bunch of hairpins at the back to keep the dyed portion hidden.

“Well? Surprised?”

When I saw her mean smirk, I knew exactly what all this meant.

I understood what she was doing. Our school had a very strict code of conduct—and dyed hair was not allowed.

This was just like my smoking—a symbol of her rebellion.

“I’ll say it again,” she said. “I want you on my side.”

Restored to her true form, Kurumi Hoshimiya looked down at where I was sitting and reached out her hand.

“Let’s become the resistance and transform this awful school.”

“The resistance...?”

It sounded so cringe. We were too old for this. Was she for real?

But I wasn't that mature, either. And I found her idea extremely tantalizing. Her invitation was so convincing, so *unreal*, that it actually made me think we could change the world.

I swallowed hard.

Maybe we can.

Maybe we could shake up this sickening school with teachers who thought it was okay to shout at kids for their grades and hierarchies based solely on class placement. Maybe this would give me a way to vent all those frustrations and grievances that no amount of cigarette smoke could ever carry away.

Maybe I could even get revenge on that one teacher.

"C'mon. Let's do this."

Kurumi Hoshimiya thrust out her hand, urging me to take it.

Possibilities swirled in my mind. My pulse sped up. I began to see spots.

I reached out—only to pull back just before our fingers touched.

"...I can't. If I had the courage to do that, I wouldn't be skulking around up here with a cigarette."

"Oh yeah? What a shame."

She shrugged, letting the matter drop.

Perhaps she'd never really been serious. The thought disappointed me.

But it didn't matter. I'd made the right choice.

Of course I had bitter feelings about this crappy school and its awful teachers. But this was my life, and I didn't want to make any more mistakes.

The vengeance Kurumi Hoshimiya sought was obviously a mistake. It was bound to fail, and even if it succeeded, it wouldn't make either of us happy. A big plot like that would only cause problems and lead to regrets.

Sure, this terrible school already had me making all sorts of bad decisions, and I hadn't thought twice about breaking the law to smoke. But revenge was a much bigger transgression, and I didn't have the guts for it. No matter how furious I was inside, the best I could manage was sneaking a cigarette.

I was just a small fish in a big pond.

“...Haah. How sad! What a pity!” Kurumi Hoshimiya said, sighing dramatically.
“This sucks. I was really counting on your help.”

“Sorry. Your proposal was tempting, but it was a little unrealistic.”

“You think so? Well, that’s a real shame. I guess I have no choice. Can’t believe I’ll have to spread this photo around.”

“...Photo?

“Yeah, this one. Heh-heh. Good shot, right?”

She showed me her phone. There was a photo of me on the screen, with a cigarette dangling from my lips.

“Wh-when did you...?!”



“I sneaked a shot while you were puffing away, sharing your sob story. Tee-hee!”

She stuck her tongue out and winked at me. She might be cute, but her behavior was not.

“Why would you do that?! You have to delete it! Come on!”

“Huh? I don’t think so. I’m keeping this one.”

I tried to grab the phone from her, but she slipped away, that mean smirk back on her lips.

“What do you think will happen if the teachers see this photo?” she mused. “Suspension? Expulsion? What kind of nasty insults do you think they’ll throw at you?”

“You’re really gonna rat me out?! Screw you!”

“Heh-heh. The teachers are gonna tear you apart! They’ll run your heart right through the shredder! You’ll hate this school even more than you do now—and I bet you’ll want payback. Just like I do.”

There was no guilt in that shit-eating grin of hers. She was the devil herself. Satan incarnate.

If the teachers found out about what I did on the roof, it would be bad. But my real concern was that they’d tell my parents. What would my dad do if he found out I was smoking? What would he say to me? What emotions would I see on his face?

I didn’t know. And not knowing scared me.

He certainly wouldn’t come to my defense. That much I was sure of.

Ugh, now I’m in trouble. I should never have gotten myself into this mess.

I had to get her to delete that photo. I frantically racked my brain for any way out, any solution—but I came up blank. Should I take a photo of her dye job and threaten her back? No, that was nothing compared to smoking. Plus, she was already planning to drop out. There was no point in even trying.

Fear wore me down quickly, and I put my hands up, surrendering.

“I’ll do whatever you ask,” I said. “Just keep that photo to yourself.”

“Oh? You’ll do anything? Gosh, think of the possibilities. I mean, all I really want is an accomplice.” She made a show of thinking about it.

“Fine! I’m in, Hoshimiya. I’m yours to command.”

“No last names. Call me Kurumi—no, *Lady* Kurumi.”

“Lady Kurumi, your wish is my command.”

“Pfft! Bwah-ha-ha!” She doubled over, laughing. “You actually said it! I was kidding! That sounds awful. Just call me Kurumi, please.”

This girl definitely had some issues. Though I guess I should have expected as much when she started talking about revenge.

“My sides are splitting!” she said. “You’re a blast and a half.”

“...Thanks.”

“Heh-heh. Okay, then we’ve got a deal, right?”

“...Sure.”

She held out her hand again, and this time, I took it.

Kurumi and I were going to be noble villains, out to change the school.

...Against my better judgment, of course.

ACT TWO

The day Kurumi blackmailed me into becoming her accomplice, we split up without further action. It was time to leave school, and she promised we would formulate a proper plan later. For my part, I wanted to sort out my thoughts, so I had no objections.

We traded contact info, and I headed home.

Joining the flood of students leaving after-school clubs, I headed to the nearest train station.

I was stuck on the platform for half an hour, waiting. The local train eventually showed up a few minutes late, and I boarded it.

There were too many commuters to sit, so I stood, hanging on to a leather strap to keep my balance. I stayed on the train, getting jostled around, for a total of fifteen minutes. Then I changed trains and spent forty more minutes on another train, also standing. The last leg of my trip was a twenty-minute bike ride.

I pedaled through a residential area. Every home had lit windows save for the one, about halfway down the street, with “Natsume” on the sign out front. This was my house—or more accurately, my dad’s.

I parked my bike next to the empty carport, unlocked the front door, and went inside.

Silence and darkness welcomed me. I felt my way to the light switch and turned it on. This brightened the place up, but since all it revealed were plain white walls and hardwood floors, the view remained depressing.

I shucked off my shoes and moved to the living room, turning on the lights as I went.

“.....”

I knew no one would answer, so I never bothered announcing that I was home.

My parents never got along. They used to have screaming fights on a daily basis. They constantly talked shit about each other, and my mother would disappear for long stretches at a time. When things got really bad, my dad would move in his mistresses. Eventually, my mother couldn't take it anymore and filed for divorce. That was eight years ago.

I don't know what kind of discussions took place, but I wound up with my dad. My sister, who was four years older than I was, went with my mom. That was how our family split up, and this house became half-empty.

My dad was a busy man and rarely around. I basically had the place to myself. He was out again today, as evidenced by the darkened windows.

“...Here we go again.”

I found three ten-thousand-yen bills on the table in the living room. I'd be using these for food money for the foreseeable future. It was a routine so established, my dad didn't even leave a note.

I wasn't lonely or disappointed; I was used to this, so it was whatever. I don't know if their marriage problems were to blame, but neither of my parents had ever paid much attention to me.

They expended the minimum effort to keep up appearances, but otherwise left me to my own devices. They never came to parents' day or sports festivals at school and showed no interest in my grades or test scores.

The only time my father ever butted in was when I'd chosen which high school to attend—the sole point in my life where he'd intervened.

I'd basically raised myself.

Yeah, I guess I've always made my own decisions. Maybe that's why I was so scared today.

How would a father like him react to me smoking? What would he say if he found out I'd sworn vengeance on my school?

I had no idea. And I was terrified of the unknown.

His face was always like a mask, and it scared me to imagine it twisting with emotion. Maybe nothing I could do would ever shatter that poker face—and I hated that idea, too. I was scared to find out how little he really cared.

I briefly wondered if growing up watching my parents fight was what made me so sensitive to the teachers' verbal abuse. Maybe the reason I didn't want to screw up was because my parents' neglect had given me a particularly strong sense of responsibility for my own actions.

How strange. My parents had barely raised me, and yet they still defined my values. I supposed that was inevitable. I, like most high school students, didn't have a lot of contact with adults outside of my parents and teachers. But thinking about this stuff didn't change anything.

I had no energy to go out. *Should I get something delivered?*

I picked up my phone, and a cheery jingle played. I had a new message. The sender's field read "Kurumi."

"Natsume! Come to the room at the very back of the old club annex tomorrow. We need to strategize!"

I opened the chat app and typed the first thing that came to mind.

"As you wish, Lady Kurumi."

"Just Kurumi is fine! Or does calling me 'Lady' do it for you?"

She included a picture of a cat with narrow, beady eyes, which I left on read.

It didn't matter how scared I was of my dad's reaction. As long as she had that photo of me smoking, I had to obey.

I could only hope this wasn't the beginning of a terrible new stage of my life. Then again, I had the feeling people who swore vengeance didn't usually get happy endings.

...I wonder if we have any instant ramen left in the kitchen.

“...The Stargazing Club.”

After school the next day, I found myself in the very back of the old club annex, staring at a sign above the door. This wasn't the original sign, just a piece of paper taped over it—but that hardly mattered.

Kurumi had told me to meet in a clubroom for a club I'd never heard of. Was this even the right place?

I glanced back down the way I'd come, but there were no other hallways to try. The old club annex was a single-story building, so this was the only place she could have meant. This had to be her intended meeting spot.

Hmm. She wants us to strategize here?

It was a totally ordinary clubroom. Could I just waltz in?

I knew nothing about the Stargazing Club, so I wasn't sure what the proper protocol was. It was probably safe to say, “Pardon me,” as I walked inside, but if Kurumi was the only one there, I'd be totally embarrassed.

Was I overthinking things? *That's just how I am, I guess.*

But standing around in the hall like this was going to arouse suspicion. I had to at least knock. I reached for the door—and it swung open.

“Oh, I thought I heard noises! There you are, Natsume.”

A pair of cat ears appeared before my eyes. Had a cute kitten come bounding out of the room? No. Kurumi's newsboy hat had ears on it. She bowed, wiggling the hat and ears.

“Come in, come in,” she said. “You got here faster than I expected!”

“You startled me. I didn't recognize you with that hat on.”

“Oh, this? Heh-heh, pretty sweet, isn't it?” She adjusted the hat, a smug smirk on her face.

Objectively, Kurumi was pretty cute. The hat, with its little ears, appeared to grow right out of her black and ash-gray hair, making her look like a gray tabby cat.

“Why are you wearing a hat inside?” I asked. “Aren't you supposed to take

that off?”

“An excellent question!” she said, puffing herself up. “I’ve decided to wear this hat during all our vengeful activities as a symbol of my minority status. It’ll help me mentally change modes.”

Ah. So when she’s wearing the hat, she’s Kurumi Hoshimiya: Vengeance Mode.

It seemed Kurumi was the type who liked to externalize things. I decided to leave her to it. It *was* pretty cute, after all.

“When I’ve got this hat on, I’m being *bad*. Maximum evil! Don’t you forget it, Natsume.”

“Right, okay. Will do.”



“That’s the spirit! Now then, we don’t want anyone spotting us, so hurry up and get in here.”

Kurumi pulled the door all the way open and waved me into the Stargazing Club.

The tour ended as soon as it began. The room was around twelve square meters large and contained one long table and two folding chairs. Some shelves were set up to one side, but there was no club paraphernalia or any member’s personal possessions. From the name, I’d expected a telescope or at least a globe, but there was nothing of that kind to be found. It was just an empty room ready to welcome a club one day, not the base of operations of any active group.

“Go on, make yourself at home,” Kurumi said.

“Mm. Okay, thanks.”

I took one of the chairs. It creaked as I sat down. I could smell dust, reminding me of how old this building was.

I put my backpack down and asked the first question on my mind.

“Kurumi, the door said this was the Stargazing Club... Aren’t there any other members?”

“Oh... Nope, not a one.” She sat down opposite me in the other chair, looking downcast. “There are several members who signed up but never came. They don’t count. There are no active members. No adviser, either. I founded the club, but before it I knew it, it was just me.”

Hmm. Fair enough... Wait a minute.

“You founded the club?”

“Yeah, right after I enrolled here. It’s two months old!”

Aha. No wonder I’ve never heard of it.

So this was a brand-new club already facing extinction. That explained the lack of equipment.

“I planned to take it seriously, too. But almost right away, everyone said they

had too much homework and stopped coming.”

She was sounding more and more depressed. Unsure of how to react, I fidgeted for a few seconds, then did my best to console her.

“That’s just how this school works. It was inevitable.”

“...I know. I’m already over it! And since all the other members quit, we’ve got a perfect spot to talk in private.”

She was clearly not over it, but her tone had brightened, at least.

I was glad she was able to be logical about this. Our goal was vengeance; we had no time to worry about the other members or to be depressed about her club’s future. And if Kurumi was planning on dropping out, that stuff didn’t even matter.

“Let’s start scheming!” she said, straightening up. I followed suit.

We were here to get vengeance on the school. What kind of plan would she suggest?

I might have been here under duress, but I still intended to function as her brakes. For instance, if she suggested murdering somebody, I would do everything in my power to stop her. If I knew her plans and did nothing, I’d wind up in jail right beside her. Arrested as an accomplice. One ticket to juvie. *And* my parents would find out. That would be even worse than the cigarettes. No thank you.

So it was time to determine what scale she was operating on. How big was this vengeance of hers?

Nervously, I waited for her to continue.

“Ta-daa! I thought this might help us plan.” With a slightly ridiculous fanfare, she pulled out a yellow notebook.

“...What’s that? It just looks like a regular notebook.”

“An excellent question. These are my Notes on Revenge.”

Notes on Revenge. I ran the title over in my head. Was she implying that revenge was a school subject? She probably meant it as a sarcastic jab at our

prep school and its obsession with schoolwork. Personally, I found it in poor taste.

“Yesterday, I said I hadn’t made my mind up, but I do have several proposals,” she said.

“And you’ve written them down in that notebook?”

“Exactly. I’ve summarized them all here. This should provide us with a basis for action. Um... Hang on a second, let me pick a good one and run it by you.”

She started flipping through the notebook’s pages. She was moving too fast for my eyes to follow, so I propped my chin in my hand and watched her absently.

Notes on Revenge.

A notebook, in this day and age. How quaint. Then again, if you had to eliminate evidence, electronic records could often be recovered, while a physical notebook could easily be burned. Perhaps this *was* the right choice.

Uh-oh, now she’s infecting my thoughts.

Kurumi moved back and forth through the pages for a while, and then her hands stopped.

“How’s this one? I call it the ‘Student Insult Redistribution Campaign.’”

“...That tells me nothing. Elaborate.”

“Okay, allow me to explain.”

She cleared her throat and corrected her posture, like she was about to recite a passage in Japanese class.

“Natsume, as I’m sure you’re aware, this school’s teachers use red pens to inscribe insults upon low-scoring tests and quizzes.”

“Yeah, I know. They come back with ‘Trash,’ ‘Moron,’ or ‘Did you even try?’ scrawled across the top.”

“Precisely.” Kurumi nodded. “I believe these written insults are a key factor in the vile ‘law’ that holds sway over this school. I propose we hurl a metaphorical stone at this behavior.”

“I see. And what would we be doing, exactly?”

“With our own two hands, we will write insults upon the answer sheets of people with *good* grades.”

“...Hmm.”

So her plan was to insult the good students, too.

Kurumi spoke with confidence, but honestly, I didn’t find this plan particularly persuasive. Sure, the way the better classes went along with the school’s BS was despicable, and I *did* hold it against them. I longed to take a hammer to their smug superiority and unshakable confidence, break it into a million pieces, then sweep the shards into a trash bag and hurl it into the incinerator.

But our target was the school; our ultimate goal was to change the way this place operated. That wasn’t supposed to involve lashing out at the better classes—or so I’d thought.

Maybe Kurumi had other ideas. In that case, I’d better say my piece.

I raised a hand, seeking permission to speak.

“Pardon me, Kurumi. If I may?”

“By all means. You have the floor.”

“What is the goal of this scheme? It seems less like an attempt to change the school than like a vindictive strike against the top-ranked students. Are we really hurling the right stone?”

As I spoke, Kurumi’s lips curled into a smirk.

That was when it hit me—she’d tricked me into saying this.

Crap. How irritating.

Fine, go ahead. You’ve got an answer prepared, right? Go ahead and destroy my argument.

“Don’t be so simpleminded, Natsume. This is a scheme with *two* goals.”

“Uh-huh. Do tell.”

Kurumi wagged her index finger at me, still wearing that mean-spirited smile.

“First, we’ll be spreading awareness of how wrong this is. No matter how perfect their grades are, the good students will still get insulted—turning them against the school itself.”

“Awareness... Okay. I think I get it.”

“At the moment, the resistance is just the two of us. If we truly want to change the school, we’ll need to recruit more people. Supporters—or, if not that, comrades in spirit.”

Hmm. I hated to admit it, but she was starting to convince me.

If the better students turned on the teachers, that might begin to shift the school’s atmosphere. At the very least, more students would realize just how messed up this place was. In that sense, this scheme might provide a solid start.

“Understood,” I said. “And? What’s the other goal?”

“The second part is a bit trickier to explain. Essentially, I want to unnerve the teachers.”

“Meaning?”

“Uh, gimme a sec. I wanna phrase this properly.”

Kurumi pursed her lips and tapped a finger against her temple. The gesture was pretty cute.

After a moment’s thought, she thumped a fist against her palm.

“Aha! Got it. Make sure you listen closely, before I forget.”

“I’m listening. Go right ahead.”

“So, um, I didn’t mention this before, but every insult we put on the good students’ tests will be things the teachers have actually written on *our* papers.”

So we’ll be sticking to stuff like “Garbage,” and “Quit goofing off!”

“And how will that unnerve the teachers?” I asked.

“Put yourself in their shoes. The faculty will be aware of our crimes. They’ll know someone is doctoring the students’ answer sheets. What will they do?”

“They’ll probably be furious.”

“Agreed. But here’s the thing—no matter how mad they get or how big a problem it is, they can’t *tell* anyone that someone’s scribbling abusive language on the tests.”

...*Why not?*

I gave that a moment’s thought and finally caught her drift.

“Oh, since it’s all stuff *they’ve* written, they can’t classify it as ‘abusive.’”

“Precisely.”

Aha. They might be scum, but they were still teachers. They knew their actions could be used against them. And that was why we had to limit ourselves to stuff they’d already written.

Even if they discovered what we were up to and flipped their lids, all they could say was that the tests had been doctored. If they said, “Someone’s written insults,” it could come back to haunt them. It would be like admitting that they had harassed their own students.

Even if they went ahead and said, “Somebody’s writing awful things on your tests!” they couldn’t make a big enough deal about it that word would reach our parents and guardians. The stronger their response, the more likely they’d be to expose themselves.

This was sure to vex and irritate them, or in Kurumi’s words, “unnerve them.”

So far, it sounded reasonable. We’d make the teachers uncomfortable and generate more rebels. It was a roundabout approach, but it would send a message to the faculty that they should tone down what they wrote on tests.

It wasn’t...the worst idea. Arguably, it was a decently practical approach—on paper, at least.

“I get the gist. Overall, it’s a step toward positive change, even if all we’re doing in practice is carrying out a spiteful little vendetta.”

“Spiteful is my middle name! That was my intent from the very beginning.”

Kurumi slapped her flat chest. Why’d she look so proud of herself? I was baffled, but at least now I knew what kind of scale she was working on.

I ran over the plan once more in my mind, then nodded.

“Okay, that sounds worthwhile.”

“Oh, you think you have a choice in the matter? You have to go along with everything I say.”

“Sure, but—I thought you might have something much worse in mind. I’m relieved that wasn’t the case.”

“Worse, like what?” Kurumi asked, blinking. Then she clapped her hands. “Like spreading word of the faculty’s misdeeds online and building up a public furor? Nope. That would just be passing the buck on to some grown-ups. I want to make this *our* payback.”

No, I was thinking you might want to kill someone... But thankfully, it didn’t sound like that was in the cards. It seemed her brand of vengeance wasn’t likely to land us in prison, at least.

The tension drained from my shoulders as Kurumi put her notebook away and rose to her feet.

“That concludes our meeting. Natsume, let’s go shopping.”

“Shopping? For what? I’ve got red pens.”

“Oh, we won’t be using pens. We’ll need something more efficient.” With a confident huff, she put a hand on her hip. “We’re gonna buy some new erasers and turn them into stamps!”

“...Uh, what?”



After our strategy session, Kurumi and I managed to collect our shoes without the teachers spotting us, and we slipped out the back gate.

We weaved through the residential streets and got back on the main road, then headed to the station, looking for all the world like we were on our way home from school.

Once on the train, we rode south a few stations to the terminal where I

usually switched trains. Our destination was the mall—specifically, a stationery shop within it.

This location had a far broader selection of goods than any local bookstore. We moved quickly around the interior, buying ten large erasers, two carving tools, a red-ink stamp pad, and a bunch of tracing paper. Once we'd made our purchases, we sailed out like we owned the place.

The mall was fairly crowded after school. Students were hanging around, housewives were out doing their evening shopping, and so on and so forth. The two of us moved inconspicuously along one side of the path between the shops.

Kurumi had briefed me on the purpose of this trip on our way here.

"Even quizzes are technically tests. The teachers will be keeping them safe at their desks. When we act, we'll need to enter the faculty office, slip past their watchful eyes, and quickly doctor a bunch of tests. Speed will be essential."

"Hence the eraser stamps?"

"Exactly. I spent a long time considering the most efficient means of adding insults—and concluded that eraser stamps will allow us to perfectly copy the teachers' handwriting with a single press. I'm calling them the 'Teachers' Handwritten Insult Stamps'!"

...Kurumi could really stand to improve her naming sense. Maybe this was really the best she could do. Whatever—the name didn't matter.

"Then I guess we've gotta carve these erasers to match the teachers' handwriting. Do you think we can do it?"

"I know we can! Don't worry, I'm good with my hands."

She struck a T. rex pose, flexing her fingers. They were thin and beautiful. *What a waste to use them for vengeance*, I thought idly.

"...Why are you staring at my hands?" she asked. "Do you want me to tickle you?"

"Why would you think that? No human alive has ever wanted to be tickled."

"Puh-leez. Tickling is a known fetish." Kurumi reached for my sides. "You sure you're not into it? Coochie, coochie coo!"

I slapped her hands away, and she laughed with delight.

“It’s working! Bwa-ha-ha!”

Just what was so funny to her? She’d always been weird, but this was a whole new flavor.

I put the shopping bag in my backpack and resumed walking. I wanted to get our conversation back on track before she officially branded me a tickle fetishist.

“I know we’re making eraser stamps, but what’s our next step today?”

“Um, let’s hit up a convenience store to make copies of the insults written on our tests.”

“Do we need copies? Can’t we just use the originals?”

“That was my first idea, but to match the eraser size, we may need to shrink or enlarge the text.”

I didn’t know much about handicrafts, so I just took her word for it.

“So you brought the tests? That’s what we’ll be copying, right?”

“I did! Here’s one right here. See?”

Kurumi pulled a page out of her backpack.

It was a standard-issue pop quiz. The subject was physics, and she’d scored two out of ten points. Next to her name, the teacher had written “Quit school” in red ink. This was a classic example of the abuse hurled at bad students.

“So we’re making an eraser stamp out of this?”

“Mm? Would a different phrase be better? I have more! I collected a bunch in preparation for this very day.”

Like a certain cat-shaped robot rummaging through its belly pocket, Kurumi pulled out a bunch of different test sheets. “Idiot.” “Unacceptable.” “What is this garbage?” “Why are you even here?” “Are you kidding?” “Study harder!” She had quite a variety. *Damn, just looking at them makes me wanna puke.*

Once she’d finished digging through her bag, she fanned the tests out in her hands.

“This is all of them! Well, Natsume? Any catch your fancy?”

“I can’t say any of the insults particularly appeal to me.”

“What a coincidence! I feel the same way... Heh-heh, I guess we think alike.”

Kurumi sidled closer to me, and I reflexively recoiled. What was she up to? Did she not know about personal space?

I tried to act calm as I cleared my throat and continued.

“There’s no need to narrow it down to one. Let’s make copies of several and carve stamps for any that seem easy. Copies aren’t that expensive.”

“True. Good idea.” Kurumi nodded, flipping through the sheaf of papers. “First, let’s ditch anything tricky to carve. I doubt we can pull off characters with a bunch of lines. Like this one—the character for ‘unacceptable’ is gonna look terrible. I wish the teachers would consider stuff like this when choosing their insults.”

“Riiight.”

I started to point out that this was quite unreasonable, then stopped myself.

Instead, I just nodded and smiled. This was a silly conversation; there was no point in taking every word of it seriously. *Why am I like this?*

“What is it? What are you grinning about?” Kurumi asked.

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“Don’t make things weird! Oh, sorry, you were always weird.”

She really didn’t need to say that. But I was the older one here, so I decided not to take the bait.

“Okay, let’s copy these tests, then call it a day,” she continued. “We’ll meet up in the clubroom after school tomorrow and make the stamps there! Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah, that’s fine with me.”

“Awesome! Let’s get this done and go home!”

Kurumi put the tests away and gestured for us to get moving.

I was glad she was motivated, even if it was just to do mischief.

Come to think of it, it had been a while since I'd read any of the red-inked insults. They'd been on every one of my quizzes and tests until the start of this year, when I lodged my complaint and the teachers began ignoring me.

Kurumi and I were in different grades, but both of us experienced this abuse. It was a school tradition carried out in every class—a rotten practice that had to be eliminated. Bad grades were no excuse to say whatever you wanted.

Just then, I had an idea.

“Hey, Kurumi,” I said. She was walking a few steps ahead of me. “Do we have to choose one of the ones you brought?”

She turned back and cocked her head just enough so her hat didn't slip.

“Hmm? I guess not. What are you thinking?”

“...If we're gonna make stamps, we should use Furukawa's handwriting. He's the second-year math teacher.”

“Uh...why?”

“He uses a thicker pen than the others, and he writes really big. He's gotta be the easiest person to copy.”

“Oh... I see.”

She put a hand to her chin and let her gaze swim around for a moment. A few seconds later, her eyes snapped back to me. That mean-spirited smile was back on her face.

“Great! I didn't think that far ahead. You're a bad influence, Natsume.”

“I'm no match for our ringleader.”

“I prefer 'mastermind'! Bwa-ha-ha!”

She was quick on her feet, and her laugh proved infectious.

“You're hilarious. So, Natsume, if you brought Furukawa's name up, you must have his tests, right?”

“Yeah, I've got a few of them. They should still be buried somewhere in my

backpack.”

“Ideal. Then we’ll use those for our eraser stamps!” She grinned merrily. “Heh-heh, I made the right choice recruiting you!”

She hadn’t recruited me so much as coerced me. She was blackmailing me with that photo—I didn’t have a choice... And yet somehow, I didn’t mind the compliment.

✱

The next day, Kurumi and I met up in the Stargazing Club room after school and settled down to carve our erasers.

It was a simple procedure. First, you prepared a template matching the eraser’s size, then you laid tracing paper over it. You could see the template through the paper, allowing you to run a pencil over the part you wanted to carve into the eraser. (In this case, the word “Idiot.”) Next, you pressed the graphite-laden tracing paper against the eraser itself. You rubbed your nail against it, transferring the graphite to the eraser, and it produced a mirror image of the text. Finally, you simply carved away the unwanted portions of the eraser.

This was the basic process for making eraser stamps. It was so simple, even a child could do it.

.....

“No, Natsume! Yours is too sloppy! You’ve gotta make the carvings even!”

“I am. This is as even as it gets.”

“Hardly! You’re not even trying! You have to be extra careful making the impression or you’ll mess up later! You’ve gotta make each one count!”

“D-don’t yell at me. I’m doing my best.”

Even a child could do it, but apparently, I was worse than a child. The difference between my efforts and Kurumi’s was like night and day. In fact, that was making them sound too close. Mine was Wednesday night, and hers was Sunday morning. Sunday morning one hundred years in the future.

My work was so bad, she took it away from me, made a sour face, and said, “What a waste of a perfectly good eraser,” then started carving a new stamp into the flip side.

Whoa. The world’s first reversible insult stamp. Even if one side is unusable.

I applied myself for a little over an hour and came to one conclusion: Trying wasn’t going to get me anywhere. I was clearly all thumbs. Still, I didn’t give up. I persevered, and yet...

Kurumi fixed me with a heavy-lidded glare, then shook her head. “Yeah, that’s enough. I’ll handle the rest. You go clean up the scrap rubber.”

“Sorry. I’m on it.” *Yeah, I know. I’m no better than these scraps of discarded rubber.*

“We can’t use that tracing paper, so throw it out—and put the carving tool away.”

“Got it.”

“How many erasers do we have left? There are still a few insults we haven’t gotten to, right?”

“Three untouched erasers, and two pages left.”

“Ugh... This is exhausting. Natsume, massage my shoulders!”

“Certainly, mademoiselle.”

“You’d better do a good job. Ooh. Ah. That’s the spot! Mm, that feels good...”

I wished she would stop making those noises...

She continued ordering me around for a few more hours.

“...That should do it. All done!”

With almost no help from me, the Teachers’ Handwritten Insult Stamps were complete.

Four eraser stamps were laid out on the table in front of Kurumi. We hadn’t tested them yet, but they looked surprisingly high-quality, like a machine had stamped them out.

I was very impressed. From watching her work, I could tell Kurumi hadn't been kidding about being good with her hands.

"Hmm, four decent ones. Not bad." She picked one up and inspected it.

"You're being too hard on yourself. These look great, and you worked so quickly!"

"...If you hadn't been so clumsy, we could have made a lot more."

"Sorry. Will another massage make up for it?"

"Ooh...! Ah...! Stop...! I didn't...even...ask! ...Ooh... That's...really good..." Kurumi's cheeks turned red, and she wailed, "F-fine! I forgive youuuu!"

Well, that was easy.

"Whew... Enough massages!" she said. "Time to test the stamps."

"Oh, good idea. We might need to make some adjustments."

"Please. My stamps are perfect."

Time to put that to the test.

I sat back down and took out an ink pad, then flipped over one of the copies we'd made—the back was still blank.

All we had to do was load the stamp up with ink, then press it to a piece of paper. Kurumi had done all the work, so I let her do the honors.

I held out my hands toward the stamp, gesturing for her to begin. She bowed, then picked up one of the stamps. She tapped it against the ink pad twice, then caught my eye.

"This is the moment of truth," she said.

"G-go for it."

She pressed it to the back of one of the copies, hard.

When she pulled the stamp away—a red "Idiot" remained.

No problems so far. The ink ran a bit, but it was still clearly legible and in Furukawa's handwriting.

"Looks good," I said.

“Let’s try the others.”

Kurumi grabbed each of the other stamps in turn. The second one read, “Dunce.” The third, “Are you kidding?” The fourth, “Drop out.”

Each time Kurumi’s hands moved, another of Furukawa’s insults appeared. It was like using CTRL+V on a computer. A stream of them materialized. It was a bit surreal.

“Pfft... N-Natsume! I didn’t think it’d be so... Ha-ha-ha.”

“Yeah... Heh-heh. It’s pretty hilarious.”

She kept going, holding in her laughter.

Stamp. Dunce. *Stamp.* Are you kidding? *Stamp.* Drop out.

I’d hated these words, but now that they were silly little stamps, they just seemed so *funny*.

“Lemme try, Kurumi!”

“Go ahead. The quality will stun you.”

Even with me stamping them, Furukawa’s handwriting came out nice and clean.

It felt so odd. This abuse that used to make me nauseated was now in the palm of my hand. Malice directed at me was now under my control. It did exactly as I commanded. I felt a weight leave my shoulders. The very thing that had hurt me so much was now reduced to a silly prank.

“Hey, Natsume. I just had a great idea! Why not pass these out to all our teachers? Tell them they can save themselves the trouble of writing their insults out every time!”

“That’s a little *too* sarcastic. Though I am curious how they’d take it.”

“Same! Ha-ha-ha! They’d look like such idiots.”

We kept stamping as we laughed.

Within ten minutes, the entire sheet was filled with Furukawa’s insults. There was more red than white. I balled it up and tossed it in the trash.

Even that was fun. It gave me the same thrill I got from smoking. It was a rank, guilty kind of pleasure, like some evil thing deep inside me was feasting on that feeling and drowning in joy. I could keep doing this forever.

“...Okay, that’s enough.”

We were about halfway through the second sheet when Kurumi stopped, and I followed suit.

“Are we done testing, then?”

“Yes, the quality is clearly there. Let’s save the rest of the fun for the big day. If we overdo it now, the real thing won’t feel as exciting.”

The big day... Oh, right.

Our work today was merely preparation. Our crime would take place *later*.

The flush of excitement I’d felt rapidly drained away. My body cooled off, my pulse slowed down, and my head cleared. And as I calmed down, the rush gave way to anxiety.

“Kurumi... You called this the ‘Student Insult Redistribution Campaign,’ right? So we’re really going to do it?”

“But of course. Just making erasers is no different from fantasizing about punching your enemies. I need to punch them *for real*.” Her eyes narrowed. Her mean smile was back.

“...Yeah, I guess so.”

It was no use. Nothing would stop her. I’d known it all along.

What was driving her to this? I didn’t really know what this school’s laws meant to Kurumi. What had the teachers said or done to her? Maybe it was worse than what they’d done to me, or maybe she was simply more sensitive to it. There was so much I still didn’t know about her. And yet...

“You’re something else, Kurumi.”

“Oh yeah? I don’t know about that. I’m just a self-righteous girl out for revenge. I don’t think that’s anything worth praising.”

But she had a strong will and the ability to take action. I admired that. I envied

her commitment. I was still hesitant to do something so morally dubious as *rebel*.

“Okay, let’s plan out the big day.”

But she had leverage over me, and I had to go along with her.

I know, I know. I just have to do what you say, right, Kurumi?



We spent a few days scouting and firming up the details of our operation.

Our target: Furukawa, the second-year math teacher.

Our goal: To use the insult stamps on quizzes from his good classes.

We could have picked any teacher, but Kurumi said, “We used Furukawa’s handwriting to make the stamps, so we oughtta return the favor. Ha-ha.” So we went with that.

She had a real mean streak, this girl.

The big day would be Wednesday, for one simple reason: Furukawa taught one of his good classes first thing Thursday morning.

If we doctored their quizzes after school on Wednesday, he’d be handing them back the following morning. That would lower the chances of him noticing the graffiti and deciding not to return the answer sheets. The less time between our operation and our desired outcome, the better. Wednesday afternoon was our best shot. We were sure of it.

Finally, the big day arrived.

“Listen up!” declared Kurumi. “We strike in ten, at precisely seventeen hundred hours. Our intel suggests Furukawa will be away from his seat, monitoring club activities. Natsume, act swiftly, and complete your mission.”

Kurumi and I were in the Stargazing Club room, in our usual seats. Between us lay a chart detailing our operation. This was to be our final briefing before we began the mission.

“Once you’ve infiltrated the faculty office, you will advance to Furukawa’s

desk and stamp the quizzes with insults. I recommend centering your marks to lessen the likelihood of discovery before the sheets are distributed. Once your task is done, place anything you moved back to its original location, eliminating any signs of your presence, and beat a hasty retreat. Do I make myself clear?"

She shot me a serious look, so I nodded.

"So I'm the one who has to get my hands dirty?" I asked.

"On that point...I apologize. If I enter the second-year faculty office, it might arouse suspicion. Therefore, you're the best man for the job."

This was true. Saigou High was a large private school, and the faculty offices were divided by school year.

Kurumi was a first-year student, and she'd stick out like a sore thumb in the second-years' room. She could try to put on an act, but it made more sense to send me in instead. We didn't want to make this too complicated.

From the way she spoke and acted, I didn't think Kurumi was using me like a sacrificial pawn or a disposable foot soldier. *Well, probably not.* She'd made all the stamps, too, so it was only fair I swallowed my trepidations and carried out the deed. And as long as she had that photo of me smoking, I couldn't really argue.

I'd be fine. I knew where Furukawa's desk was. We'd figured out where he kept the quizzes and rehearsed the process. I knew just what to do.

Also, I'd be wearing a disguise. Even if I was caught red-handed, I could run for it, find some cover, ditch the disguise—and get away scot-free.

I took a deep breath. I was beginning to hyperventilate, but I forced air into my lungs.

"Natsume, are you nervous?"

Kurumi's two-tone hair swayed. She leaned in and looked up at me.

"Of course I am. Once I go in, there's no turning back. To borrow your phrase, I'm no longer 'fantasizing about punching people'—I'm actually going through with it. That's nerve-racking!"

"You're such a chicken! Even if they catch you, they'll just hurl their usual

insults.”

“...You’re probably right.”

“What am I gonna do with you...?” She let out an exasperated sigh, then put her hands on mine. “There, there. You’ll be fine. You can do this. If you get yelled at, I’ll stand with you.”

As she spoke, she rubbed the back of my hand.

“...!”

The sensation brought me some relief, but the idea that I was being mollified by an underclassman mortified me. My heart wavered between the two emotions for a spell, but the former quickly overtook the latter, and I found myself squeezing her hand back. She gripped mine a little harder.

“Mm. Well? Feeling any better?”

“...Yeah, a little.”

Kurumi let me go. “Good,” she said, smiling gently.

And then her lips curled into that mean smirk.

“Natsume, it’s time. Let’s commence our merry mission!”

*

Kurumi saw me off, and I headed toward the second-year faculty office.

I made my way quickly down the crowded hall. Students from lower-ranked classes were hurrying to the office to turn in their corrected quizzes, their gazes distant and hollow. Students from higher-ranked classes were showing off by asking about particularly difficult questions. Arrogant, overbearing teachers lectured them all. I slipped past them and through the office door.

Saigou High’s faculty offices were unusually accessible. It wasn’t quite to the point where anyone could walk in without knocking, but it was pretty close. The reason was that students were constantly going in and out to turn in their overdue homework.

The doors were left wide open, so I did a quick scan of the room beyond.

Two rows of desks—a very typical layout. A few of them were occupied, but as we'd predicted, no Furukawa. There was an average number of students present. Nothing out of the ordinary.

I glanced at the clock and saw that it was just past five. Time to commence the mission.

I took a deep breath, steadying my pulse.

I could do this. I'd come prepared. I wouldn't get caught, and if I did, I could make a clean getaway.

First, I was in disguise. I had fake glasses and a mask covering the lower half of my face. I'd be hard to identify at a glance. Even if I was caught red-handed, if I bolted, they wouldn't be able to pin anything on me.

Next, I had props. I was infiltrating the office with a cover story: I was a student turning in late homework. If I ran into Furukawa or another teacher, they might ask why I was there. As an excuse, I'd brought completed homework with me.

I also had a notebook and a pen. This would give me an excuse to be standing at Furukawa's desk for a while. I would appear to be leaving a note for the absent teacher.

We'd considered every possibility. I couldn't fail—or so I hoped.

.....

...How long was I going to stand here reassuring myself?

Move. It's time to do this. Make up your damn mind.

"...Phew."

I let out a short breath, then knocked on the door.

"Pardon me. I'm turning in some homework," I said, stepping in.

Four teachers were inside. None of them responded. They didn't even look up. Every single teacher remained focused on their own work.

Too many students stopped by the office for it to be worth their notice. Perhaps we were mere insects to them, nothing more than a mild nuisance.

Either way, this worked in my favor.

I moved quickly to Furukawa's desk. Fortunately, none of the teachers currently in the room sat near him.

Ideal. I swiveled my head once, as if I was looking for him, then faced the desk, searching it with my eyes alone.

...There.

The desk was covered in writing implements and documents. But toward the back and to the right, I saw a stack of half-sheet quizzes.

I squinted at the names. They belonged to Class 2-1. At our school, classes one through three were considered "good," so these were definitely the answer sheets I was here to doctor.

"Okay..."

Trying not to attract attention, I hunkered down and reached for the stack.

At that point, I realized my hands were shaking.

"....."

Once I did this, there was no turning back. Maybe I was being dramatic, but I felt like I was at a crossroads in my life.

Should I do this? It was my last chance to bail. If I fled now, Kurumi might bite my head off, but at least I could delay the decision.

My chest hurt. It was getting hard to breathe.

...What am I even doing? This is wrong. It's a huge mistake. I shouldn't be here.

Hesitating, I took a step back.

"...Oh."

I spotted something under Furukawa's desk and froze. It looked like a black plastic box, but I'd had cause to learn just what it was—a paper shredder, home office size.

"....."

It was a reminder of something I'd tried to forget.

My heart skipped a beat. I could feel a chill settling over my core. But at the same time, the blood in my brain was boiling like my skull was a kettle. It was a terrible feeling.

I didn't want to remember, and still the shame came flooding back.

It happened shortly after I enrolled at Saigou High. My score on the entrance exam had placed me in a lower-ranked class.

The school then was no different from now. If you turned in homework late, it'd be "You wanna die?" If you were called on in class and couldn't answer, it'd be "You're a dunce." A bad grade on a pop quiz would earn you "Get the hell out of this school."

I endured abuse from the teachers and sneers from the better students.

Less than a month after enrolling, I already knew lower-ranking students like me had no rights.

I was a sensitive kid, and I just wanted to live quietly.

I never asked for praise or a kind word. I just wanted to be left to my own devices—to live my life.

So I studied. I hoped to climb my way out of the lower-ranked classes. I'd get grades good enough that they wouldn't complain, and they'd leave me alone.

I devoted all my waking hours to studying, and I was seeing some results.

Halfway through my first year, there was a test to redetermine class placement.

I got a decent score and was moved to a better class. I was relieved. I'd escaped being treated like an animal.

...Or so I thought.

But in the end, I realized I'd been wrong.

The day before my transfer took place, Furukawa and the head teacher for our year called for me.

I was summoned to the student guidance room. And there, they offered me some extremely helpful advice.

"Natsume, don't get giddy just because you've moved up."

"You had the best grades of anyone in the lower-ranked classes, so we had to pick you. But you're still trash, no better than the rest."

"Remember that you're still the worst student in the upper-ranked classes. You're a monkey on monkey mountain that just happened to learn a few tricks. Don't let it go to your head."

"If your grades slip even a little, you'll be right back in the garbage classes. If you don't want that happening, you better study like your life depends on it. You're dumb as a rock, remember?"

The teachers might not think of me that way, but I was a human being.

Their torrent of abuse infuriated me. I was incensed. I'd cut into my sleep time to study, and *this* was all it had earned me? I was livid.

I hadn't expected them to praise me. I knew better than that, and I'd made my peace with it. But I'd worked my ass off to become human, and that work had paid off—and this abuse was way out of line. These were not the words you said to someone who'd done their best and applied themselves.

Rather than freedom, my efforts had just earned me more of the same.

I couldn't stand it. And so I slipped up and complained. In hindsight, that was my first show of resistance.

"...I worked really hard to get into a better class, and this is how you treat me? You called me here for *this*?"

Both teachers sighed and heaped fivefold more insults on me.

They claimed they'd taken time out of their busy schedules to offer me advice, and they were appalled by how I was repaying them. That only proved I was an idiot. No wonder I'd been in the lower-ranked classes. I was worthless.

They went on and on like that.

The upshot? I had to write an apology essay.

I didn't understand why I was having to apologize, so I just half-assed it. "Sorry this monkey acted out. I'll do my best to perform my new monkey tricks." This earned me more insults and an order to redo the essay.

I was *done*.

I couldn't deal with this. I just wanted a stress-free life.

I wrote out what they wanted: "I couldn't accept my teachers' benevolent guidance. I apologize for my inappropriate attitude." And this time, it was accepted—if you could really call what I got "acceptance."

Furukawa took the essay from me, skimmed it for a few seconds, and said, "Okay."

Then he ran it through the shredder right in front of me—the one under his desk.

I still can't really put my feelings into words.

Maybe I was angry, maybe I was just numb. Maybe I hated him, maybe I was just lost at sea.

The one thing I can say for sure is that the emotions I felt in that moment were not the kind of thing you let other people see. They were dirty, foul, and nasty. The stuff you'd find at the bottom of a cesspool.

I'd killed my soul to write that essay, and he just shredded it. What went through my head that day? Maybe I do have the words.

Die in a fire, you piece of shit.

My mind was dragged back to reality.

The world around me felt brighter than before, but the sounds were muffled, like they were far away.

I'd felt like this once as a kid, when I got lost. The anxiety and tension built up inside me had taken their toll on me physically, and the world had stopped feeling real.

"....."

Even since that shredder incident, I'd let everything slip. The teachers treated me like a nuisance, and I quit studying and took up smoking. It all came back to that shredder.

I'd been letting my loathing fester ever since.

...It all makes sense now.

There were lots of teachers who used a thick pen, just like Furukawa. So why had I insisted we choose him? ...It was because *he* was the one I had it in for.

Maybe this was just a nasty, one-sided grudge, but he was an awful teacher, and I wanted to take him down. I wanted payback, and it didn't matter how I got it.

But my morals had kept those feelings at bay up until now. I saw everything I did as my personal responsibility, and that made me hesitate to make mistakes. That impulse had stopped me.

And so I'd relied on Kurumi. I admired her drive and hoped she'd do what I couldn't.

Yeah. That's right. I've finally put it into words.

I was using Kurumi's blackmail as an excuse to get revenge on Furukawa.

"I'm no match for our ringleader." Yeah, right.

I was ready to become her accomplice right from the start. I had a lot more in

common with her than I'd wanted to admit.

Something cracked inside me. It was like some device keeping my reason in check, regulating my emotions, had broken for good.

To hell with it. Who cares if this is wrong?!

The impulse I felt right now mattered more than my morals, more than being "responsible."

The laws of this school were inhumane—the faculty were the ones really in the wrong.

Beneath my hesitation, deep inside my heart, I'd always craved vengeance. And now that I was conscious of it, it was too late. This went beyond consciousness, beyond reason and instinct. None of that mattered anymore. I was no longer who'd I'd been before. Now I was the *real* me.

"...!"

For a moment, everything went white. All sound vanished.

The next thing I knew, I had the ink pad out, and I was stamping away. I placed an insult right in the center of each answer sheet, one page after the other. Flipping noisily through the papers, I made the quizzes into my own personal rebellion.

I did just as we'd practiced. My motions were flawless, not a single wasted movement.

When I realized my lungs were empty and begging for air, I calmed down a bit.

...I had to get out of here soon, or someone would catch me.

I straightened up and moved toward the door, trying not to walk too quickly. I glanced at the teachers in passing. *Please. Don't notice me.*

"Pardon me," I said—and then I was out the door.

The hall was empty, so I dropped my disguise and hustled back to Kurumi in the clubroom. My nerves were far too raw to soothe on my own.

When I stepped inside, Kurumi put her book down and ran up to me.

“Well done, Natsume. Let’s hear your report.”

“...I stamped ten quizzes that had no insults on them.”

“Did anyone follow you?”

“No. They didn’t notice a thing.”

Kurumi’s lips curled up in a grin. “Excellent. Heh-heh. You’ve really outdone yourself!” She reached up to pat my head.

My heart was racing. The thrill of my illicit activities had set my mind on fire.

Something ran down my spine, not quite a chill, not quite a shock. Then all the tension drained from my body, and I crumpled to the floor.

I’m so doomed.

This was a guilty pleasure far stronger than any cigarette.

Our operation succeeded, and the outcome was pretty much as we’d imagined.

Furukawa failed to notice the insults and passed the quizzes out on Thursday morning. Inevitably, the students saw them and protested.

“I only got one wrong. Why should I drop out?”

“I can’t believe you got so lazy you made stamps!”

I had my ears peeled, but I needn’t have bothered. Word reached the lower-ranked classes before the day was out. It was the talk of the school.

When Furukawa revealed the marks were stamps, he only added fuel to the fire. He claimed that someone else had stamped the tests—and the good students were flabbergasted.

“A stamp mimicking a teacher’s handwriting?”

“Is someone rebelling against the school?”

“Who did it?!”

Word of our exploits was on everyone’s lips.

It was lunch break on Friday—two days after our first strike.

“Did you hear? It’s about the stamp incident! They’ve got a suspect in Class two.”

“Really? Why do you think they did it? Jealous of Class one?”

“Where’d you hear that? I heard Furukawa got blowback over using stamps, so he tried to blame a student.”

I was nibbling a nutrition bar in the corner of the classroom, eavesdropping.

The other second-years had been talking about our crimes all morning. The rumors refused to die down. In hindsight, the fact that we’d used eraser stamps was inherently funny, which only helped fan the flames. It felt like we were openly mocking the teachers’ abusive language. This was an unexpected delight. And the more the other students gossiped, the further from the truth they got, lowering the chances I’d get caught. *Keep going, everyone! Gossip all you like!*

“.....”

Keeping one ear open for further developments, I took a moment to assess our progress.

I wasn’t sure if this plan had successfully turned any of the students into our supporters, but it *had* turned the better classes against the teachers’ insults. And everyone knew someone out there was fighting back. I figured that was good enough.

Pleased with myself, I quit listening and focused on my meal. I munched away at the nutrition bar, staring out into space. Eventually, I tossed the last piece into my mouth, chewed, and swallowed. I was done.

But as I stood up to toss away the packaging...

“Say, Natsume.”

...I heard a soprano voice coming from the seat next to mine, and I jumped.

Did she just say my name? Was I hearing things?

Since I was the only one spared the teachers' insults, my classmates shunned me. Without exception, no student in this class ever spoke to me—at least, not until now. The boys ignored me, and the girls picked up on that and avoided me as well. Yet someone had broken that rule, right as everyone was talking about the resistance.

I could only think of one explanation.

I didn't want to consider it. I hoped against hope it wasn't true, but...

...could there be a detective in our class?

"Natsume?"

I wanted to run for it, but that would be like an admission of guilt.

I slowly turned toward the voice. The girl next to me had medium-length brown hair that looked great on her. Her pale skin and delicate, elfin features made her more "pretty" than "cute." She was of average height, but her long legs made her seem more mature.

So this was the student who had called my name.

I was at least aware of her. She sat next to me, after all. I thought her name was... Yes, Yumi Tanaka.

"Um, Tanaka? What is it?"

"You remembered my name," she murmured, her eyes widening. Then she sighed. "Sorry, it's no big deal. Just...did you hear about the stamp incident?"

"...Uh, well, yeah."

I did my best to maintain a poker face.

Oh, crap. She's on to me. Dammit, I thought I was in the clear!

Did she have hard evidence? If not, I could still get out of this. I just had to play my cards right. Could I ad-lib some kind of excuse?

I decided to let her make the first move. I just had to stay calm no matter what she said.

Steeling myself, I waited... But her next words caught me off guard.

“It scares me.”

“Y-yeah, it’s pretty frightening.”

“.....”

“.....”

Tanaka didn’t say another word and simply took her seat. She didn’t elaborate on her deductions or say “just one more thing” and follow it up with some devastating question. She just looked genuinely rattled.

...Huh? That’s it? Why’d she talk to me, then?

I searched her face for answers, but she just cocked her head at me.

It didn’t seem like she was hiding anything. She looked...confused. What was she after? Had she just wanted to share that thought with someone? Had she picked me on a whim?

I didn’t get it. And the more I thought about it, the less sense her actions made.

✱

“Ready, Natsume? Cheers!”

“Cheers.”

We squished two plastic cups together, and they deformed, making a rather pathetic sound.

It was after school, and Kurumi and I were in the Stargazing Club room, holding a celebration.

Three types of chips and cookies in large bags were laid out on the table, along with a liter of orange juice. This might sound like the kind of meager spread you’d find on a side table in some TV studio’s greenroom, but there were only two of us, so it was plenty.

Kurumi chugged her juice and let out a satisfied gasp.

“Wow, I didn’t think things would turn out this well!”

“Yeah. It worked out better than I expected.”



“You nailed it, Natsume. A flawless performance. Color me impressed.”

“I couldn’t have done it on my own. It’s all thanks to you, Kurumi.”

I meant what I said, and she turned bashful, muttering, “Was it?” and fiddling with her newsboy hat. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was clearly tickled pink.

The outcome of our resistance effort was something we could be proud of. And this was Kurumi’s plan, so she’d earned this celebration.

I was still wondering why Tanaka had suddenly spoken to me... But I wasn’t going to bring that up now. Kurumi wasn’t even in our grade. She wouldn’t know what to make of it. Besides, it didn’t seem like Tanaka suspected anything, so I figured I should just put it out of my head.

“I hope our actions will lead more students to work toward change,” said Kurumi.

“I wonder. It’s still too soon to say.”

“What if another resistance group springs up? Mwa-ha-ha! That’d be so cool. Maybe the new group will oppose us! You’ll have to take a stand, Natsume. ‘Our real enemies are the teachers! We can’t fight among ourselves!’”

“Why is that *my* line? It sounds like something out of a third-rate anime. That kinda thing doesn’t happen in real life.”

“Aw, but wouldn’t it be fun? You’re such a killjoy. Dream a little, why don’t you?”

Kurumi handed me a cookie, so I ate it. Would this give me dreams? Who could say?

For a while, we munched away on our snacks.

Once we’d filled up a bit and slowed down, Kurumi wiped her hands and mouth with a handkerchief. Then she rummaged through her bag and pulled out that yellow notebook.

“So what next?” she said.

“Already planning another caper?”

“You betcha. We’ve scored big-time, and now we’ve gotta follow it up! Strike while the iron’s hot!”

Was that really necessary? *Fine, I’m at her beck and call. I’m in no position to sweat the details.*

Kurumi flipped through the notebook’s pages for a while.

I sipped at my juice and basked in the moment. As I waited, wondering what she’d pull from her notebook next, I was filled with equal parts anxiety and excitement. I was actually enjoying myself. I felt a rush, like I was about to open an unexpected present. Now that I knew she wasn’t likely to suggest homicide, I was able to appreciate the tension without any of the dread I’d felt the first time.

Kurumi went back and forth between several pages for a few minutes before settling on one at last.

“This oughtta do. I call it ‘Memeification of the Teachers’ Insults.’”

Her taste in naming was as bad as ever.

“And what will that entail?” I asked.

After a few gulps of juice, she continued. “Let me begin with this idea’s inspiration. Natsume, are you familiar with the word *meme*? It’s a little more common overseas than it is in Japan.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard it before. You mean those things on the internet, right?”

Memes were popular phrases, images, and the like that got passed around online. Weird pictures like a cat flying through space, that Rick Astley song, or phrases like “Just do it.”

“Um, so our goal this time is to intentionally cause the same phenomenon using our teachers’ insults.”

Hmm. In other words...

“We’re supposed to take the teachers’ cruel words, goof on them, and spread the trend around the school?”

“Goof? Well, word choice aside, that’s the basic idea.”

“Okay. And what will that achieve?”

“Well, by making fun of our teachers’ abusive language, we can cheer up the whole school. And hopefully having the students mock them will shame the teachers into thinking a little more about what they say. We’ll be killing two birds with one stone.”

Aha. So that’s what she’s after.

Getting everyone to goof on our teachers wasn’t a bad idea. All it would involve was students joking around. No problems there. That is, if we could make it happen.

It was a good plan, but with one caveat.

“The trick will be how to get the ball rolling,” I said. “The idea has potential, but can we really get everyone to go along with it?”

“Point taken. I’m not sure. Any ideas?”

“Guess we’ve gotta brainstorm.”

We’d just stocked up on sugar, and now it was time to burn through it. Both of us thought hard.

We needed to get everyone to go along with the trend. It was easy to say, but I had no idea how to achieve something like that. Kurumi seemed equally at a loss. She was twirling a pen in her fingers.

“Hmm, this is a toughie,” she said. “How do you get people to riff on something?”

“If it’s funny and easy to copy, it generally takes off on its own.”

“True... Natsume, can you whip something up for us?”

“If I could do that, I’d drop out today and become a comedian.”

“Huh? ...Come on, Natsume. It doesn’t matter what, just do something funny.”

“Me? Right now? Don’t be absurd.”

“Aww, you won’t even try? Well, you can’t refuse. Otherwise, I’ll just have to spread around this photo of you smoking... You don’t want that, right? Go on,

give it your best shot.”

She waved her phone around and smirked at me. *Horrible. What a monster.*

...But now I’d had a few minutes to think, and I had an idea—an imitation that might get people laughing.

I guess I don’t have a choice. Time to break a leg. This was inherently mortifying, but it was better than anyone seeing that picture. *Wait, am I sure about that? Maybe I’d rather she just expose me.*

No, don’t overthink this. I’ve got to focus. This is all for the sake of our vengeance!

“Fine! I’m going to do an imitation of our principal during morning assemblies.”

“Oh! Promising.”

“...Ahem. ‘One of my favorite idioms is *Dripping water hollows out stone*, but it has come to my attention that some of you here are not aware of its true meaning. I believe that to be a crying shame.’”

“.....”

Kurumi looked me dead in the eye for several seconds before scrunching up her face like she’d just eaten something sour. I could hear crickets chirping.

Wow. I’d never bombed this hard before. Incidentally, I’d never been given the opportunity to make someone laugh before, and my record was now zero wins, one loss, out of a total of one round played. It was my first failure, but it was also my first try.

“Natsume, your imitation sucked so bad, I don’t have a choice. I’m sharing this picture.”

“No, no, wait! That wasn’t the deal!”

I leaned in, and she pushed me back and cackled. “I’m kidding!”

“Don’t scare me like that.”

“Sorryyy! Well, it’s true that you sucked.”

“Hurtful. Kurumi. Have you never heard the principal say that before?”

“No, I’ve heard it. But...funny imitations aren’t about your audience recognizing the line. It comes down to whether or not you can convey their *vibes*.”

“Convey their vibes, huh? ...You mean, the more I exaggerate, the better?”

“Not exactly. But...some exaggeration might help.”

Hmm. She had a point. I’d seen comedians doing impressions on TV and laughed even when I didn’t have a clue who they were mimicking. There was more to this kind of thing than just copying a familiar phrase. I needed to delve deeper.

“Put this experience to good use!” said Kurumi. “Try again.”

“Do I have to? You’re a real taskmaster, you know that?”

“Natsume, think of the photo!”

Grinning, Kurumi played with her phone with one hand as she placed the other atop the desk. I saw no shame on her face. She was reveling in this.

“You win,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

“Great! That’s the spirit! You’re adorable... So? What’s this one called?”

“Called? Uh...‘Japanese Instructor Shimizu Asserting Dominance with Five-Dollar Vocabulary.’”

Kurumi didn’t seem to know this teacher’s name and stared at me, baffled. I’d expected this, since Shimizu was a second-year teacher.

I cleared my throat, making my voice as naggy as possible.

“‘Maladroit. Nescient. Dilatory. Jeune. Yes, all words that describe *you*. Well? Aren’t you insulted? Yes, if you do not learn, you won’t even know when someone is disparaging you. That’s right, you and I are not even in the same dimension.’”

“...Pfft.”

“Was that a laugh? Did I make you laugh?”

“S-so? I was supposed to laugh, wasn’t I? Don’t look, you’re making me blush!” Kurumi turned her back to me and fanned herself.

Hell yeah. I totally nailed it. I defeated Kurumi! I finally came out on top.

“Glad I managed to amuse you,” I said.

“Don’t let it go to your head... But loath as I am to admit it, that was pretty good. I don’t even know the teacher, and I could totally hear their voice.”

Okay, so getting the target’s essence across was critical. I’d made an important discovery. Putting aside my embarrassment and imitating the teacher’s voice and speech style made it much easier to get laughs.

I poured myself a new cup of juice, took a sip, and realized something. Why was I trying to become a stand-up comedian?

“Back up, Kurumi. Somehow, I ended up doing impressions, but wasn’t the goal to get everyone else goofing on the teachers? I’m not gonna go running around the school making people laugh. That’d be completely out of character.”

“You’re worried about staying in character, Natsume? Despite being at my beck and call?”

“Shush. I’m saying that we need a better approach!”

Kurumi put an index finger to her lips and groaned. We spent a little while eating snacks, sipping our juice, and thinking.

“Character...vibes...trending... Oh!” Kurumi thumped a fist against her palm.

“Have you got something?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Not sure if it’s a good plan, but it’s worth a shot.”



Kurumi’s new idea was fairly risk-free, so we put it into action the very next day.

I ate lunch quickly in the classroom, then headed to the second main school building. It was on the west side of campus and contained the first-year students’ classrooms. Blending in with the younger students on their way back from the cafeteria, I headed to our prearranged meeting spot.

Yesterday, Kurumi said she’d be waiting at the far end of the hall.

.....

Ah, there she is.

The gray underlayer of her hair was hidden, but I managed to spot her in the outdoor passageway connecting the first-years' building to the new club annex.

She was standing next to a boy with a crew cut, just as she'd promised. She'd done her part.

I checked my phone. It was time to commence the mission.

I moved closer to Kurumi and the boy, pretending like I belonged here.

"Oh, Natsume! Yoo-hoo!" Kurumi called as I got closer. *Good, she's spotted me.*

Acting like I'd just noticed her, I turned my head.

"Mm? Oh, Kurumi. What's up?"

"Aoki here was just showing me a funny impression."

"Uh, h-hi. I'm Aoki."

When Kurumi said the boy's name, he awkwardly rubbed the back of his head and introduced himself.

I appreciate it, Aoki, but I already know who you are. Aoki was a class clown, and Kurumi said he was always doing impressions for the other guys in class. Our plan hinged on him getting everyone else to start mimicking teachers.

"Oh! Natsume, you've gotta see what Aoki can do! He's so good! He'll blow your mind!"

We'd scripted this encounter ahead of time, but Kurumi really made it sound off the cuff.

"Wait, Hoshimiya!" Aoki yelped. "Don't raise his expectations like that!"

I supposed she *was* putting him on the spot. Sadly, we weren't about to let him escape. Right now, I needed to play the mean upperclassman.

"You do imitations, Aoki? Come on, let's see what you've got."

"Seriously? I gotta do an impression right now? That's way too

embarrassing!”

“Prove yourself, Aoki,” chimed in Kurumi. “You’ve got the skills.”

“Augh... But... Oh no...”

He pretended to hem and haw, but every time Kurumi said, “Please!” he’d soften up a little more, and eventually, he agreed.

This bugged me for some reason I couldn’t quite put my finger on. But we needed him to do at least one imitation, or our script couldn’t progress. I had to put my feelings aside.

Aoki cleared his throat. “Well, here goes nothing. This one’s called, ‘Famous Actor with a Really Weird Way of Speaking Stops a Shoplifter.’”

This was clearly one of his trademark routines and was very high-quality. He wasn’t just copying the celebrity’s speaking style but the pitch of their voice, their facial expressions, and even their body language. His only line was ‘Hey, hey, stop that!’ but it had the quality of a lasting gag. He’d definitely nailed the *vibes*, as Kurumi said.

I was legitimately impressed. But I wasn’t allowed to laugh here.

I maintained a faint smile as I watched him work.

“Wh-what’d you think?” he asked nervously.

I felt bad for making him squirm like that. I looked at him apologetically and said, “Uh... I’m sure it’s a great impression, but I don’t know the actor. Makes it kinda hard to laugh. I’m not that big into TV.”

“What? I had no idea! My bad.”

“It’s okay. How could you? It’s my fault for not keeping up.”

I felt even worse when he apologized to me. Of course I knew that actor. I watched plenty of TV, and Aoki’s impression was hilarious. But I had to forget my feelings of guilt and move down our script.

“You do anyone else, Aoki?”

“Sure, but...if you don’t watch TV, celebrities are kind of off the table, huh?” He frowned, thinking. Ideally, he’d think of mimicking a teacher here—but

would we be that lucky? “Oh! I got it! What about ‘Mall Boutique Staff Tries to Attract Customers by Repeatedly Promising Great Deals’?!”

I’d love to see that, I really would. I could see Kurumi doing her best to suppress a grin. Unfortunately, that didn’t suit our goals.

“Sorry, I’ve never been to a mall.”

“Really?! What else is there?!”

“Hey, Aoki,” said Kurumi. “What about a teacher? Natsume goes here, so he’s gotta know *them*.”

“Oh, a teacher! Yeah, that make sense!”

Smooth, Kurumi. Nice job.

Aoki clapped his hands together, nodded, then turned back to me.

“Uh, you know the head teacher for our grade, Shimazaki?”

“Yeah, I know him. The dude who always blows his top at assemblies, right?”

“Yes, exactly! I’ll do him next!” Aoki thrust his hands in his pockets. ““Yo, yo, pipe down, we can’t hear! Don’t make me say it again, nitwits!””

Kurumi started laughing first.

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s so him! Natsume, Aoki’s dead-on, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, totally! That sounded just like him,” I agreed.

“Y-you think?” he said. “Sweet! Thanks!”

Our praise clearly delighted Aoki. His imitation was really good. He’d recreated the teacher’s angry tone and loud volume flawlessly. I couldn’t believe he was this talented even improvising. This guy was on another level.

I decided it was time to build up his repertoire with a request.

“Aoki, can you do anyone else? What about Takagi from English Conversation?”

“Oh? You know Takagi? Uh, sure. This is ‘Takagi Three Seconds from Snapping ‘Cause No One Did Their Homework’!”

Kurumi and I kept encouraging Aoki to do impressions of different faculty

members. Fortunately, he was great at all of them, and I felt zero guilt about showering him with compliments. I could simply tell myself I was being honest. It was almost like we were just enjoying Aoki's performances and not tricking some unwitting kid into aiding our rebellion.

We ran him through three or four more impressions, then had him do a repeat performance of the best ones. It was quite fun.

When the warning bell rang, signaling five minutes until the beginning of afternoon classes, we split up.

"Oh, crap!" exclaimed Aoki. "I forgot to give my adviser some paperwork! Sorry, guys, I gotta go!"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm the one who kept you here. It was fun, thanks."

"Preciate it! Later, Hoshimiya."

"Bye!" she said, waving.

We watched him vanish into the crowd.

A solid ten seconds after he was gone, I whispered, "Think it worked?"

"Good question. It's up to Aoki now."

"Yeah. Well, good effort."

"Yep. We tried our best."

We bumped fists behind our backs, so no one else could see.



We'd nominated Aoki as the influencer most likely to start our desired trend for two reasons.

He was a class clown, yes—but he was also on the baseball team.

Our school's baseball team had a reputation for fostering good relationships across all three grades. If we buttered up Aoki, there was a good chance he'd show off his imitations to the second-and third-years on the team. And since he was a class clown, he probably did imitations for them all the time. We were banking on that spreading the trend throughout the school.

In the end, our expectations paid off. A few days after we spoke with Aoki, I heard some classmates talking.

“One of the underclassmen on the team’s been doing impressions of our teachers. He’s pretty funny!”

“Huh? Impressions? Which teachers?”

“Shimazaki, among others. We had his class last year, right? He was always banging people’s desks with the textbook.”

We saw other people imitating teachers, too, though it was mostly centered on baseball team members and those around them.

From what I could see, teachers who made strong impressions or had clear gimmicks got mimicked the most. There were about two or three students in each class who picked it up, a few boys with a knack for it, making their friends laugh. I was just counting the people I saw in the halls, so I didn’t have the precise numbers, and it was hard to gauge how much of it was our doing.

I only saw two teachers who noticed people goofing on them and got mad about it. Both spotted students doing impressions, snapped instantly, and chewed the culprits’ heads off. After that, it seemed like fewer students were willing to join in. The threat of getting yelled at ended the fad pretty quickly.

It was hard to evaluate our success. You could argue we had little to show for our efforts, but you could also say we got a proportionate return for the risk we’d taken.

One thing was for sure, though—I wasn’t the least bit satisfied.

“Starting trends is hard...,” I muttered to no one in particular.

School was over, and I was watching the other students drift back into their usual routines.

“What was that, Natsume?” came a soprano voice from behind me.

I turned to find Tanaka peering down at me, looking depressed. I didn’t think she’d been so close to me a moment ago. When did she get there?

“Sorry, did I startle you? Were you talking to yourself?” She smiled and tipped her head to the side.

I’d spoken very quietly, but clearly she’d overheard. I’d have to talk my way out of this somehow.

“Uh... I was just thinking about trending songs. I heard the other guys talking about them.”

“Oh, okay. Do you listen to a lot of music, Natsume?”

“Some. I mostly just watch videos of the stuff everyone’s listening to.”

“That’s nice. Lots of artists upload music themselves these days.”

“.....”

“.....”

Oops, the conversation died.

Seriously, why is she talking to me? The fact that she’d made a second attempt meant the first probably wasn’t some random whim.

Whatever, I don’t need to think about this too deeply. She doesn’t seem to suspect me of anything. I should just ignore her and head to the clubroom.

But just as I picked up my backpack...

“Er, um,” Tanaka said, bracing herself.

Uh-oh. Now that I’d let my guard down, was she going to launch into her detective speech?

“I studied piano when I was younger. I still listen to a lot of classical music.”

Apparently not.

“Huh? Oh... Um, you did?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. So, um...” Tanaka scratched her cheek, though I couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed or just feeling awkward. “Can we talk again? I’d like to know what music you like, Natsume. But, um...if you prefer being alone, that’s...totally fine. It’s just...” Her elfin features took on a bashful cast. There was real warmth in the expression.

So that's it. That's why she's talking to me.

I was a total idiot to connect this to the resistance, to assume she was a detective out to expose me. She was just *nice*, speaking to me out of the goodness of her heart.

Right at the end, she'd brought up how isolated I was in class, but she seemed hesitant to dig deeper. This was enough information for even a thick-headed doofus like me to get the idea. Under several layers of politeness, she was likely saying this: "If you like being alone, fine. But if you don't, I feel sorry for you, and I'm willing to talk to you."

Phrasing it like that sounded a little condescending, but I didn't really mind. It was a fact that my position in class was tenuous, and I didn't *actually* like being all alone.

If Tanaka was willing to chat with me, that would make me genuinely happy.

The moment I cottoned on, there was only one answer for me to give.

"Sure. I'll recommend some songs to you next time."

"...Okay, thanks."

It took her a second, but she nodded.

And that was how Tanaka and I started talking in class.

✱

At the Stargazing Club, we skipped the planning session and held a postmortem.

We sat in our usual chairs, and I relayed what I'd seen and heard: Imitations of teachers had seen a short if small boom, and a few teachers had taken issue with it. Whether that counted as success was pretty subjective.

Kurumi's observations were more or less the same. If the fad hadn't even taken off in Aoki's own grade, then it was safe to assume this plan was a dud.

"Well, it wasn't an outright failure, at least," Kurumi said. She could tell I was disappointed and kept her tone bright. "Little schemes like this will add up over

time. It's like landing body blows in boxing."

"Yeah... I hope so."

"Argh, it's not the end of the world! We're fine! Now everyone knows imitating teachers will get laughs! This is only the beginning!"

It was true that our goal with this mission was less about open rebellion than about inspiring more people to fight back. Maybe one day there'd be another rash of imitations. We'd just have to keep our eyes peeled.

Our first plan had simply gone too well. Our results this time were closer to what we should be expecting, realistically speaking.

I sighed and stood up. "Sorry, Kurumi, I'm gonna step out."

"Where to, Natsume? Done talking already?"

"No, no. I'm just gonna hit the roof for a smoke break."

I was trying to cheer myself up, since our resistance efforts had left me unsatisfied.

"Eww, don't do that. I really hate the smell." Kurumi stuck out her tongue.

"I won't be smoking in front of you, Kurumi."

"But you'll still reek of it when you get back! Quit that stuff already."

"Easy for you to say... I just need a smoke to clear my head, okay?"

"Nope, not okay! You've gotta vent that stress some other way!"

"Got any suggestions?"

"Well... Uh... I'm a bit light on the specifics at the moment..." Kurumi pouted and folded her arms below her meager chest.

You suggested it, and now you're fresh out of ideas? That thought had barely crossed my mind when Kurumi made a noise and turned bright red. As she blushed furiously, her gaze flicked to me and then back again.

"So... N-Natsume. You said doing bad things made you feel like you were getting back at the school and boosted your mood, right? Isn't that why you started smoking?"

“Hmm? Yeah. It’s just an empty gesture, but it helps.”

“So it’s not the nicotine that relieves your tension, then?”

“Nicotine? I guess not. I never let the smoke into my lungs anyway.”

“Hmm. Heh. Heh-heh. Well, there are better ways to relieve stress than cigarettes. In fact, I just thought of one.”

“Did you now? What is it?”

Kurumi didn’t respond immediately. She silently got to her feet and came over to me. Then she put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me toward the wall.

“Er, wait, what? Kurumi?”

“Trust me, Natsume. Bend your knees a little.”

“L-like this?”

I knelt slightly. My back was up against the wall now.

This reversed the difference in our heights. Kurumi’s head was framed against the fluorescent lights. Her face cast a shadow onto mine.

“Heh-heh, perfect. Now stay still.”

Her expression alarmed me. She looked like a predator on the hunt for her next meal, or a swordmaster about to win a duel. Her eyes were a mix of ferocity and calculated intensity.

...What *was* this? Was she slamming me against the wall like I was some girl in a romance manga? What else could this be?

Before I could ponder it further, she answered all my questions.

“Excuse me, Natsume,” she said, cupping the back of my head with her hand.

“Huh? Mmph?!”

Something soft sealed my lips.

In laymen’s terms, this was a kiss. I’d heard they were just a greeting in some European countries, though they probably didn’t mean this kind of kiss. We were now engaged in full-on, mouth-to-mouth lip locking.

“Gasp! Kurumi...?”

“Don’t speak. Not another word. Mm!”

When I tried to protest, she drowned my voice in another kiss.

Our breath mingled. Our noses rubbed. We could feel each other’s body heat.

Kurumi’s soft lips pressed hard against mine, smashing into them. I’d never done anything like this, so it was hard to be sure, but the way she was kissing me felt desperate, like she was trying to obscure her inexperience with enthusiasm.

The brim of her cat-eared newsboy cap bumped my forehead, and it fell off and hit the floor. Kurumi ignored it and continued passionately pressing her lips against mine.

“Smooch... Natsume...”

Her lovely features filled my vision.

Naturally, I had questions. I was confused. But all of those emotions were overwhelmed by the sheer shock and embarrassment.

Honestly, I had no clue what I was doing. Kurumi had a firm grip on my head, and I couldn’t squirm away—so I just let her work. All I could do was stand there while she kissed me, playing with my lips and tugging at them with hers.

It was several minutes before she let me go. Our kiss had been long and intense. It was now seared into my memory, burned into my soul. I knew I’d never forget it.

“Gasp! ...K-Kurumi, what was that about?”

“Hahh...hahh... What else? It was a kiss! Oh, was it your first one, Natsume? I’m sorry. But it was mine, too, so we’re even.”

I’d asked because I was genuinely curious. I wasn’t accusing her of anything, and I was pretty sure my expression backed that up.

“Dating is against school rules, remember?” she said.

“Um, what? ...Er, I guess you’re right,” I said, not quite catching her point.

“Exactly! But here we have a boy and a girl in a clubroom, making out behind

the teachers' backs. Improper relations! That's even worse than dating!" Kurumi looked extremely proud of herself. "We're not supposed to do stuff like this, but we're doing it anyway. Just like you and your cigarettes."

"...You mean, you thought this would relieve my stress?"

"That's the idea, yeah. In your mind, smoking is a kind of rebellion. So why shouldn't kissing be just as effective? Doesn't it give you a guilty thrill? It sure got me going. Heh-heh!" She was clearly blushing, and I felt a jolt shoot through my body in response. "You're only smoking because you need to feel like you're fighting back. It helps you vent your frustration. So replace your cigarettes with my lips! They're both crimes."

"....."

I couldn't argue with that.

I didn't have a nicotine addiction. I didn't even like the taste of tobacco smoke.

All I really wanted was to lash out at our stupid school and how it treated the lower-scoring students. I'd simply chosen cigarettes as a symbolic gesture, since it was such a classic delinquent behavior.

Yeah. The more I thought about it, the more I realized having an inappropriate relationship with Kurumi would be just as effective... Or, well, it made sense in my head, but that didn't mean I had no qualms.

Praying she couldn't hear how loud my heart was beating, I asked, "You're okay with that, Kurumi? I get you don't like the smell of smoke, but are you sure you're not forcing yourself to, uh...make out with me? I wouldn't want that. I can make do with smoking."

"You don't need to worry about that," she said, shrugging me off. "I'm past caring about stuff like that. We're freedom fighters now! We're up to no good! Who cares about a little kissing? We can't let propriety hold us back!"

...I guess she has a point.

We were using every underhanded means at our disposal to overthrow this rotten school—propriety no longer meant anything to us. Morality, purity—it

was time to grind that stuff up and feed it to the dogs. We'd thrown out normal behavior with the dishwater. The act of making out was no longer something to be placed on a pedestal, out of reach.

When I looked at it that way, all my concerns faded away.

I had no reason to reject Kurumi's proposal or tell her off. My lips were hardly precious. She could do whatever she wanted with them.

I turned my gaze away from Kurumi's mouth and faked an exasperated tone. "Fine, if you say so."

"Sounds like you're trying to put all the blame on me. All right, be that way." She shot me a heavy-lidded glare.

She'd seen right through me. Now I was even more embarrassed.

"Then it's settled! From this point on, you will stop smoking. Instead, we'll make out. Come on, Natsume. Let's go for a second round. This time with tongue."

"W-wait, tongue?!"

Before I could get another word out, her lips had covered mine once again. I wasn't sure about this tongue thing, but my feeble resistance was easily put down.

I could feel Kurumi's tongue trying hard to pry my lips apart. I kept them pressed tightly together, shutting her out. But after a while I had to take a breath, and I was forced to open my mouth. She quickly took the opportunity to wedge her tongue inside.

It met mine and tangled with it inside my mouth. Our spit mixed together as her tongue rubbed against my sensitive tissues, stimulating them. I fought back, as if trying to force out the foreign object, to beat back this interloper.

The friction gave way to heat. Wet noises and ragged breath bounced off the walls and filled my ears.

As our tongues began to move with more and more intensity, Kurumi's grip on my head tightened. Caught up in the moment, I squeezed my fingers into the back of her blouse. We were technically embracing, but it felt more like we

were trying to hurt each other.

I could feel my vision narrowing and blurring. I became convinced we were absorbing each other—turning into slime, merging into a single being.

I felt a euphoric, illicit pleasure. Now we were free to live our lives however we pleased. We each provided what the other lacked, and nothing could stop us.

I knew this was simply a nihilistic fantasy. And yet it was all I could think about.

“Smooch... Natsume... How was that? Mmph!”

I had no idea how to answer her. The lack of oxygen had made me giddy. All I could do in this state was move my tongue, hold Kurumi’s back, and gaze into her eyes at point-blank range.

I stared at her, and she stared back at me. Something passed between us, beyond words. It was the strangest sensation. I wasn’t sure what it was, and before I could work it out, Kurumi followed her heart and let her tongue loose in my mouth once more.

I matched her assault. My tongue attacked her lips, her tongue, her teeth.

“Gasp! Natsume...you’re really intense!”

“Hahh...hahh... You started it!”

It felt like we’d been at it for half an hour, but it was probably only a few minutes before we peeled away from each other.

A strand of spit stretched between our mouths, glimmering in the overhead lighting. It was a bridge—proof we’d been connected up until a few moments ago. It was just saliva—yet it seemed so lurid, so obscene.

Kurumi brushed a few strands of hair behind her ear and shot me a smoldering look.

“Heh-heh... How’d your first kiss taste, Natsume?”

What kind of question was that? How could I possibly answer it?

I’d heard “strawberry” was a common answer, but I didn’t think that fit for

me.

No, it was more like...

"...Dark chocolate."

"Huh? But I haven't eaten any chocolate."

"No, sorry. I meant...metaphorically."

She only looked more confused, so I did my best to put my thoughts into words.

"Kissing is something sweet, but when we do it, it's wrapped in a veil of vengeance and rebellion. Those are both negative things, so our kisses are sweet, but they're also bitter." I looked away, a trace of self-recrimination in my tone. "So making out to vent stress and get revenge...tastes just like dark chocolate."

Kurumi studied my face for a second, then snorted.

"That is so pretentious! You're talking in riddles! That's so cringe."

"Shush. I thought it sounded cool."

"Heh-heh! Stop it. Pretentious upperclassmen are gross. Guess I'll have to shut you up. Let's go another round."

Her face closed in.

We kissed like we were trying to devour each other.

Her kisses were every bit as effective as she'd said they'd be. I felt just as refreshed as I did when I smoked. It was the same kind of guilty pleasure—like I was mocking the whole world.

And so, for the thirty minutes left until we had to leave school that day, we were legitimately happy.

ACT THREE

After our day of lip-locking, Kurumi and I saw a lot more of each other.

We convened strategy sessions nearly every day after school. We'd sit in the Stargazing Club room, perusing her Notes on Revenge and plotting our next act of resistance.

Once we'd firmed up a plan, we'd put it into action. We did this again and again.

After the Student Insult Redistribution Campaign and the Memeification of the Teachers' Insults, we put two other plans into action.

The first was a decoy mission allowing students with unsubmitted homework to leave school grounds; the second involved placing signs on the sunny cafeteria seats, officially designating them "Reserved for Good Students."

Admittedly, these did little more than cause a nuisance. But they added up. They shone a light on the nasty unspoken rules of our school—and would hopefully lead to change.

I'll spare you the details, but some plans worked, and some didn't.

When we won, we celebrated in the clubroom. When we couldn't handle our frustrations, we made out. This became our routine, our new normal.

We were happy—or at least I was. I'd spent the previous year with my head underwater, but now I felt alive.

Since several of our plans had succeeded, the mood around the school was improving—or I thought it was anyway. There was a sense of expectation hovering over the building, like something big was about to happen.

I was changing, and so was the school. I was sure of it. We'd finally achieved

the thing I'd been yearning for all this time.

I was awestruck, and it was all thanks to Kurumi Hoshimiya.

"Hmph, none of these are grabbing me."

One day after school, Kurumi and I were in the clubroom as usual. Kurumi was scowling at her Notes on Revenge.

I'd been reading a news article on my phone, but I put it away and focused my attention on her.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Struggling with the next plan?"

"A little, yeah. We've committed several minor acts of resistance, so I'd like to do something really big next, but all the plans I've got stockpiled are kinda small-scale. They don't have the impact I'm looking for."

Hmm, fair. So it wasn't a matter of not knowing how to carry out a plan—she didn't have a good idea in the first place. Had we already exhausted her notes? That was a little disappointing.

"What kind of impact are you looking for, exactly?"

"I wanna blow stuff up! Ka-blooney! Send shock waves through the school!"

"So something that'll draw a lot more attention."

A large-scale attack that would take everyone's breath away. *Yeah, it might be time for something like that.*

Our four prior plans had provided the both of us with a lot of valuable experience. Students and teachers alike were getting increasingly nervous, aware that something was going on. Maybe it was time to start the next phase—to do something that would really stick with them.

"What should we do? Natsume, name your top three acts of terror—dastardly deeds you long to commit!"

"I don't have anything like that. Even real-world terrorists don't sit around making to-do lists."

“Argh, spare me. I just need an idea, any idea!”

Kurumi was really putting me on the spot. This whole time, I’d just been going along with her proposals. Even with such a broad scope, I had nothing.

Silence settled over the room. You could hear the clock ticking on the wall.

Kurumi spoke first. Her head shot up, and she snapped her fingers.

“I know! Let’s ruin the school festival!”

“The school festival? Oh... Yeah, I guess we do have one of those...”

“Our school holds a big festival at the end of July, right? That’s only one month from now! Classes and clubs will start preparing soon. It’s the perfect time for it!”

She was right. Saigou High’s school festival was held at the end of July, just before summer vacation. Why was it held at such a weird time of year, you ask? Because our faculty thought such events were just a distraction from studying.

As soon as we returned from summer vacation, we had to take a big test that would decide our class placements. Before and after fall break, we had meetings to discuss our future career paths and preparations for college entrance exams. No one had time for festivals. Once winter vacation approached, both students and teachers were busy with finals and entrance exams. The time for fun events was long past.

So, for lack of any other options, they’d wedged it into the space right before summer break.

I gave Kurumi’s idea some thought.

It was indeed the perfect time to consider ruining the school festival. And the idea aligned with our goals. But there were a few downsides.

“...Do you really think it’ll get that much attention?”

“Hmm? Why wouldn’t it? The whole school’s involved, right? Everyone will be there.”

“What? Oh, Kurumi, hasn’t your class heard yet?”

“Heard what?”

“Low-scoring classes aren’t allowed to participate this year.”

Kurumi’s jaw dropped, and her eyes bugged out. This was clearly news to her.

Sadly, this year’s school festival was going to be a little different from usual. All lower-ranking students—and anyone else who wasn’t caught up on homework—were banned from the event. And that didn’t just mean they couldn’t put on labor-intensive exhibits like shops—they weren’t even allowed to come to school. They were supposed to stay at home and study.

Apparently, the overall grade point average was extremely low this year, so they’d decided to take drastic measures. Our homeroom teacher had recently given us the news, insisting we had only ourselves to blame.

Half of every grade was in the lower-ranked classes. And since they’d also banned anyone who’d fallen behind even in the better classes, very few people would be taking part in the festival. Apparently, they intended to make participation a perk for the upper echelon.

“With so few students involved, the scale will be a lot smaller,” I said. “And because of that, we’ll get fewer visitors from outside, too. It’ll be pretty hard to make the kind of splash you’re after.”

“Hahh... What the heck? And it sounded so promising!”

“That’s Saigou High for you. The faculty can’t stop bringing their discrimination into everything.”

“This school is so over,” Kurumi wailed, letting her head fall flat onto the table.

Yep. That’s a reasonable reaction. She’d just had the rug pulled out from under her.

But I wasn’t ready to give up yet. A smaller festival might actually work in our favor.

“Kurumi, given the situation, I have a proposal.”

“Oh? What is it? I’m not going to accept anything boring!”

I’m not sure if it’s interesting, but I think it’s a decent idea.

She sat back up, eyes gleaming, so I started my pitch.

“What if we bring *back* the festival?”

“Bring it back? Oh, thwart the faculty’s plans? Interesting.” She nodded a few times and put on her trademark mean-spirited smile. It seemed my idea was working for her. “Reviving the festival sounds big! I like it!”

“Right? Banning the lower-ranked classes is discriminatory. It’s oppressive. If we break that rule and bring it back, it’ll be a direct challenge to the teachers’ authority.”

“Very true. And it’s in line with our goal of changing the school.”

“I haven’t thought of the specifics yet, but what do you say?”

“Yeah... I like it. Well worth a shot.”

With Kurumi’s seal of approval, my plan was formally adopted.

“Then we’re agreed,” I said. “From now on, we’re working to ensure the restoration of the school festival.”

“Great. Let’s bring it back—and then we’ll wreck the hell out of it!”

“Wait a second, why are we wrecking it?”

I expected her to say she was kidding, and for us to laugh about it, but...

“Huh?”

“What?”

...Kurumi just blinked at me, so I blinked back at her.

Had I said something weird? I thought it was a pretty orthodox rejoinder.

“Why wouldn’t we wreck it?” she asked. “We make it, then we break it.”

“Why go to all the trouble of bringing it back only to ruin it?”

“Huh? I don’t see the problem. Once we’ve restored it to its former glory, we can get back to our original plan to disrupt it.”

It seemed Kurumi genuinely didn’t get where I was coming from.

I thought for a minute. *Make it, then break it. Okay.* It had sounded

outrageous at first, but the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. If we could get the school festival back to its former glory, then it would be big enough to be worth disrupting.

So we'd ruin the very festival we revived. It made some sense. But should we? It felt more openly contemptuous than simply restoring it. Clearly, common sense was holding me back.

"The idea reminds me of a baby piling up blocks only to knock them over again," I said.

"Ha-ha-ha! What's wrong with that? All of this is just one big tantrum, right?"

Hmm. Well, Kurumi's calling the shots here.

"Fine. We'll revive the festival; then we'll blow it up."

"Awesome! I'm feeling super motivated! Let's do this! High School Festival! Restore Its Former Glory! Then Smash and Destroy! Oh shit, that's a haiku. Let's make that our motto! I'm on fire."

Kurumi looked extremely smug. I watched her and shook my head...for several reasons.

"Then let's start by figuring out how to bring it back," I said. "That has to come first, or our whole plan's a bust."

"Oh, we're good. I'm way ahead of you."

"You've already got a plan? That was fast. What is it?"

"Well... Heh-heh. Just you wait and see. I can handle this one solo."



Kurumi didn't keep me waiting long. I soon found out what she meant. Or rather, I witnessed it the very next day.

That morning, I hit up the convenience store as usual during my commute. By the time I arrived at the school, there was already an uproar.

"It's basically a ransom letter! Did you see it?"

"I did! It was plastered all over the halls!"

I heard various students talking as I walked down the corridor. Following the crowds, I soon learned what all the fuss was about.

There were flyers pinned up all over the building.

FREE THE SCHOOL FESTIVAL—OR THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES.

Each flyer contained the same threat. The words were clipped from newspaper headlines to avoid anyone recognizing the culprit's handwriting. The clippings had been pasted together, then copied and posted all over the building.

You saw stuff like this all the time on TV. But seeing one for real—plus the possibility of having the festival back—had put the student body into a frenzy.

My class was no exception. Before homeroom even started, I heard people chatting about it.

“Weird stuff just keeps happening.”

“You think it's the same people who did the stamps?”

Kurumi and I sure knew how to get people's tongues wagging.

“Natsume.” Tanaka called out to me as I watched our classmates gossip. “Did you see the flyer? What do you think the culprit meant by ‘consequences’?”

“...Good question.”

“I wonder who's behind it. Some people do the scariest things.”

It seemed she still wasn't on to me.

I just shrugged. I knew exactly who was behind it, of course.



The dramatic threat had certainly made waves, and it had succinctly communicated our demands to the school. Since the flyers were plastered everywhere, the entire student body was guaranteed to be aware of our

efforts. And with no handwriting on the copies, odds were low they'd figure out who was responsible.

Yep, I can tell exactly what she was going for.

But she went about it the wrong way. This was a huge mistake.

I wasn't exactly speaking from experience (despite dabbling in criminal enterprises myself). Still, the instant I saw the flyers, I knew she'd blown it. This would never get us the result we wanted.

And my prediction proved correct.

"Don't yammer about the flyers. And whoever did it, turn yourself in."

Student chatter dried up almost immediately, the teachers took no further action, and the school was soon back to normal.

It generated a lot less uproar than someone threatening to bomb a train station—probably because it was never clear what the threat *was*. And besides, everyone knew the culprit was a student.

"Mmm... That didn't accomplish much. Mmph... The noise this morning seemed so promising, so I was hopeful... Mmm..."

"Mm, *gasp*! Hold on, Kurumi. Don't *think* while we're making out."

"Mm? Why not? Oh, you want me focused on kissing? *Smooch*."

"...No. It just makes me feel silly when I'm desperately trying to catch my breath to see you so chill about it."

We were lying on the floor, limbs tangled together, making out to vent Kurumi's frustrations. More accurately, she was sitting on top of me, and I was letting her kiss me as much as she wanted.

"Mmph... *Gasp*! I wonder if I have to actually make good on the threat."

"I don't think that'd do much. It might even backfire."

"You think? Mmph... Then what should I do? I mean, I'm not gonna stop

kissing you until you provide a specific plan of action. *Smooch...* I might even nibble on your lip.”

Kurumi pulled at my lower lip and ran her tongue along the back of it, applying pressure.

I was in trouble. If we kept making out like this, my head was going to overheat.

But I already had an idea. I’d come up with it before I even entered the room. Perhaps it was time I shared it with her.

I slowly sat up and folded my legs. Kurumi slid down my torso and settled into my lap. She stared directly into my eyes, her face mere centimeters from mine.

“Kurumi, you chose the wrong approach.”

“Hmm? To kissing? *Smooch.*”

“...To the threat.”

I rolled my eyes at her, but she just kept sucking on my lip. Apparently, I needed to do more than just offer her specifics. *Fine, I’ll keep talking as long as she lets me.*

“I know what you were going for, Kurumi. But the school doesn’t want to set a precedent for giving in to student threats. If they do that, they’ll have to deal with a lot more.”

“*Smooch... Gasp!* I see...”

“A direct threat like that won’t get results. You’ve gotta make the faculty admit that banning students from participating in the festival was a bridge too far.”

“Mm... That’s some big talk, Natsume. Open wider... *Slurp...*”

Why was I being teased for making suggestions? I did as she asked and opened my mouth.

Kurumi and I frenched for a while. We could hear the sports teams at practice and the wind ensemble tooting in the distance. Meanwhile, wet, slurpy sounds echoed through the clubroom.

Somewhere along the line, making out became a way for me to switch modes.

Lip contact left all my nerves electrified, made me feel like we were alone in the world, together. It sent all my worries and fears packing and left me with nothing but guilty pleasure and clear thoughts.

“*Gasp...!*”

Once she’d had her fill of smooching, Kurumi pulled away; a strand of spit stretched between us. The bridge of saliva stretched out, drooped, and dissolved into nothing. Kurumi watched it absently.

Then she brushed a few strands of her gray-and-black hair behind one ear.

“Natsume, if you’re running your mouth, I assume you’re ready to back all that up.”

“Well, yeah. Though I can’t promise it’ll work.”

“Come on, at least *act* confident. I’m pinning my hopes on you!”

Kurumi collapsed against my chest, and I caught her. Then I began to explain my plan.

“I thought about it and...I think the two of us alone won’t be able to pull this off. Our usual nuisance tactics won’t be enough; this time, we’ve gotta make the school yield. The bigger our goal, the more people we’ll need to involve.”

“.....You mean, you want to start recruiting?”

“Not necessarily. But let’s write some invitations and seek temporary collaborators.”

I wasn’t sure if she’d misunderstood, or if she just didn’t like the idea. Either way, Kurumi was pouting at me—and not the way she did when we were kissing.





To all club presidents,

As summer approaches, those of us in lower-ranked classes are nursing frustrations at the discriminatory policies enforced by this school's administration—specifically, the blanket ban on participation in the school festival.

In hopes of providing some relief, we're gathering interested students for a party. This event will be held off campus, with no restrictions on school year, gender, or GPA.

Accordingly, we are reaching out to all club presidents assigned to lower-ranked classes, seeking your assistance in this matter.

We attend high school but once in our lives—should we not make the most of it?

The details of the party will be relayed at a preliminary briefing. All of us have busy schedules, but we would appreciate your attendance.

Naturally, you are free to withdraw after hearing the full plan.

We look forward to your participation and cooperation.

PS: If there is not enough interest, the party will be canceled. To avoid spreading inaccurate information among the student body, please keep the contents of this letter to yourself.

Lower-Ranked Class Party Briefing Details:

Date: June 25, Lunch

Location: Second Main School Building, Third-Floor Supplementary Classroom



The chosen room had a designated function—it was used for first-year makeup tests. After school, it would be full of students retaking quizzes they'd failed. But since it was used exclusively for that purpose, no one used it for anything else, and nobody ever went there during the day.

I was well aware of this, and that was why I chose it for our briefing.

"Okay," I said. "Let's get ready before the presidents arrive."

The classroom was empty except for the bare essentials. We would simply

arrange the desks in a circle to create a makeshift round table. I would sit at the back, the seat farthest from the door.

“...Natsume, are you sure it was a good idea to send letters to people you don’t even know?” Kurumi was in black hair mode, leaning over my shoulder.

“Uh, ‘sure’ is a strong word. It might work, or it might not. It could go either way.”

“Fifty-fifty, then? And you still thought it was worth a shot?”

“Well, this time we have to make the school bend to our demands. We won’t pull it off without taking a few risks. We’ve gotta put ourselves out there.”

“...You think?”

“Well, if it blows up in my face, we can share the punishment.” I smiled, but she didn’t look the least bit pleased. Was something else bothering her?

“...Look, I just—”

But before she could say anything else, I heard footsteps approaching. I held up a hand and cut her off.

From the get-go, I’d asked to be in charge of this plan, especially anytime we were in contact with potential collaborators. I didn’t want anyone realizing Kurumi and I were connected.

I shot her a look, and she moved to one side of the room, clearly disgruntled. She pulled out her cat-eared newsboy hat, pulled it low over her eyes, and kept her head down—face hidden, on standby.

A moment later, there was a timid knock on the door.

“...Pardon me,” a third-year boy said. He was tall, with short brown hair.

This was our first candidate—the captain of the soccer team.

I remained seated and gestured for him to sit down. “Thanks for coming, Shunsuke Iwata, Class 3-4, soccer team captain.”

He looked around, then frowned. “Seems like you know me. But who are you?”

“Ren Natsume, Class 2-5, organizer of this party,” I answered with complete

honesty.

I wasn't wearing any sort of disguise. My face was on full display. If I wanted anyone's help, I needed to earn their trust. This was my attempt at doing just that.

The soccer captain nodded. "I found an invite in my shoe box, so..."

"You're here for the briefing, right? I appreciate you showing up."

"The girl in the hat over there, is she staff? Wait, am I the only one who showed up?"

"There's no telling who all will come. Let's give it another minute."

As I spoke, we heard someone throw open the door.

"Uh, yo. Whazzup?"

Next came the president of the music club.

"Welcome. You must be Kanata Kashiwagi, Class 3-6, president of the music club."

"We doing a party or what? I heard there was a briefing."

"This is the place. Please, have a seat."

Each time the door opened, I ran through a similar interaction. In the end, we also received the leaders of the badminton team, the film research club, and the basketball team.

We'd sent out seven invites, so five showing up was arguably a pretty good attendance rate. We were halfway through lunch, so I had a feeling this was everyone.

I cleared my throat, drawing their attention, and glanced around the room.

"Thank you for coming. I'm Ren Natsume, Class 2-5, and I'll be planning and organizing this off-campus party. Nice to meet you all."

I bowed, but no one applauded. The attendees still didn't know what to make of me or this meeting. This was all as I'd expected.

"I'm about to share with you the details of my plan. But before that, there's

one thing I'd like to ask everyone." I took a deep breath, my expression serious. "If I say July twenty-third, do you know what day that is?"

Everyone exchanged glances, clearly aware of what I meant. How could they not be?

"...That's the school festival," the soccer team captain said. He was directly across from me.

Half right, half wrong. But I'd give him full marks anyway.

"It's the date of the Saigou High festival." I nodded. Then, speaking very clearly, I said, "But for all of you, it's just a day off, right?"

Several of them pursed their lips. The others frowned.

Clearly, no one was happy about the situation. And why would they be? I'd specifically sent letters to club presidents and team leaders in lower-ranked classes. No one here was allowed to attend the school festival.

"...Why rub salt in our wounds? What's your point?" the soccer team captain said. It felt like he'd become the group's representative.

"Let me get right to the point. It's not fair that the top-ranked students get to have fun at the festival while the rest of us have to study at home."

Everyone's expression remained grim. They didn't enjoy this topic one bit, and this wasn't the kind of briefing they'd expected.

"Can't have fun if your grades are bad," the soccer team captain said, shrugging.

"That's fine, if you really believe it. But do you? Are you sure you don't resent the school's decision and the higher-ranked classes for going along with it?"

"...Well, I do think banning us from the festival is a bit much."

Nobody smiled, but everyone nodded—they were on the same page.

Good. If everyone's frustrated, I have a shot at making this work.

"In that case, I have a proposal for you all. On July twenty-third, why don't we lower-ranked students have fun off campus?"

"...Huh? What do you mean?"

“We all go to the same school. It’s not fair that only the higher-ranked classes get to enjoy themselves. On festival day, we’ll throw unrelated parties off campus. I invited you all here today to make that proposal.”

They were wavering between confused and interested, so I got more specific.

“The badminton team can rent out a gym and play some friendly matches. Maybe the music club can hold a concert in the park. The film research club could invite interested parties to join them at a movie theater. There’s a big one a little ways away. It’ll be a bit of a hike, but it should be doable. The soccer and basketball teams could invite non-team members to a barbeque. I think it would be fun.”

“H-hang on, you’re losing me,” the soccer team captain said, scratching his head. “You think it would be fun? I get throwing a party off campus for those of us who can’t join the festival. But why are you involved, and why are you passing the buck to us?”

That was a good question. I had predicted someone might say that, and I’d even hoped they would.

This was where I revealed my real plan. I rattled off my prepared answer like I was reading a speech.

“I have a very good reason to rope you all into this. To be totally honest with you—I want to bring back the school festival, the way it was meant to be.”

“What? ...Hey, were you behind those flyers?”

“No. But they made me think. And knowing I wasn’t the only one who wanted to change things made me decide to take action my way.”

I was exposing my identity to lend credence to this motive. This way, I could make it seem like I wasn’t involved with the anonymous threat, and like my proposal was comparatively legitimate.

“A flyer isn’t going to convince the faculty to change their minds. So I asked myself—what would get them to open the festival back up? I could only think of one thing.”

“...And that is?”

“Make them think it would cause more problems to exclude us.”

Everyone frowned at me, so I elaborated.

“If it sounds like students will be making trouble off campus, the faculty will decide they’re better off keeping us in school, at the festival.” This was the exact same argument I’d pitched to Kurumi. “What can we do to make the faculty anxious? The easiest way is to plan large-scale assemblies outside of school. If they catch wind of these parties, the school will try and trap us all here. But I’ll need your help to pull it off. That’s why I asked you all to join me today.”

“So basically, you want us to plan these parties so the teachers will let us back into the festival?”

“That’s the gist of it, yes. Sorry if the invitation was deceptive.”

I apologized to try to improve my image, but they still looked dubious.

“I get the logic of it, but what’s in it for us?”

“If the teachers don’t rescind the ban, then you can enjoy the off-campus parties. If they let us attend the festival, then you can have fun at school. Either way, you’ll have a good time. What’s the downside?”

The soccer team captain thought it over.

As long as the others were considering my idea, the game was still on. If they backpedaled and started saying, “If we can’t get good grades, we don’t have the right to enjoy ourselves,” then I’d have to conclude they were brainwashed beyond salvation.

Fixing them with my gravest stare, I said, “If we’re going to get any numbers behind this, we need leaders like the five of you.”

“So that’s why you came to us?”

“Yeah. I’ll do the legwork securing venues. You won’t have to deal with any of that. What I need you to do is get people to attend. Start with your club members and have them spread the word—that should be enough. Will you help?”

“I dunno. If we’re caught, the teachers will be pissed...”

That was no concern. I had an argument ready.

“There’s no need to worry. Even if they find out, all five of you are in this together—none of you will be singled out.”

“Hmm...”

They were still waffling. But I had one final card left to play.

“Very well. Then how about this—I’ll cover all expenses for the off-site parties. You have my word. All you have to do is get people to come.”

I shot them a look like that was my final offer, and they exchanged glances. After a minute or two of this, the soccer team captain turned his eyes back on me.

“You’d go that far for the school festival?”

“I would. Banning the lower-ranked students from the festival sets a precedent. They’ll definitely pull the same crap next year. Please, lend me your help.” I added a hint of desperation to my voice.

I wasn’t sure it would work, but I hoped they’d interpret my tone as that of a boy determined to attend the festival and with no one else to rely on. And it seemed I’d pulled it off.

“So all we gotta do is tell our teammates we’re gonna have a shindig on the day of the festival, right?”

“Yeah, that’s all.”

“...Fine. If you’re that committed, I’m in. I could use a breather before exams anyway. But if your plan backfires and they don’t cancel the ban, don’t come crying to me when you have to pay up.”

“I would never! If that happens, you can just enjoy the off-campus parties.”

“Cool... Well? Anyone else on board?”

Following the soccer captain’s lead, the others all nodded.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Your help is invaluable.”

I put my hands on the desk and bowed low as my lips formed a smirk.

They were in, hook, line, and sinker—and they had no idea. They thought they were helping out a passionate underclassman, but they'd just made a deal with the devil.

"I'd like to avoid the faculty finding out about these parties, so please don't tell anyone else about this briefing and who all was here."

"...Understood."

"I appreciate it. So, shall we move on to the specifics?"



A few days after the briefing, I was at lunch, witnessing the usual display of discrimination at the Saigou High cafeteria.

I looked over the long tables and folding chairs and saw how different the atmosphere was on the sunny side versus on the gloomy interior. The better students were monopolizing the condiments and stealing the other students' chairs—and none of the students or teachers questioned any of it.

Seeing this always killed my appetite.

But today, something was different. Even the lower-ranking students sounded excited.

"Did you hear the music club's throwing a concert? Wanna come?"

"The day of the festival, right? I'm gonna hit the barbeque."

"There's a barbeque? Maybe I should go to that..."

Voices could be heard throughout the gloomy interior of the cafeteria.

As I slurped my cold udon, I stole a glance at my phone. I was holding it under the table, texting Kurumi.

"More chatter. The club leaders are doing good work."

She read the message and replied right away.

"Same here. Some people just sat down next me and said they're planning to check out the movie viewing."

I looked up and saw her sitting toward the back on the right. Our eyes met, and she smiled faintly enough that you'd have to be looking to see it, then took a big bite of curry.

Today, we were both in the cafeteria at its busiest time, trying to gauge how far the party plans had spread. Eavesdropping in our classrooms could give us some idea, but all three grades mingled here, and their conversations painted a far more precise portrait.

We were seated separately so we could take in more conversations.

From what we were hearing, the club leaders were doing good work. The gossip mills weren't yet in high gear, but the news was steadily spreading through the lower-ranked classes.

As I quietly downed my udon, ears alert, my phone vibrated.

I had a new message from Kurumi. Had she heard something of value? I checked.

"You eat like a guinea pig, it's adorable."

It turned out to be the exact opposite. Why was she looking at me?

"Don't say that! Now I'm self-conscious."

"We're secretly sending each other messages! It's like a workplace romance."

"This isn't a workplace, and we're not in love."

We're not here to have fun. Investigate!

I looked up and found Kurumi sticking her tongue out at me. What was that for?

But I knew why she was bored. We'd both eaten slowly, spending as much time in the cafeteria as we could. By this point, we had a good grasp on how far the news had spread.

We'd made solid progress; it was probably time to get back to class.

I was about to suggest as much, when I heard a voice from the previously unoccupied space across the table from me.

"Oh, Natsume."

I knew who it was without looking. A voice that clear could only be Tanaka.

She was looking down at me, holding a tray with a fried fish meal on it.

"I never see you here," she said.

"Uh, didn't have time to swing by the convenience store this morning. Did you only just get here, Tanaka?"

"Oh... Um, yes. I spent time with some friends and arrived late." She flashed me an awkward smile, then looked a little unsure of herself. "Er, N-Natsume, are you done eating already?"

"Uh, no. I've got a few bites left."

Tanaka took a quick look around, then exhaled. "Okay. Would you mind if I joined you? I'm on my own."

"Uh, sure. If you're up for it, I am."

I pulled my dishes toward me to make more room for her, and she looked relieved. She put her tray down, ran a hand down the back of her skirt to straighten it out, and took a seat.

This was a stroke of luck. Ideal, even. It was nice just to get to eat with Tanaka, but it also gave me the opportunity to ask her about the parties.

"Sorry. You go on ahead, I'm gonna dig a little deeper," I told Kurumi before pocketing my phone.

Tanaka put her hands together, then started eating. Seeing this, I took a bite of udon, allowing a natural pause before I started making small talk.

"Tanaka, are you in any clubs?"

"Clubs? Oh, I guess not. I've got so much homework to do..."

"Yeah, that's how this school works. You're not alone."

"Mm. It's a shame. But why do you ask?"

"Oh," I said, acting like it was nothing. In actuality, I was just getting to the point. "Everyone's talking about holding parties with their club on the day of the school festival. I was just wondering what you thought about it."

“Ah, yes. I heard about that. Isn’t there a barbeque?”

“Yeah. But if you’re not in a club, are you planning to sit them out?”

“Hmm. I doubt I’ll go. It sounds like they’re open to anyone, even if you’re not part of the clubs, but I’ll probably stay home. I’m sure the teachers won’t like it...”

So she was worried about what the faculty thought. She was a very cautious girl.

“None of your friends invited you?” I asked.

“They did. They said that since the festival was canceled, we should go. I bowed out, though.”

Okay. That means most of the second-year girls have probably heard about it already.

Asking directly gave me a lot more info than just listening in. Now I knew what Tanaka *and* her friends thought.

“Natsume, since you brought it up, does that mean you’re going?” she asked. I had an answer ready.

“Uh, probably not. I heard about the movie screening and the concert in the park, but nothing that really grabs me.”

“Wow, there’s a lot going on, then. Those both sound like fun.”

I’d found out what she thought and spread the word about a few different activities. I figured that was good enough. I took another slurp of udon, then wrapped up that topic.

“Oh, not to change the subject, but you asked me before about what music I like, right?”

I’d already won. The rest would just be victory laps.

I matched her pace, finishing up my meal while chatting about nothing in particular.

Once we were done, I said I had to swing by the faculty office and left first, dropping off my empty dishes. I figured it’d be awkward to walk back to class

with her.

I saw Kurumi up ahead of me. She silently put her tray down and stalked off without so much as glancing at me.

I'd told her to go on ahead. Had she been here the whole time?

Chasing after her and asking would attract attention, so I figured I'd touch base via a text message and report what I'd learned.

I returned my tray, found a corner of the hall where the teachers wouldn't spot me with my phone out, and wrote, "Seems like everyone knows you don't need to be in the clubs to join the fun."

The little sound of the message being sent held a tinge of loneliness. It was quickly marked read, but no response came.

Did she not have time to reply? Or maybe she didn't think it was necessary.

I told myself it didn't matter. I was about to put the phone away, when I noticed that Kurumi had updated the status next to her profile picture—an image of a black cat.

I looked closer. Her status had been blank before, but now it read "liar."



This bothered me, but when we met again after school, Kurumi was her usual self.

We had a strategy session planned, but I arrived a little late and found her twirling her newsboy cap on one finger, looking bored.

"Oh. Hey there, Natsume. You're late! Did you stop to have a smoke?"

"No, homeroom just ran over. I haven't smoked...since we started."

"Hmm? Started *what*? You've gotta spell it out for me!" She giggled, in full payback mode. She was such a tease.

I pulled my chair out and sat down, and she put her hat back on. Then she took out a pencil and her yellow notebook and laid them on the table. Our usual routine.

“Then let’s get scheming,” she said.

“Yeah... But what should we discuss, exactly? Everything’s going smoothly.”

“As far as reviving the festival, sure. But that’s not the whole plan, is it?”

“...Oh, I get you.”

“We still need to figure out how we’re going to wreck the event once it’s back on.”

Saigou High’s school festival was at the end of July. If we managed to successfully revive it, we’d need our next plan ready to go. Or at least that was what I imagined Kurumi was thinking.

I wasn’t about to argue. I was a big believer in planning our resistance efforts carefully, to avoid anything going wrong. If we locked down everything beforehand, I’d have time to run through it a few times in my mind.

“So how should we go about it?” she asked. “I’d like it to be big and splashy, like we originally planned.”

Kurumi flipped through her notebook until she found a blank page. I was hoping she had an idea already prepared, but it sure didn’t look like it.

“We really want to blow some minds, right? I guess that’s easier said than done.”

“Hmm. We could set off some fireworks! Then we’d be blowing things up *literally!*”

“You need a government-issued license for that. We can’t even buy fireworks, let alone set them off.”

“Let’s not get hung up on what we can or can’t do. What do you think about the idea itself?”

“It’s splashy, but I bet everyone will just assume it’s part of the festival.”

There was no *art* to it—no *theme*. The things we’d done so far were ultimately just nasty pranks, but there was an *ethos* behind them—an *aesthetic*, albeit a little warped.

It was like how Banksy used the medium of street art to mock society and

politicians. That was what we wanted to do. Our methods were different, but we were supposed to be aiming for Banksy. It was a tall order, but that was the type of resistance I was after.

“You’d prefer something that causes more damage and makes the teachers really regret their actions, huh?”

Kurumi understood without me saying anything. She pursed her lips and folded her arms.

“Those are both good phrases,” I said. “To get us started, let’s think about why this school even has a festival.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“If the faculty’s goal is just to make us study, wouldn’t it be better to get rid of such a useless event? Why has a prep school like Saigou High kept holding a school festival all these years? If we can figure that out, it might give us a good angle of approach.”

“Interesting. I’ve heard that the usual goal of holding a school festival is to give students experience organizing and managing projects, and to teach them the value of cooperating as a group.”

“Really? I’m impressed you know all that.”

“Right? I’m super smart. You may lavish me with praise.”

Looking very smug, Kurumi showed me her phone. She’d done a search for “school festival why.” *Kids today...*

“Experience and cooperation, huh? What a load of crap. All our school cares about are GPAs and college admission rates. They don’t give a damn about teaching students how to function in the real world.”

“You can say that again. So why *are* they holding a school festival?”

“It’s a private school. There’s gotta be a practical reason.”

“Hmm... Could it be profits? From the student-run shops?”

“No, I don’t think that stuff makes any money. Plus, they donate anything earned.”

People tend to have a positive view of schools, but private high schools are for-profit businesses. What made Saigou High money? What did the teachers stand to earn? If we could figure that out, it ought to point us in the right direction, but...

“...Maybe they’re holding the school festival to make students and guardians think this place is fun,” I suggested. “Like a kind of tour.”

“Oh, that could be it. I went myself during my last year of junior high.”

“If they cancel it outright, it’ll affect next year’s application numbers.”

“True. Nobody wants to attend a high school that doesn’t do anything fun. That could be why they’ve kept the event going. Good theory, Natsume.” Kurumi clapped her hands.

It seemed like an obvious conclusion, but I appreciated the compliment.

“In that case,” she continued, “the best way to hurt the school is to discourage applicants.”

“Makes sense. If I had my way, I’d make sure no one on earth wanted to come to this dumpster fire of a school.”

“Hmm. Why don’t we come up with something along those lines, then?”

We gave that some thought. After a little while, Kurumi yelped and held up a finger.

“If prospective applicants are attending, why don’t we introduce them to the *true* nature of the school.”

“And say what? How horrible it is?”

“Yeah, exactly! There won’t be time to make a proper speech, but we should be able to get the truth out somehow. For example...we could record the way our teachers talk in class and play it for everyone. Let the prospective students know just how abusive the faculty gets.”

“Broadcast their insults... That might work. But how would we do that? It won’t be easy.”

“We could hijack the broadcast booth during the festival. That would let us

reach every corner of the building.”

Hijacking... That would put us firmly in criminal territory.

Sure, using the broadcast booth without permission was technically feasible. We could concoct some likely sounding rationale to get ourselves inside, then send whoever was supposed to be in there packing.

“Right at the peak of the festival, we broadcast a stream of insults!” Kurumi exclaimed. “We’ll tell all the visitors, ‘Here are the sounds of daily life at Saigou High!’ It’ll be like a grand finale!”

“I see. Nicely sarcastic. That could work.”

“Then it’s settled. But first we’ve gotta get some good recordings. The nastier the better! Especially if it’s stuff that wouldn’t meet TV broadcasting standards.”

“...Mm, hang on.” I pulled out my phone and placed it on the table. “I’ve got plenty of data already.”

Kurumi blinked at me. “Er, huh? Why? When did you record it?”

“...Before we even met.”

I’d collected evidence at the start of the school year when I lodged my formal complaint. I’d meant what I said about taking legal action, but I’d wound up too discouraged to follow through. I never imagined my recordings would come in handy now.

“Awesome, Natsume! Then this will be our plan for ruining the festival.”

“...Yeah.”

Kurumi held out a fist, so I bumped mine against it. Then I pulled away and looked down.

Phase one of the school festival revival scheme was going well. We had a plan to ruin it, too.

It occurred to me then that we were now aiming to gain complete control over the school’s means of survival.

It was a strange thing to realize. I felt as powerful as I was tense—and more

than a little intoxicated. The phone in my pocket seemed oddly heavy.



The following day, I spent all my time listening to classroom chatter, monitoring our progress.

Information about the parties was spreading fast, and projected attendance was snowballing. I was initially worried that girls wouldn't want to attend something called a "party" for fear it would be full of boys trying to pick them up. But the boys inviting them would call them "social gatherings" or "get-togethers" instead, craftily using their words to allay such fears. *They might not get good grades, but they have street smarts*, I thought, then realized I could say the same thing about myself.

In that sense, the party plan was going well—and just about to reach a turning point.

At the end of the day, our homeroom teacher looked extra grumpy.

"Sounds like people are planning some off-campus 'fun' on the day of the festival, so I'm here to tell you all to get serious. You were asked to stay home and study. Faculty with free time will be patrolling the area all day, so you had better stay in your rooms and hit the books."

A stir ran through the class. Students looking forward to the parties were clearly disgruntled.

"The lower-ranked classes this year are an unmitigated disaster!" he continued. "I shouldn't have to spell this out for you!"

This clearly rankled students, but the teacher moved right along to the July exams, and the students' anger began to fade. It felt to me like our plans had been thwarted.

With this, both the festival and the off-campus parties were officially banned. We'd been too optimistic, and our plans had met the worst possible end—except they hadn't.

In fact, I'd been counting on this. The school wouldn't revive the festival purely because they saw potential trouble brewing. That had been obvious all

along. And I was prepared.

Our festival revival plan was still in full swing. And it was time to implement the next stage.

I wrote another letter, summoning the club and team leaders once more.

✱

“Yo, your plan to bring back the festival belly flopped!”

The second everyone was gathered in the supplementary classroom, the soccer captain confronted me.

I had the desks arranged in a circle again, and everyone was upset and glaring at me.

“The teachers are gonna be on patrol! I knew it wouldn’t be so easy. At least they didn’t come after us directly... But now we’re not gonna get to hold those parties *or* go to the festival.”

“Yes, you’re right,” I replied. “That seems to be where we find ourselves.”

“I went out Sunday and priced ingredients, too! I was so excited. What a letdown.” The soccer captain sighed.

“We did so many rehearsals,” muttered the music club president.

The others joined in, saying, “The badminton team was hyped, too” and “I really wanted to see that movie...”

Once everyone had grumbled a bit, the soccer captain sighed and turned to me. “So, Natsume? What now?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The parties! The festival! You invited us all here. You gotta have another plan!”

Everyone looked at me expectantly. They hadn’t given up yet.

I looked at them all in turn, then blinked.

“I don’t have a plan. The parties are a bust. We’re still banned from the

festival. That's all she wrote."

Several seconds of silence ticked by, and then the soccer captain half lunged across his desk.

"Excuse me?! You don't even have a backup plan?!"

"Nothing springs to mind."

"Then why call us all here?!"

"The plan fell through, so I figured we should at least touch base."

"And do what, a postmortem?! We already know the parties are a bust! The teachers said so!" He flopped back in his chair as the others nodded. "...So that's it? We're through trying to make the best of our high school years?"

"I'm afraid so. At the very least, *I've* got nothing else to propose."

"This sucks. *Tch*... I was an idiot to ever get involved."

Swearing, the soccer captain got to his feet and headed for the door. He was acting like every second spent here was a waste of his time.

He'd been the other students' spokesman, so with him gone, the others followed suit. They stood up, one after the other, scratching their heads and shrugging.

"...Natsume," Kurumi said, looking anxious.

Come on, don't give me that face.

She had nothing to worry about. I was only just getting started.

"You've given up?" I said, just before the captain opened the door.

One by one, the disappointed students turned around, like a wave was running through them. At the very back, the captain sighed, his hand still on the doorknob.

"Rich, coming from you," he said. "You're the one who roped us all into this."

"That's why I'm saying it."

Their glares were like daggers, but I didn't let that stop me.

"Let me ask again. Are you gonna lie down and *let* the school and the higher-

ranked classes rob you of your money and freedom?”

“...What?”

“I guess that means you’re fine with forking over all that dough so the better students can have a good time. Well, thanks for your donation!”

Everyone frowned. They had no idea what I meant.

“Hang on, what are you talking about?” asked the soccer captain. “Stealing our freedom—I get that. But what’s this about donations? When did we give the better students money?”

Aha. So they really don’t know. Well, allow me to explain...

...about the dark underbelly of this awful school.

“I’m talking about our extracurricular fee.”

“Our what now?”

“It’s one of several fees Saigou High collects. I believe it’s a little over fifty thousand yen. It’s a part of the lump sum your parents work themselves to the bone to pay at the start of every year.”

“...And what of it? How’s that a donation?”

“Don’t you see? The extracurricular fee pays for the school festival.” That probably wasn’t all it paid for, but it was better I left that unsaid. “Students in the lower-ranked classes are paying to hold the school festival. But we’re not allowed to attend.”

“But, uh... They’ll have to offer a discount, then, surely?”

“Absolutely not. I mean, banning us from the festival is a new rule they just made up this year. And since the fee is annual, we *already* paid it.”

They all exchanged glances.

“...Huh? Wait, Natsume, how...?”

“Even higher-ranked students are banned if they’re behind on their homework. Do you seriously think they’re going to return the fee to those who can’t attend? No way in hell.”

Maybe they would have considered it, but this school didn't have a great track record. The club leaders had experienced that in person in the lower-ranked classes and found my argument very convincing.

The rest was easy. I'd already aroused their suspicions; now all I had to do was fan the flames.

"In effect, our school's out to pocket all the money you paid them."

"...You really mean that?"

"A smaller festival means more funds will be left over—and what will the teachers do with that money? Maybe they'll go out drinking or gamble it away, or maybe they plan on paying a visit to the red-light district."

A weighty silence settled over the room. I had them—hook, line, and sinker.

"Now do you see why they *really* banned us?"

"....."

"The teachers here—and the sheep they've browbeaten into submission—act like it's totally normal for kids with bad grades to have no fun. But with the school festival, it's not that simple." The more I talked, the more their anger and frustration mounted. "They're taking our money, then banning us from the festival. That can't be legal."

The club leaders glanced at one another, grim looks on their faces, gauging the others' reactions. They'd finally realized just how unfair this was.

It was time for the finishing touch. I stood up, my voice dripping with rancor, and began to rub salt in their wounds.

"So go on home. Go back to your failing test scores, your pathetic grades. Keep letting them discriminate against you, stifle your freedom, and steal your money. Go back to your sad, hopeless little lives, *losers*."

"....."

"Life's not fair. So why not just give up and let them suck you dry for the rest of your days?"

"...There are some things it's not cool to say, buddy."

The soccer captain stomped across the room and grabbed a fistful of my shirt.

Don't let him spook you, I told myself. I held his gaze, refusing to back down.

"I apologize for getting heated," I said, "but I'm not the one you should be mad at."

At last, the fuse was lit.



My plan had always been to make the school think they'd gone too far by banning the lower-ranked classes from the festival. But I hadn't told Kurumi or the club leaders the truth about how I intended to do that.

I'd been thinking things over ever since I first saw Kurumi's flyer.

The faculty genuinely believed they could make all the students fall in line by merely pointing to their unsatisfactory grades. With weak threats and half-hearted crimes, we'd never get them to negotiate. The festival would stay banned.

So what could we do? Well, we had to convince the school the students *wouldn't* fall in line so easily, make them believe that this was no idle threat. And to do that, we had to set a fire that would rage out of control. If they couldn't beat the students down, they'd have to take action—and bring back the festival.

The day after my speech about the extracurricular fee, Saigou High was in chaos.

"Teacher, what are you planning to do with our extracurricular fees?"

"We're paying the same fees as the upper-ranked classes, but you're making us stay at home and study?"

By the time I rolled in that morning, our class representatives were already pestering the homeroom teacher. The club leaders had gotten word out *very* quickly.

The teacher looked genuinely rattled. This was clearly the last thing he'd expected. After dithering a moment, he shouted some evasive answers and

focused on buying time.

“You all need to spend less time worrying about nonsense and more time studying!”

I moved out into the hall and saw similar scenes playing out in every class.

Bad move, teachers. That response will just pour oil on this inferno.

Unable to trust the teachers, the lower-ranking students began to act. They weren't just demanding their fees be refunded, they were bringing back the off-campus parties. People started putting up flyers around the school declaring we attended “Fraud High.” The whole place was in an uproar.

They might patiently endure daily discrimination, but the lower-ranking students weren't ready to put up with *anything*. They felt justified in their anger now that they saw the school taking their money and giving it away to other people.

The teachers yelled at and insulted the students. They even attempted to quell the flames by explaining away the fees. But the lower-ranking students' revolt was only getting worse.

I was acting like an innocent bystander, but on the inside, I was smirking.

This was ideal. I couldn't have the school extinguishing this fire too quickly. I'd gone to all that trouble arranging the off-campus parties specifically to rile up the students so their furor would be nastier and last longer.

A riot big enough to change the school's policy would take a lot of people. Kurumi and I could scream our heads off, and no one would even care. We could hand out flyers arguing the school was pocketing our fees, and it wouldn't go any further than Kurumi's original attempt.

We needed to make everyone frustrated first and then put a lit match to that frustration. That was why I'd planned parties, well aware the school would shut them down. I had to make everyone believe they had a fun alternative to the festival—and then let it be snatched away. Like the soccer captain said, it was bound to be “a real letdown.”

And just as the students' frustrations with the school peaked, word would

spread that the faculty was misappropriating their extracurricular fees. That was the spark we needed—and my plan all along.

Suck on that, Saigou faculty. You can't fool me. Trying to pin the blame on us, huh? Well, you're the ones who decided to ban students from the festival!

Four days after the uproar began, it spread beyond the school. After hearing the rumors, the lower-ranking students' guardians began calling the faculty to confirm what was going on, while those of the upper-ranking students started complaining about the chaos.

These calls were highly effective—the teachers held an emergency meeting that very afternoon.

You're trapped now. You can't play it down, and you can't dismiss it. You have only two possible responses: Offer refunds to those banned from the festival, or open the event up to everyone.

I was certain they'd pick the latter. Saigou High was an expensive private school. Going one by one through the class rosters and refunding fees was a lot of work for no profit. They'd never do it.

But restoring the festival was easy. They'd always planned to hold one, albeit just for the good students. The groundwork was already laid. All they had to do was let the bad students participate, and the problem was solved. This would force the school's hand.

Time passed. I was in morning homeroom a week after the uproar began, when our teacher took the podium and finally explained the school's official decision.

"Um, I have an important announcement. Attention please. Despite rumors to the contrary, our school has done nothing wrong. The extracurricular fee..."

He explained that this fee wasn't just for the school festival, nor did the leftover money go into the teachers' pockets. The balance was carried over and...blah, blah, blah. He went on for ages.

Students were muttering "C'mon" or "Get to the point." Everyone knew the important stuff was yet to come.

Hearing this, the teacher sighed, made a face, and broached the real subject.

“...However, it seems like nothing I say will convince you. The changes to the festival attendance rules *were* a last-minute decision. So for this year, at least, we will be allowing all students to attend.”

Essentially, the school was surrendering to the lower-ranking classes.

My classmates were normally like the walking dead—but on this one occasion, they came alive. A cheer rose up.

“You may attend the festival,” continued the teacher, “but don’t get carried away. You’re still in the bad classes. Studying is your one and only priority. Exams are approaching fast...”

No one was listening. We’d won our freedom and were still riding that high. My classmates were already talking about what they’d be doing for the festival and who would take which shift on the day.

Watching the giddy commotion, I allowed myself a soft sigh of relief.

This scheme had forced me to deceive and manipulate a lot of people. I’d racked my brain, done everything I could to pull it off—but I’d never been sure if it would work.

I was glad it had ended well. The festival restoration plan was a success.

“Mm. *Whew...* Hmm?”

Homeroom ended, and as I was stretching, I sensed someone watching me.

I turned, and Tanaka’s clear, marble-like eyes met mine. She was smiling.

“Natsume, the festival’s back!”

“Uh, yeah. Sounds like it.”

“Heh-heh. I’m so glad. Let’s make some memories together!”

...What was that supposed to mean? How should I take it?

I wasn’t sure, but it felt like a compliment, so I smiled back.

The day after the school surrendered, I gathered the club leaders again.

The goal this time was personal, and it wasn't that important in the grand scheme of things. All the same, my plan would never have worked without their help. If it was just me and Kurumi, the faculty would have simply shut us down. I was genuinely grateful, and I felt the need to thank them.

The festival revival was the result of an uproar I wasn't even involved in—perhaps they'd just be confused by my gratitude. But I wanted to put it in words. I felt *compelled* to.

At lunch, I sat in the supplementary classroom waiting, and one by one, they filed in. Their expressions were much brighter than before. Each looked pleased with themselves, their confidence restored.

Once all five were seated, I cleared my throat and began my speech.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you for coming."

"Isn't it great, Natsume?" said the soccer captain. "The festival's back on!"

I bowed. "You spread the word and held the school accountable. Thank you."

"Nah, we only acted 'cause you pointed out how messed up the situation was."

"Even so, I believe it was thanks to your actions that the festival ban was rescinded." Gratitude was always welcome. Every one of them looked tickled pink. "Like I said in the invite, today I'm just here to thank you."

"No need, man. We did this for us."

"But I *want* to thank you. Your work was invaluable. Things didn't go as I'd originally planned, but in the end, we got what we wanted. I can't thank you enough."

That's what I said...but what I meant was, *Thanks for taking the bait*.

I bowed low. "I've prepared a small token of my gratitude. I hope you'll accept it."

I picked up a grocery bag filled with five-hundred-milliliter bottles of tea. I'd grabbed these at the drugstore on my way in.

I moved around, putting a bottle on each desk. The others sheepishly accepted the gesture.

“All right,” said the soccer captain. “You sure, though? We’re the upperclassmen here.”

“I’m sure! Help yourselves. I’m sorry I couldn’t afford anything better.”

The soccer captain nodded, then opened his bottle and took a swig.

Mission complete. I’d done all I came to do. I had no regrets, and I would have no further contact with these people.

“This was a short meeting, but I appreciate you taking the time to attend,” I said. “That’s all I’ve got today. You’ve been a huge help—and once again, I’m extremely grateful.”

A few people clapped. I hadn’t earned that, but whatever. It was just a formality.

I opened the classroom doors, and the club leaders started filing out, chattering happily.

“The music club’s got a slot on the main stage.”

“Really? I’ve gotta go see them!”

The soccer team captain was the last to go. He stood up, still gulping his tea, and started to follow the others out the door. He’d done the bulk of the work, speaking for the rest of them, and I thought he deserved some individual gratitude.

As he passed me, I pasted a smile on my face. “Captain Iwata, thanks for getting everyone on the same page.”

“Mm? Oh, sure. And sorry—I wasn’t always nice.”

“Don’t worry about it. I got in some digs myself—it goes both ways.”

I’d had that response ready. The captain was easy to read. And since he’d served as point person, it had been simple for me to control the flow of conversation. I was grateful for that, too. Not that I could admit it to his face.

“The party plans went up in smoke, but I hope you enjoy the festival instead,”

I said.

“Will do. Our class is already making plans! Come check it out on the big day.”

“You got it. I’ll be there.”

I assumed he’d wave and leave...

...But instead, he flashed his pearly whites, and said, “Natsume, thank *you*.”

“Hm? For what?”

“Your plan might not have worked out, but if you hadn’t brought up the extracurricular fee, we’d never have noticed the teachers’ dirty tricks. So thanks, man.”

“Oh... Uh, sure...”

I’d just fed them a line of bullshit. I hadn’t expected to be thanked for it.

“Okay! Gotta cram for these finals so I can enjoy myself at the festival! Later, Natsume.”

“Uh, yeah. Later.”

I watched him vanish around the corner. Inside, I was holding a hand to my chest. This didn’t sit right with me, and I felt a little wound up.

Why, though? What’s making me feel this way?

I was trying to get to the bottom of it—when something warm touched my cheek.

“Smooch.”

That dragged me out of my thoughts.

There was a faint, wet noise as I felt Kurumi’s breath on my cheek. The brim of her hat bonked my head.

I knew exactly what had just happened.

Glancing sideways, I saw Kurumi grinning, fixing her hat.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Oh, just a little reward.”

I'd done a bad thing and earned a kiss on the cheek. How villainous.

Clearly in a good mood, Kurumi clasped her hands behind her back and hopped into place beside me.

"You whipped all the lower-ranking classes into a frenzy! So that was your plan to restore the festival, huh?"

"Yep. It had to be something on that scale, or I figured they'd never budge."

"You could have told me!"

"Oh, sorry about that. They say you've gotta deceive your allies to trick your enemies."

"The club leaders are our enemies?"

"...Not really, no. Are you mad at me? I'm sorry. The real reason I didn't say anything was in case it didn't pan out and I wound up with egg on my face."

"You know how to earn my forgiveness," Kurumi said, pointing at my lips—so I kissed her. "Mmph!"

I was doing this to mollify her—yet another messed up reason to kiss. When I pulled away, her cheeks were flushed, but she was smiling. All was forgiven.

"Heh-heh. You really pulled it off. Impressive work, Natsume."

"I just did everything I could, and luckily, it worked out."

"Luck is a skill! There were some hairy moments, but I had faith in you."

Did she? Kurumi often expressed her praise and admiration for me. Technically, she was still blackmailing me into this, but I couldn't bring myself to hold that against her—was it because of her devilish charm? I was starting to wonder. She was a real femme fatale. I admired her—but I had to make sure I didn't fall under her spell.

She jabbed me in the gut with her elbow, pulling me back out of my thoughts.

"But you're so weirdly formal."

"...Formal how?"

"This whole meeting! Thanking the club leaders, giving them gifts—super

formal.”

I supposed she was right. They’d led the charge on the uproar, and officially, I’d barely even been involved. I could have just walked away.

So why had I felt the need to bring them here? Even I wasn’t sure.

“Mm!” Next to me, Kurumi was doing stretches. “Well, that’s one job down. That one really took a lot out of me...and things are just gonna get busier. Figuring out what our classes are doing, preparing our shop or whatever...”

“And we’ve got exams before the festival.”

“That doesn’t matter to me. I’m dropping out!” She rapped my shoulder. “You say the silliest things.”

I was pretty sure my worries were anything but silly. Still, I let it go.

Perhaps she read my mind, because she grinned at me. “Natsume, this festival’s gonna be a blast!”

“...I think it just might.”

“And just as the fun peaks—we’ll ruin it all!”

She was all fired up, so I nodded accordingly. But somehow, my heart just wasn’t in it.

ACT FOUR

With the festival now open to everyone, the uproar died away completely. The students were only mad about the misappropriation of their money, not about the performance-based discrimination. Letting them attend the festival satisfied everyone's demands.

When they saw the students calming down, the teachers looked both exhausted and relieved. Time passed, and shortly after the school's surrender, it was time for exams.

I put aside my rage, crammed all night, and just barely managed a passing grade. I didn't want to waste time on extra classes or makeup exams. I had too much on my plate right now. I wasn't studying to get good grades! (I swear.) The exams continued for three days, and once they were done, the students' spirits visibly lifted. This wasn't because the stress of exams was behind them... or at least that wasn't the *whole* reason. The moment our tests were over, we were clear to start preparing for the festival.

For this brief window of time, Saigou High students suffered a mass hallucination. For a transitory moment, we were all carefree teenagers participating in a classic school event. And right after that would be summer vacation.

Our school didn't allow students to date, but everyone got their hopes up anyway.

Just like last year, the whole school was in a tizzy.

"Yo, got any extra masking tape?"

“Hmm? Uh, sure. Actually, I’m done with this...”

After school, the usual funereal vibe was replaced with cheerful chatter.

The desks and chairs had been dragged to one side of the classroom, and blue tarps were spread out on the floor. At the center of it all was a big cloth surrounded by students on all fours.

We were making a giant banner.

We’d taken a vote in homeroom and decided that our class’s festival contribution would be three giant banners, to be displayed outside the school.

Making festival decorations was a classic low-energy offering. Not every class needed to run a shop. Decorations and displays didn’t require us to work shifts, which freed everyone up to enjoy the rest of the festival. It was an entirely valid approach to the event, if you asked me. Making banners was hardly a bad choice.

I had a personal stake in the matter as well. I didn’t have the skills to cook or wait on customers. Whatever shift I got would be a disaster, so I’d wanted to avoid running a shop at all costs.

“You done laying out the roughs down there?”

“Almost! Let me concentrate.”

Everyone seemed to be enjoying their work.

The festival prep period was the only time students with unfinished homework weren’t required to stay behind. This wasn’t because the teachers had a change of heart, of course. There were simply too many students behind on their work; if they weren’t allowed to help, the festival preparations wouldn’t get done.

But as a result, we were free and legally allowed to have fun. Of course everyone was excited.

“Crap, I think I messed up!”

“Augh! Get it together! We have to use your lines to paint!”

The girls were running the show, and the guys were following their lead.

Groups of boys and girls chattered away as they carried out their tasks, undivided by gender.

Everyone was arranged in little clusters—but we were all in this together. It was like a big ship, and we were each manning an oar. Some people were super into it, others just dabbling—but the oars kept moving, and the ship sailed on.

A pretty good metaphor, if I do say so myself.

I was standing alone in one corner of the classroom as I had this thought.

“.....”

What, then, you might ask, became of those not allowed to man an oar? We’ve been observing my classmates, but now let’s turn our attention to yours truly.

Once homeroom ended, I joined the flow, moving my desk and chair aside. And I’d been standing here ever since. I was beside the wall, staying out of everyone’s way, like a potted plant.

Some of the girls had gotten a head start on the banners on their own and were now running the whole operation. To get assigned to a task, you had to talk to them. But if I did that, they’d just stare at me, shocked. I couldn’t help even if I wanted to.

So what should I do? Just go home and die? That sounded like as good a plan as any.

Some people had already slipped off to teams or clubs, but there were still a solid thirty people in the room—plenty of hands. No one would notice my absence.

I grabbed my backpack and headed toward the door. I moved carefully, unobtrusively, making sure not to bump into anyone on my way across the room.

But just as I was about to escape—disaster struck. I almost bumped into someone right outside.

“Eep! Oh, Natsume. You startled me.”

“S-sorry, didn’t think anyone was out here.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tanaka said, a faint smile gracing her alabaster skin.

At least it was her I’d almost bumped into. Anyone else, and it could have spelled trouble.

“I wasn’t watching where I walked,” she said. “I was on a shopping errand.” She held up a plastic bag.

“Yeah? Uh... So they put you in charge of that? Good work.”

“Thanks. It was so hot out! More grueling than I’d expected. Mm?” Picking up on something, she glanced down at my hand. “Natsume, you’ve got your backpack—are you leaving?”

“Uh... Yeah. Didn’t seem like there was anything for me to do, so I figured I’d get out of everyone’s way.”

“I doubt you’d be in the way...”

She poked her head into the classroom, scoping things out. She looked around for a moment, then groaned. Maybe she’d picked up on the cause of my discomfort.

“See?” I said. “Everyone’s on the floor. Anywhere I stand is in the way.”

“You may have a point. There’s not much room left.” Tanaka nodded. She’d been out shopping and had no clue.

I’d convinced her and was free to go. Or so I thought, but a moment later, she flashed me a grin and caught me off guard.

“Then you should work with me in the hall!” she declared.

Um, what? What was that? Work with her? Me?

I locked up, and she tilted her head, making her brown hair sway.

“What? Oh, did you have something else to take care of?”

“Er, no, not really. But... You’re sure?”

“Huh? Sure about what? We’re classmates.”

Am I allowed to help you? Wouldn’t you rather work with your friends? That was what I’d meant when I asked if she was sure, but Tanaka didn’t seem fazed.

She was just a genuinely nice, considerate person.

“Uh, you’re embarrassing me, staring like that...,” she said while fidgeting.

I’d meant it respectfully, but I guess that hadn’t come across. I averted my eyes.

“Okay, then. I’ll take you up on that offer. Happy to help.”

I had some qualms, but I eventually agreed. I’d only been trying to bail because I didn’t belong. If she had work for me, I could hardly object.

“Nice. Don’t worry, it’s nothing strenuous. We’re over here.”

I put my backpack on my desk and followed her out of the room.

The hall was quite cluttered. Every class had run out of space, and quite a few students had taken their work out into the corridor. People were drawing, making daisy chains, cutting up cardboard boxes—it was a regular smorgasbord.

“It’s kind of crowded,” said Tanaka. “We’d better get out of the way.”

I headed toward the back of the hall. We were pretty far from Class 2-5, but here we’d have some room. It was a little out of the way—perfect for getting work done.

“Just a sec,” Tanaka said, heading to the bathroom. I assumed she had to use the toilet, but she came right back out with a plastic cup full of water. “I’m back. Let’s get started.”

“So, what am I doing?”

“Um, I need you to put paint in these bowls, like this.”

She handed me a plastic bag. I looked inside and found a paint set with the word “acrylic” written on it in English and a stack of paper bowls. There were also several sizes of paintbrushes.

“I think the people inside are almost ready to start painting, so we need to get ready. Just add a bit of each color of paint to each bowl. I’ll add the water to thin it.”

“Mm? Here? Oh, so the bowls are like palettes?”

“Exactly. You catch on quick!”

It was simple work. I just added a dollop of each color to each bowl. My butterfingers might have horrified Kurumi, but I could handle this.

“Let’s make short work of it,” said Tanaka. “Don’t worry if you add too much paint.”

The two of us leaned back against the wall and got busy. I put paint in the bowls, then handed them to Tanaka. She took them and added a bit of water from her cup. Every now and then, a girl on the paint team would come and collect the palettes. Rinse and repeat. We just had to keep our hands moving.

“Oh, Yumi, there you are! Come help paint!” one of the girls said, ignoring me.

“I’m good, and you’ve got plenty of help. I’m the one who went out and bought these anyway! Oh, this one’s ready.”

This suggested Tanaka was part of the group running things. That explained why she’d put me to work.

“Sorry, Natsume, can I get a little more blue in here?”

“Uh, sure. Gimme a second, I’ll open up a new one.” I quickly topped up the paint.

“Thanks.”

Working like this really made me feel like I was a part of things. Even if what I was doing was more of a personal assignment from Tanaka herself.



I kept busy, blending into the scene the way the water blended with the paints.

“...Mmm... Hmmm...”

As I worked, I heard a pleasant little melody.

“Tanaka, what are you humming?”

“Mm? Oh, a standard classical number... Was I distracting you?”

“No, nothing like that. I just thought it sounded nice.”

“Ha-ha-ha, don’t! You’re making me blush.” Tanaka fanned herself and giggled. “I love preparing for festivals. Everyone gets so excited. Watching them enjoy their work makes me happy, too. The cheer is infectious.”

“...Mm, I guess so.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. Should I be happy, too? Or should I feel guilty? To hide my confusion, I asked her a question in return.

“Are you looking forward to the big day?”

“The festival? Hmm...I guess so.”

Her answer was more evasive than I’d expected. Then again, if she’d just said yes, I wouldn’t have known what to say to that, either. I’d really laid a trap for myself with that one.

“But I guess I’m more excited than last year,” she continued. “For a little while there, I didn’t think we’d even get to participate.”

“You mean like how you don’t notice how much you care about something until it’s gone?”

“Yeah. Because of that, I started looking forward to it even more.”

Tanaka narrowed her eyes and gazed fondly down the crowded hall. Her smile looked fragile. Combined with her delicate complexion, she seemed about to shatter.

“Oh, I know. Natsume,” she said, turning to face me. “The conversation just now reminded me—we still need more supplies, so I’ll have to make another

shopping run. Would you mind coming along?”

“You want me to come with you?”

She made the suggestion casually, but it rattled me.

The truth was, I hadn’t helped much last year, either. No one had ever asked me to make a shopping run before. I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Um, uh... When would we be going?”

“After school tomorrow. I’ll be leaving right after homeroom ends. Does that work?”

I opened my mental schedule. Kurumi and I didn’t have a meeting planned for tomorrow, and in that case, it just depended on whether I felt like going. I hesitated for a long moment before making my choice.

“Okay, sure. I can tag along.”

“Really? Thanks. We’ll need a lot, so I could use help carrying it all.”

In that case, I was happy to lend a hand. I didn’t owe Tanaka anything, but she was nice. It would be rude not to help her out when she needed it.

We worked together for a little while longer, and then we were done.

“Yumi, everyone’s got palettes now. No need to make more!” someone called from the classroom door. We stopped working.

“Guess that’s enough! Thanks for helping, Natsume.”

“Um, uh, good work.”

“We sure made a lot! Better clean this up.”

There were a lot of empty paint tubes lying around. Had I really gone through all of these? I hadn’t kept count. I must have been really focused.

I gathered up the empty tubes and torn plates in a plastic bag. Meanwhile, Tanaka emptied out the cup of water and washed the brushes. We hadn’t made that much of a mess, so cleanup didn’t take long.

“Oh dear, I guess we’re out of things to do. Now what?” Tanaka glanced down at her wrist. She had a light brown watch on. I sneaked out my phone to check

the time—it was just past six. “It’s a bit late...I wonder if there’s anything else we can help with.”

Before she could make a concrete suggestion, I spoke up.

“Uh, sorry, Tanaka. I’ve gotta make dinner, so I’d better get going.” I didn’t want to impose on her any more than this.

Tanaka blinked at me a few times, then smiled. “Do you always cook, Natsume? That’s really something.”

“Oh, it’s no big deal.”

She waved, and I said, “See you tomorrow” and headed back to the classroom. I had to collect my backpack before I left.

I opened the door and found the rest of the class still happily at work. There was too much going on for anyone to notice me. *Whew.*

The banner creation was going well. Motivated students were leading the charge, and the first banner was almost done.

It read “Saigou Festival,” in giant characters across the length of the cloth. A classic, basic banner.

My classmates held their paper bowl palettes in one hand and busily moved their brushes with the other.

How many of them knew that I’d prepared those palettes? Maybe no one. It didn’t matter, but I thought about it anyway.



Backpack in hand, I left the classroom.

I made my way through the hall and down the stairs. In the outdoor passage, festival committee members were busy making the welcome arch.

I continued to the building’s entrance, where we kept our outdoor shoes. For once, there were no teachers waiting to ambush us. I was clear to leave, so I got my shoes and headed for the doors.

I’d planned to quietly slip out, but someone slapped my shoulder as I passed

the cafeteria.

“Yo, if it isn’t Natsume!”

It was the soccer team captain.

“Uh, hey. Long time no see, Iwata.”

“Ha-ha. It hasn’t even been a week.” He cackled merrily.

This made me uncomfortable. I tried to smile back but couldn’t quite pull it off.

“You headed home?” he asked.

“Yeah, I am. If you’re here, are you doing the same?”

“Nope, I just got back from practice. Gonna hit up the classroom.”

I took another look and saw that while he was wearing his regular uniform shirt, he was only carrying a sports bag.

“The festival’s back on, so I left practice a little early. I figured I’d see how the preparations for our shop are going.”

“Being on a team sounds rough.”

“Yeah. Especially when our adviser won’t stop yelling at us to work harder or quit and go back to studying.” He let out an exasperated sigh.

I wasn’t on a team, so this wasn’t a topic I could sustain for very long.

I said, “Good luck with that” and tried to move on...

...But then he suddenly clapped his hands, as if remembering something.

“Oh, right, Natsume, our class is doing a barbeque.”

“...Really? You don’t get many of those.”

“I’d been planning on throwing one for the off-campus party and couldn’t get the idea out of my head. So I made the suggestion while we were discussing what to do, and it took off. I mean, it’ll probably be more like yakitori in practice.” He seemed pretty chuffed about it. He couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “That’s another reason why I wanna help out.”

“Makes sense. You mentioned scoping out ingredients. Glad that work paid

off.”

I meant what I said. Despite having conned them—or perhaps because of it, I was genuinely happy to see the club leaders get what they wanted.

The soccer captain rubbed his nose, then flashed me a grin. “Come chow down on the big day. We’ll make sure the sauce is to die for!”

“Looking forward to it. I’ll be there.”

“I’ll hold you to that! But I better hurry. Later!”

He shot me a thumbs-up and spun on his heel. I was finally free.

So his class is running a shop. I said I’d be there—but will I have the time?

I watched him run off, knowing I might not be able to keep my promise.



After school the next day, I left my things in the classroom and followed Tanaka out.

The festival committee members were working on the columns out front. We moved past them, exited through the front gates, and left the school behind.

Saigou High’s campus was quite large. To acquire that amount of land, they’d built it in a fairly remote location. The main road leading to school was flanked by ordinary houses, and beyond those were creeks and rice paddies.

There were no office buildings, no stores—just a great view of the sky above. But today, thick clouds were gathered in the heavens, and you couldn’t see a single patch of blue. The newscasters had sworn the rainy season was over, but there were no signs of the skies clearing up.

“Where are we shopping, Tanaka? I doubt they sell those paints at the one hundred-yen shop.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s a bit of a trek, but it should be within range of your train pass.”

We continued down the main road, passing few other pedestrians. Eventually, we reached the nearest station and climbed up the stairs. After tapping our

commuter passes at the gate, we moved to the platform.

The train was just pulling in. It was a local—the kind that made every stop. The air-conditioning kept the interior nice and cool.

We found two empty seats and let the train jostle us for fifteen minutes. Just as we were running out of small talk, Tanaka said, “This is our stop,” and we got off. It was the same terminal where I always switched trains.

There were far more people going in and out of the gates at this station. We left through the west entrance and were soon surrounded by pedestrian overpasses and multi-tenant buildings.

By this time, I knew where we were headed.

“Are we going to the stationery store on the sixth floor of the mall?”

“Oh, yes. Exactly. You know the place?”

I thought so. I recognized this route. It was the same store where Kurumi and I had gone to buy eraser stamp supplies.

“Do you buy art supplies often, Natsume? Do you draw for fun?”

“No, nothing like that. I just happened to pass by it once, and it stuck in my mind.”

“Wow. I didn’t peg you for the type of kid who hangs out at the mall.”

Well, I was making that story up. I was no mall rat. I was just a liar. But I figured if I tried to elaborate, I’d only wind up in trouble later, so I held my tongue.

We wove through the crowds, crossing several streets.

The mall hadn’t changed much since last time. I looked up at the glass-encased seven-story building.

“Doesn’t seem *too* packed,” said Tanaka. “Let’s get what we need and go.”

We stepped through the front doors, passed by several cafés, and took the elevator up.

We got off at the sixth floor, turned right, and made our way to the stationery store near the center of the building. The mall was spacious and airy, but the

shop's interior was cramped. Well-stocked shelves filled every inch, like a maze.

We grabbed shopping baskets, then stopped in one corner to catch our breath.

"What are we here for?" I asked.

"The girls on the painting crew said they wanted some big, wide brushes."

"Okay... This area's more for fine arts painting, so let's check over there."

"Oh, but we also need more paint. I've got a list here, so..." Tanaka froze, one hand in her shirt pocket.

"What? If you give me the list, I'll go grab what we need."

"Oh, um. Thanks, but that's okay. Let's just go around together." She smiled and stuffed the list back in her pocket.

It didn't seem to me like she'd deemed me incapable of carrying out the task. So why had she changed her mind? I was happy to do my part. *Oh well, whatever.*

"Looks like the big brushes are over here. Let's go check it out."

She led the way farther into the store, and I followed, like I was in the hero's party in some retro JRPG. We threaded our way through the narrow gaps between shelves, piling what we needed into our baskets. The brushes weren't where we expected, and we had to wander around a little, but we had fun.

"Tanaka, are these the brushes we're looking for?" I asked.

"Ha-ha-ha, those are for painting *walls*. They're too thick!"

"Oh, really? Okay, I'm officially clueless."

I was at the mall with a classmate, laughing and shopping. It was a totally normal activity, but I'd never done anything like this before.

The two of us wandered through the store's labyrinthine aisles, filling our baskets.

"Natsume, grab that tape, would you? The chunky one."

"This one? Okay. Anything else?"

“Um... We’ve got the brushes and the paint... I think that’s everything.”

In under half an hour, we’d gotten all the items on the list.

“Excuse me? We’re ready to go!” Tanaka called, moving to the register.

Luckily, the employee on duty wasn’t the one who checked us out during my previous visit.

Tanaka paid from a brown envelope containing the class funds, and we exited the maze of stationery.

“Sorry to make you carry everything, Natsume.”

“I don’t mind. That’s what I’m here for.”

I lifted our purchases as a show of strength. Everything we’d bought fit in one bag—it wasn’t exactly a lot.

“Let’s hurry back to school. The others are waiting on us.”

Tanaka and I retraced our steps. Down the elevators, past the cafés and the information center, through the sliding doors, and back out into the heat and humidity.

Our route cut through the same urban area as before. On the way to the station, Tanaka suddenly said, “I’ve been meaning to ask—what were you like last year?”

“Last year? What do you mean? It’s only been a year, I didn’t change that much.”

“No, I mean... Did you have friends?”

Friends. That helped me connect the dots.

Tanaka was aware I was shunned by our classmates. She was wondering if that was a new thing, or if it had been going on for a while.

“Last year all I did was study, so I didn’t really have time for friends.”

“So you *are* smart. I knew it!”

“...My grades aren’t that great. That’s why I was studying. I was trying to get into a better class.”

This was safe to admit. Tanaka looked faintly surprised.

“Are you still trying?”

“Not anymore, no. Too much effort.”

“Hmm, okay. I see.” She broke off and thought for a moment. There was a long silence, and then she made up her mind. “You know those boys in charge of the masking tape?”

“Huh? Oh, for the festival. I think so, why?”

“You might try talking to them. I think they’ve got the wrong idea about you.”

She must have been suggesting I try to join their group. *The wrong idea, huh?* Was it that simple? I’d only convinced the teachers I’d make trouble if they harassed me—they didn’t actually like me or anything. I figured my classmates had misunderstood the situation, but how was I supposed to explain something like that?

While I pondered this, Tanaka sighed.

“Okay... Look, Natsume, I could—”

“Ah!” A yelp cut her off.

I looked up, saw who it was, and almost yelped myself.

There was Kurumi, in black hair mode, right in the middle of the crowd.

What a weird coincidence. Bad timing all around. We’d kept our relationship under wraps all this time, and if we made contact now, Tanaka would find out. It hurt, but I had to ignore her.

I blended into the crowd and tried to pass her by—but she blocked my escape.

“O-oh, hey! Fancy meeting you here,” she called out as we passed.

Come on, Kurumi, what are you thinking? We have to pretend we don’t know each other! Was she trying to cover for her yelp?

Crap. Now that she’d said something, I had to respond. *Fine, here goes nothing.*

I stopped and turned to face her. But there was no need to reply—Kurumi wasn't looking at *me*.

"What's up, Tanaka?" she said. "Out shopping?"

"...Yeah, we're getting supplies for the festival."

"I see, I see! Well, keep up the good work!" Kurumi was acting awfully friendly. "You two are in Class five, right? What kind of shop are you guys doing?"

"Well, we're actually not doing a shop. We're just making decorations." Tanaka sounded equally at ease.

What was happening? They were completely ignoring me while I stood to the side, at a loss.

"Oh. Hi, Natsume."

When I heard my name, I finally snapped out of it and began to calmly take stock of the situation.

...So these two know each other?

"What brings you here, Hoshimiya?" Tanaka asked. "You don't live out this way."

"Oh... Yeah, I'm...also on a supply run. My class asked me to go."

"Oh, okay. What's your class doing?"

"We're making a maze. Lining up the desks, setting up cardboard walls, you know."

As Kurumi spoke, she hid her shopping bag behind her back. This kept it out of Tanaka's line of sight, but I could see what was inside. The bag bore the logo of an electronics shop, and there was a round object inside it—likely a blank CD-R. It was the kind you used to make your own music CDs.

I was pretty sure what she intended to do with it. This was for our plan. Kurumi was going to make a CD of our teachers' insults and play it over the school's broadcast system, just like how students played music at lunchtime.

"...Kurumi," I said softly.

“.....”

She looked away, avoiding my gaze.

Maybe she didn't want me bringing up the CD, or maybe she just didn't want to talk to me here. It could have been either one, and I wasn't sure how to take it.

Her smile was definitely fake, like she was talking to a stranger.

“Oh, sorry!” she said at last. “I'm short on time, so I'd better run!”

“Yeah. Sorry for keeping you. Later, Hoshimiya.”

“Same. See you both later. Swing by our maze on festival day!”

Kurumi hurried off in the other direction. Our eyes briefly met in passing. She was frowning, clearly upset. She looked like someone whose favorite candy store had just gone out of business. *First she won't meet my gaze, now she looks sad—what's going on?*

“We'd better go, too,” suggested Tanaka.

“Oh, right.”

She set off toward the station, and I followed a half step behind.

“Natsume, let's get some crepes on the way home. I'll pay, as a thank-you for helping.”

“...Uh, crepes? Sounds good, let's do that.”

Tanaka was endlessly nice, but even as I spoke, my thoughts were elsewhere.

In that moment, Kurumi had looked nothing like the girl I knew—the one who wanted to wreak havoc on the festival. What lay beneath her melancholy?

“.....”

One possibility sprang to mind. Maybe, just maybe, she felt the same way I did.

For the last few days—or rather, since I'd thanked the club leaders the previous week—I'd been plagued by a nagging sense of doubt. I'd stuffed it back down, put a lid on it, tried not to give it my attention—but now I took it

back out and peered into its depths.

At that point, I stopped in my tracks and turned around. Kurumi had already vanished into the crowd. But when I held my doubt up to the setting sun, I was pretty sure its outline looked just like Kurumi.

“Natsume?” asked Tanaka.

What were we—no, what was I trying to accomplish?

Revenge? Resistance? Change?

I got all that. I got it, but something felt wrong.

Did we really comprehend what this next attack would cost?



The next day, I made up my mind to leave class before Tanaka said anything.

I wasn't heading home, though. Kurumi and I had a strategy session planned.

I moved my desk and chair, then joined the flood of students heading to practice or clubs. Fortunately, Tanaka was talking to the other girls and didn't notice.

Out in the hall, other classes were already preparing their shops. Everyone was smiling, like this was the one thing they had to look forward to.

I made my way down the third-floor hall and around the first years' building. I chose a path that would take me by the fewest people.

Saigou High didn't allow clubs to put up exhibits. Everyone was focused on helping out their classmates, so the old club annex was extra quiet.

The hallway seemed darker than usual as I headed all the way to the back. I found the same metal plate by the door as always, covered up with that paper sign reading “Stargazing Club” in magic marker.

The door rattled as I stepped inside. Was it always that stiff?

“...Oh. Hey there, Natsume.” Kurumi was seated at the table, in full revenge mode. She looked up and nodded at me. “Heh-heh! Glad you decided to show.”

“What do you mean? When have I ever no-showed?”

“Come on. You are totally the sort of cad who’d stand a girl up.”

“Am not. What do you take me for?”

“That would be telling.” She flashed me a teasing grin and giggled.

I rolled my eyes, sighing.

This was typical banter for us, but it dried up faster than usual today, and I took a seat.

“Time to strategize,” Kurumi said, putting on a serious expression.

“Yeah. Let’s get to it.”

Kurumi started digging through her bookbag. Instead of her usual notebook, however, she pulled out a thin laptop and a set of twenty CD-Rs. Our goal for today was to make the Insult CD. She’d come prepared.

I took out my phone and a USB cable and placed them on the table.

“I bought some blank CDs yesterday,” she said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Oh. Ha-ha-ha. That’s right! You saw me there.” Kurumi smiled like she was trying to cover a slipup.

Right, I’d planned to ask about that before we got to work.

“So, Kurumi, you know Tanaka?”

“...Um, well, yeah. I guess.”

Hmm. This is like pulling teeth.

As she tore the wrapper off a CD-R, Kurumi glanced up at me hesitantly. “Uh... did she say anything about me?”

“About you? Nope. She didn’t say a thing. We headed straight back to school after that.”

“Ha-ha... Well, good. Let’s keep it that way.”

She averted her gaze. The mystery had only gotten deeper, but the look on

her face made it clear she didn't want me digging any further, so I dropped the matter. *Does it have anything to do with her decision to quit school? I guess I probably shouldn't speculate.*

"Well, let's start editing!" Kurumi lifted the laptop's lid and turned it on.

I did my bit by putting the fat end of the USB cable into the computer and the thin end into my phone. After a moment, I got a notification asking if I wanted to trust this device. I tapped "okay" and put down my phone.

"How do we turn the recording into a CD?" I asked.

"First, we sync the phone and the computer and copy over the data. Then I'll use some free software to read the file. After some quick audio editing, we'll balance out the volume levels and then write it to the disc."

"So you don't just copy the file, huh? You sure did your homework."

"Yeah, I read up on it yesterday."

This didn't seem like something you could learn from a few internet searches. But Kurumi was bright like that.

While I was busy being impressed, Kurumi started going back and forth between the phone and the laptop.

"...That should do it," she said at last. "Thanks for letting me borrow your phone. The data's all synced up."

"So I'm good to disconnect?"

"Yep. Go right ahead. I've got everything copied over. Now I just have to cut and paste—that is, choose which insults to put on the CD. Let me try a few configurations. Then we'll give them a listen together."

She stared at the screen intently as she worked the touch pad.

There was a burst of white noise. I held my breath and leaned in—and immediately regretted it when a man's voice exploded in my ear.

"Do you want me to kill you?!"

The noise stopped. Kurumi was scowling. She'd pressed pause.

"...What a piece of garbage. You okay, Natsume?"

“Mm, I’m fine. It just...surprised me a little.”

“The volume’s way too high. I’ll lower it while we do the editing.”

She tapped away at the laptop, and the audio began again. This time the white noise wasn’t even audible.

“Do you want me to kill you?!”

“...Sorry.”

“You can’t even solve this easy problem?! I just taught you this yesterday! How is that possible? Why do you even come to school? You’d be better off dead.”

Better off dead. That’s right. It’s all coming back to me.

This recording came from math class. A classmate had been ordered to solve a problem on the blackboard and had failed; the teacher had lost his mind. It must have happened around the end of April.

“This is ridiculous. You’re dragging the whole class down!”

“...I know. Sorry.”

“If you’re not even gonna try, just go home. I don’t need a useless lump like you in my class!”

“Um, Natsume, what’s that noise in the background?”

“Oh, the teacher picked up the pile of turned-in homework and threw it on the floor.”

“Yiiikes. I can totally see that happening, though...”

Kurumi winced. I was probably doing the same.

The teacher was starting to yell something else, but the recording cut out.

“Oh, is that all you got that day?”

“Yeah... The teacher stormed out of the room, and the whole class had to go to the faculty office to apologize.”

“Typical! Boycotting their own classes. They pull that power play so often, I’ve started to wonder if it’s written down in their lesson plans.”

It was either a stock move, or they'd made it feel like one. It often seemed like this place had reduced teachers yelling at students to a mere formality. Schools were meant to be places of learning. If a student couldn't solve a problem, wasn't abandoning the whole class the antithesis of that? *You're a teacher—teach!*

"Well, lemme cut out the usable part and clean it up a bit." Kurumi narrowed her eyes and focused on the screen. "I figure we won't have control of the broadcast booth for very long. We want this to be memorable, even if they stop us pretty quickly. Gotta have something impactful right at the start."

"Is the one we just heard a good candidate?"

"Yep. Let's just snip out the white noise at the start and use the rest."

She pressed play, and the new clip started with *"Do you want me to kill you?!"*

Yeah, that's pretty effective. Even played at low volume, that line made my heart skip a beat.

"Should we leave in the voice of the student getting yelled at?" she asked.

"Hmmm. Good question. The back-and-forth does make it seem like a routine event, but..."

"Let's try it once more with both voices."

"This is ridiculous. You're dragging the whole class down!"

"...I know. Sorry."

"If you're not even gonna try, just go home. I don't need a useless lump like you in my class!"

It stopped, and there was a long silence.

"I know I made this recording," I said, "but I don't like it. I can't stand to listen to it."

"Having the student's voice makes it *raw*. Would that work for us or against us, you think?" Kurumi frowned.

I could feel the muscles in my face pulling into a grimace. We were using the teachers' insults against them, just like we had with the eraser stamps. But this

time, it felt especially unpleasant.

In Kurumi's view, that was because we were including the voice of the victim. But I wasn't so sure. I thought the reason it was so upsetting was because of how much we knew it would hurt our targets—the faculty.

Listening to the recordings made me realize just how wild the crap our teachers said really was. No educator should ever get so worked up they start dishing out death threats.

Playing this during the school festival and broadcasting to everyone what our classes were really like would be a huge deal. The school would look for a scapegoat, and they might even force one of the teachers to retire. That was certainly *raw*.

It was like we'd been fighting back armed with a squirt gun all this time, and suddenly we'd gotten our hands on real bullets. We weren't just mocking people we hated—we were actively trying to eliminate them.

This recording would be *fatal*. And that knowledge made me hesitant and dampened my excitement.

"Kurumi, I don't want to expose the student like that in front of everyone. Can we cut it down to just the teacher?"

"...Yeah. Then we'll string a few other clips after it."

Kurumi worked for a bit, editing out the student's voice. She played the result back at double speed. She was doing a great job, but I got the feeling she was rushing things to avoid dealing with the reality of what we were doing.

She edited the other recordings the same way, snipping out the parts she wanted and pasting them into one long string of audio.

Every time we listened to our work, I felt a pressure building around my heart. It was deeply unpleasant work. I could never have done the edits myself. I lacked both the technical skills and the grit.

"Mm, that should do it," said Kurumi. "I think we have all the audio we need."

"How long is the final reel?"

"A solid fifteen minutes. I'm pretty sure they'll stop us long before it finishes,

so that should be plenty.”

That oughtta do it, yeah. Fifteen minutes was a long time when you were under pressure.

“The editing’s done. Now I’ve just gotta write it to a disc. Hand me a CD, Natsume.”

“On it.”

I opened the case, took out one of the discs, and handed it to her. Then Kurumi popped out the disc drive and slotted the CD in place.

“Let’s see... The computer’s built-in software should let me write this to the disc...”

She leaned in and started tapping away. Soon enough, there was a whir as a motor kicked in inside her laptop. It was writing the disc. It felt like we were loading bullets into a gun.

“...Okay, it’s writing,” she said. “Looks like it’ll take a while.”

“Cool. What now?”

“I don’t want to waste time. Let’s discuss our plans for the big day.”

Kurumi pushed the laptop aside and pulled out her Notes on Revenge. She flipped through it, then placed it on the table, open to a blank page.

“Hijacking the broadcast booth should be doable. We just have to say, ‘The teacher’s asking for you,’ and send the person on duty packing. That should buy us enough time to put the insult CD in and start it playing.”

“...Yeah.”

“The problem is what happens after that. How do we get out? Once it starts playing, the teachers will come running. Even if we hide our faces, we need an escape plan.”

“.....”

Rather than answer her question, I sat there listening to the laptop’s motor whir.

The moment felt somehow empty to me, like a void. I wasn’t up to thinking

right now. Maybe Kurumi would come up with something. That's what I was hoping for anyway. But after a month together, we'd come to know each other pretty well. Kurumi looked at me and frowned, like she knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Natsume, are you listening?"

"...I am. Escape plans, right?"

She glared at me, forcing me to go on.

Fine. I just have to say something to fill the silence.

"We've got time. I'll think of a plan before the festival."

"...Okay," she said, sounding resigned, before she leaned back in her chair and sighed.

A long silence passed between us, and the mood in the room grew grim.

"...Now there's nothing else to say," she said accusatorily.

"...Guess not."

I looked out the window. The sun was starting to set.

When we weren't talking, all the ambient noises around us got louder.

Outside, there were jocks yelling, instruments tooting, voices laughing—students enjoying the lead-up to the festival. Inside the clubroom, however, the only sound was the whir of the laptop's CD drive. This divide made it feel like the two of us were off in some other world.

"...Natsume."

"What?"

I turned my gaze back to Kurumi. Her head was down, the brim of her hat hiding her expression.

"Natsume, can I get a kiss?"

That sure came out of nowhere. Her voice shook, like she could barely get the words out.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Our plan's going well."

“...Just gimme one, please.”

It occurred to me that this was the first time she'd asked. When we made out, it was usually when the mood was right. Either that, or she just pounced on me.

What was going on? It felt like she was asking for something else and simply calling it a kiss.

“You won't kiss me anymore?”

“...I didn't say that.”

I hesitated a second, then did what she'd asked. I swear my motives had nothing to do with lust. All I felt was obligation—a negative emotion almost akin to guilt.

I got up and leaned across the table.

“...Kurumi.”

I brushed her black and ash-gray hair behind her ear to get it out of the way.

The evening light from the window revealed her face. That mean smile was gone. Her lips were pressed together, and her eyes appeared to be focused somewhere else—some place I couldn't see. The only words that came to mind to describe her were negative: despondent, bereft, miserable, sorrowful.

It reminded me of the sad look in her eyes when I'd run into her on that shopping trip, just as she'd left. If she was looking like this, if she was this downcast...she must be feeling the same way I did.

I didn't want to see her like this. I put my hand on her chin and tilted it up. Then I stole her lips.

“Natsume... Mmph...”

She'd waited for me to start it, but the moment the kiss began, her arms encircled my waist, and she pulled me in. Her mouth fell open, her soft tongue and lips wet with spit.

“*Slurp... Natsu... Smooch...*”

Kurumi's tongue slipped all the way in, moving forcefully, like it had a mind of its own. Polishing my gums, marking her territory, claiming dominance.

Our breath mingled, syrupy and bitter, and our foreheads thumped together. Her hat fell to the floor.

The kiss was rough, no time to breathe, like we were trying to reach all the way into each other. This wasn't some beautiful moment like you see in a girls' romance manga—this was a junk food kiss, a craving.

"Gasp! Kurumi, I can't breathe..."

"Mmph... Shut up... Natsume... Don't say a word..."

Her arms tightened around me, and I stayed perfectly still, not getting in her way.

"Gasp! Mmph... Slurp... Smack..."

Wet noises filled the room. How long had it been since my windpipe was sealed? She was really going for it today. I always got short of breath when we kissed. And as I ran out of air—maybe my brain stopped working right. The strangest things occurred to me.

Like...were we really French kissing?

We called it a rebellion against our school, an illicit thrill, a way to relieve stress. We were making out to distract ourselves from the harsh reality—but could you really call something like that a *kiss*? This wasn't anything so sweet as that. Was there a better name for what we were doing? Something suitably nasty and dark. A unique name—one only Kurumi and I were allowed to use. This absurd chain of thought took over my mind.

"Mmph... Gasp! Natsume... Hahh...hahh... Cough..."

"Gasp! Hahh... Cough, cough, cough..."

When we finally let go, both our legs were unsteady, and we collapsed back into our chairs. We were wheezing, spluttering, catching our breaths. That was one of the roughest, longest kisses we'd ever shared—it had nearly killed me.

...Had that been enough for her?

I shook my head, blinked a few times, and got my eyes to focus again. Then I sat back up and looked over at her. Kurumi's hair was mussed, a sad smile on her face.

“...I guess you can’t read someone’s mind through a kiss.”

Huh? Was that what she was really after?

She gave me a long look, then said, “Come on, Natsume. Lay it on me.”

Lay what on her? I had no idea what she wanted. The prompt was so broad.

“...Sweet and bitter, like dark chocolate.”

“That again. You’re such a creep. No, that’s not what I’m asking.” She held my gaze, even as she shook her head. Now her smile looked genuine. “Natsume, is there something you want to tell me?”

I felt like she’d just reached out and grabbed me by the heart.

Damn. She really did read my mind.

She was right. I *did* have something to tell her, though I hadn’t meant to say it today. That was mostly because I wasn’t sure if I was right or wrong. I wanted to sort out my feelings before I brought it up.

But if she was on to me, perhaps it was time to share. It wasn’t a big deal or anything. It was just a doubt I had, one deep down that I’d put a lid on. I took it back out.

“...Kurumi. Maybe we shouldn’t.”

I glanced at the laptop—at the CD drive still whirring away and at the disc-shaped weapon within.

Looking through her lashes, Kurumi followed my gaze and put her hand on the laptop.

“You mean...you want to cancel our plan to broadcast the teachers’ insults?”

“Yeah. *Want* isn’t quite the word. I just feel like we’re making a mistake.”

“.....”

Nothing to say to that, huh? I looked at her face, searching for a response.

When I’d been shopping with Tanaka, and Kurumi had looked sad, I thought maybe she had qualms about our plan. When the same look crossed her face here in the clubroom, I wondered if she, too, had doubts about ruining the

festival.

...But that clearly wasn't the case. Her gaze had fallen to the table.

"Why...why would you even say that?" she asked, choking out the words.
"Natsume, you... You don't want revenge anymore?"

"That's not it. I still despise this school."

"Then why?! Where's this coming from?!" Her head snapped up. She was frowning, tears forming in her eyes.

I couldn't figure out what she was thinking. *Crap*. I felt like we were talking at odds, about to have a crucial misunderstanding. I had to make her see why I'd suggested we stop.

I spoke slowly, trying to stay calm.

"Kurumi, I always thought our classmates were just desperate for a normal teenage life. When it came to the festival, I was convinced they were just tricking themselves into a false sense of cheer."

"....."

"But I was wrong about that. This festival may only be a temporary illusion, but some people are genuinely enjoying it."

I remembered my conversation with Tanaka and the way the soccer team captain smiled. I'd been isolated for a long time, and those were the first glimpses of humanity I'd seen among the other students.

"Today made me think. This CD has the power to wreak havoc. The attack we're planning will have real consequences. It'll destroy everyone's fun. And I'm just not sure it's right to mess that up for people."

Kurumi had her head down. She wasn't talking. I pressed on.

"And, like—getting the festival ban rescinded made so many lower-ranking students happy. Should we really ruin that? Do we have a right to hurt all of them?"

Yeah. That's it. I remember now. The vow we made on the rooftop.

"You said you'd drop out once you made sure no one else was going to end

up like we did. By restoring the festival, we saved a bunch of lower-ranking students just like us. Isn't *that* what we wanted?" I took a breath and added, "That's what I think anyway."

It had been really hard putting all that into words, but I thought I'd managed to say everything. Now I just had to hear her take on it.

"...Kurumi?"

I'd finished saying my piece, but she still wasn't talking. Concerned, I peered into her face.

She wasn't speaking, but she *had* reacted. Those tears were her answer.

"*Sniff*... Unh... Ah..."

I could tell right away—she was trying to stifle her emotions. She gritted her teeth, screwed her lips together, did everything she could to get her heart in line.

But her efforts were in vain. Her reason lost the fight, and the emotions spilled out and rolled down her face. She couldn't hold them back.

They pooled on her chin, then a drop detached, gleaming in the evening light like a sunstone. It burst on the desk and vanished. It shattered into a thousand fragments that flew in all directions and scattered to the four winds.

"Unh...hahh... Urgh..."

I didn't know why she was crying. I'd explained myself clearly, no room for any misunderstandings. I hadn't said anything mean, nothing that should have made her cry.

Was she just that hung up on destroying the festival? No, if that was the case, she'd be mad at me. She'd argue. She wouldn't *cry*.

So where were these tears coming from? What had I done? Where had I gone wrong?

"...Why are you crying?" All I could do was ask.

She glared up at me. "...I see you're clueless, as usual."

She seemed deeply disappointed with me as she wiped her tears away. She

didn't elaborate.

A long silence followed. I could hear her shallow breathing. The laptop's motor stopped whirring, and the CD drive popped open. The disc was finished writing.

I took it from the tray and put it on the table. "...Should we wrap this up?"

"....."

"I think we're both tired. Let's talk again another day."

I stood up, put my backpack on, and moved out into the hall.

As I closed the door, I turned back.

Kurumi was still on her folding chair, hair hanging over her face. Still crying.

The laptop, notebook, pencils, the CD, her hat—they were all scattered about the desk, like a child's toys left strewn across the floor.



As the festival day approached, Kurumi stopped coming to school.

I sent her several messages, but she didn't even read them. I asked Tanaka about her, but she just deflected, an uncomfortable look on her face.

Did she know something she didn't want to tell me? I thought about it, then remembered my first conversation with Kurumi.

She was dropping out. She'd said it would happen "before summer vacation."

Oh. This is the end, then. How anticlimactic.

It made sense, though. Her exit date was coming up fast. That was why she'd been so excited about our big finale. And then I'd put the kibosh on it and offered no alternatives. I'd made her cry.

After coming to this realization, I sent her an apology.

"Sorry I didn't realize how you felt. But I don't think I said anything wrong."

Once again, she didn't even read it. Her status message hadn't changed, either.

Phones were so shallow, so unreliable. I couldn't reach her, and we still hadn't worked things out.



ACT FIVE

Once we graduate high school, we're certified as ordinary people.

But the moment you drop out, you're done for. Nobody cares what led to that decision. It's a permanent blot on your résumé. *Dropout* is synonymous with *social outcast*, with *shut-in*. That's how it's viewed through the hostile lens of public perception anyway.

A whole lot of people in this world understand that and are able to stifle the demands of their hearts.

Some random student dropping out wasn't going to change a thing. We were all just cogs in the machine called Saigou High, and today was just another day in our lives.

"...The festival is almost here, but that's no excuse to act out. That will be all. Rise!"

The teacher wrapped up the day's homeroom, and everyone in Class 2-5 bowed, then we began to shift the desks and chairs to the side of the room. My classmates were getting good at this routine, and so was I. It was time to work on our festival preparations.

"This is the last banner! Stay motivated, and let's get this done!"

"Hell yeah! I'm gonna paint the crap out of this thing!"

We were several days into the week, and Kurumi still hadn't shown up.

There was a void in my life. I went to class, ate lunch, went back to class. After school, I helped with festival preparations, and then I went home. The next day I did it all over again. I felt numb.

Two things from the past kept popping back into my mind, freezing my heart.

The first was Kurumi's and my plan to hijack the broadcast booth. We wanted to get revenge on the school, but if we did that, we would have been hurting people in the same predicament we were in.

I'd wanted to get revenge while saving those like me, but that was easier said than done. What Kurumi and I talked about on the roof was mere idealism, and once I understood that, it dampened the flames in my heart.

The second was Kurumi. The more time passed, the more my feelings about what had happened between us changed into an angry kind of disappointment. I understood that she'd felt pressure as the time of her withdrawal approached. But why hadn't she just said what she meant? Crying wasn't going to help anything.

On the roof, I'd found myself admiring Kurumi Hoshimiya. Was this really all she had to offer? That left me cold, too.

I'd been right all along. Those who seek revenge never get happy endings. Our story was going to end here, with a whimper—but that was reality for you. My ideals were nothing more than ideals. The school was never going to change.

But that didn't mean I'd gained nothing over the last month and a half. Teaming up with Kurumi and striving toward our unreachable goal had been fun. Our resistance would stay with me the rest of my life. It had gotten me through my exams. If I felt like it, I could maintain passing grades. I could be an ordinary student and survive the rot of Saigou High. Another year and a half, and then I'd be free. It was good enough, and that brief dream had made it bearable.

"Hey, Natsume."

As the other students began working on the banners, I stayed standing in one corner of the room. Tanaka saw me and called out.

"Are you okay? You look upset."

She seemed worried. She really kept an eye on the people around her.

That's right. I've got Tanaka as a friend now. I'm no longer all alone in class. Surviving this garbage school should be a little easier now.

“...Yeah, I’ve just...got a lot on my mind,” I said.

Tanaka looked surprised. Then she dropped her gaze to the floor and whispered, “Oh.”

It sounded like she’d given up on something.

“No matter how painful it is, time heals all wounds,” she said. She patted me on the shoulder, then went back to the other girls.

I stayed behind and watched her go, then allowed myself another sigh.



If Kurumi wasn’t coming to school, I had no reason to carry out our plan. And with no strategy sessions to attend, my afternoons were pretty dull.

I’d move my desk out of the way and help with the banners or just go home. Which choice I made was largely at Tanaka’s discretion. If she called my name, I’d do the work she assigned me; if she didn’t, I’d slip out. Every day was the same.

It was two days before the festival, and my classmates had just begun their work. This time Tanaka had a task for me.

“Natsume. Sorry, but can you take this trash to the bins outside?”

“Uh, sure. No problem at all.”

“I really am sorry. I wish I could assign you to a group task, but...”

“Hmm? I’m fine working by myself.”

I meant that. Over the last week, she’d had me working with other people a lot—putting down masking tape and so on and so forth. The whole time, there’d been an awkward distance between me and my classmates that made the work feel grueling. Taking out the trash was something I could do alone, and I was grateful for it.

“...Okay, then. Thanks. We’ve got several bags full.”

“All right, I’m off.”

Hefting garbage bags like Santa Claus, I headed out to the hall.

As I opened the door, the noise hit me, along with the smell of paint. The hallway had been packed for days, but now it was even more chaotic. Some students were making elaborate art pieces on their signs, others were just goofing around with the extra boxes. One person was mass-producing paper flowers while barking orders to the rest of their group. Everyone was having a great time.

It wasn't just a few people out here on their own, either. Whole classes were decorating the hallway outside their rooms with cardboard, 3D art, ads for crepes or bubble tea, and so on. One class was covering the lights with colored cellophane, turning that section of the hall a cheery shade of orange.

The school was really starting to look festive.

And it was about time—Saigou High was in the last stretch of preparations. There were two days left until the festival, and every class was putting the finishing touches on their work. Tomorrow there were no classes, and the whole day would be devoted to rehearsals.

Classes like ours, which were just making decorations or displays, had to finish everything and get it in place. It was all coming together.

I picked my way down the hall, stopping now and then to revel in the merriment. I was hoping I could catch some secondhand happiness along the way.

I went down the stairs to the ground floor, passed by the cafeteria, and saw festival committee members carrying out the finished welcome arch. I joined their throng and made my way to the shoe boxes at the entrance.

Shoes in hand, I moved to the front doors—then I saw someone unexpected and pulled up short.

“Is that...?”

It was the soccer team captain. He was standing near the shoe boxes.

“That’s just how it is,” said another boy. “Fall in line—and make sure the others know, too, okay?”

“...Yes, sir. Sorry.”

I'd run into the soccer captain in the same place before under very different circumstances. Today, he was talking to a third-year I didn't recognize. The other guy was bossing him around, and the captain was bowing his head, his tone humble.

They exchanged a few more words, and then the unfamiliar upperclassman left. I waited until the soccer captain was alone.

"Hey, Iwata. How's it going?"

"...Mm. Oh, hey, Natsume." He raised a hand and waved to me.

"That seemed tense. Did you get in trouble?"

"Oh, nothing that bad. But I guess you should know." Before I could ask any questions, he dropped a bombshell. "I know I told you to come by our barbeque, but we're not doing that anymore."

"...Huh? You aren't? Did you decide to sell something else?"

"Oh, no, no. Our class isn't doing a shop for the festival at all."

The whole thing was canceled? How did that happen? I gaped at him, not following.

Realizing I didn't understand, he started to rattle off an explanation.

"You saw that dude, right? He's from Class 3-1. They've been trying to scale up their shop, so he came to us, asking to take over our equipment and location. I put off giving him an answer, so he went to our teacher instead and got his way."

"So he just gets to take your stuff? What the hell? That makes no sense!"

"That doesn't matter. It's just the way it is." The captain shrugged, like this was normal.

Class 3-1 was a good class. Why they were being so awful was a mystery, but what baffled me even more was why the captain was so calm about it all. That other class had just stolen their location and equipment! Didn't he care?

"Just now, you were discussing giving him all your stuff, right?"

"Yep. I'm the class rep, so I was the point man."

“And you didn’t fight back? Why just fall in line?”

“Huh? It’s not like I wanted to...” He scratched a cheek. “But there’s no use complaining. The teachers will just back the better classes.”

“.....”

“You can’t fight the good students. That’s the law of our school! Ha-ha.” His smile was one of complete resignation.

I shuddered. I felt like I was seeing something inhuman and horrifying. A chill ran from the back of my heels up to the crown of my head. And following it, I broke out into a cold sweat. The clammy feeling made me nauseated, and my head began to spin.

Uh-oh. I started breathing through my mouth to calm myself down. Why was I so rattled?

I looked up, and the captain was staring at me with equal parts concern and suspicion.

“...Natsume? You okay there? What’s got you so pissed off?”

Honestly...I wasn’t sure. I wanted to ask the same thing.

Damn. My head’s swimming. I need to get it together. I gotta get out of here.

Oh, but I have to confirm something first.

“Iwata, is your class cool with not doing a shop?”

“Um, well. They said it would give us more time to enjoy the rest of the festival, so they weren’t too upset.”

...Okay. That was their choice.

If both sides agreed to it, my opinion didn’t matter.

✱

The next day was the eve of the festival. Lunch was just wrapping up.

As the rest of the school busied itself with rehearsals, our class was basking in success.

“All our banners are done! Great work, everyone!” the girl in charge exclaimed.

The other students cheered and clapped.

The most recently completed banner was spread out on the floor. It had a bright blue background, with big block letters reading, “Traditions and Connections!” That was the motto of this year’s festival.

This was the third and final banner. And with its completion, Class 2-5’s preparations were all finished.

“Where are we hanging these things?” someone asked.

“From the school roof! We’ll hang all three in a row. Right, teacher?”

The girl turned to our homeroom teacher, who’d been watching quietly, and got his okay.

“All right, then. Let’s get going. The rest of you clean up!”

The group of girls sailed out of the room, banners in tow. Once again, they’d nominated themselves to do the fun part. But nobody complained. Maybe they were all still riding the high of a job well done.

“Let’s get this cleaned up before they come back!”

“Yikes, there’s paint on the floor... That’s gonna take some scrubbing.”

Chatting away, the remaining students started cleaning.

I had to do my part. It was still school hours, and I couldn’t just go home.

I looked for Tanaka. She was in the corner, chatting with some other girls while they picked up trash. That made it hard to grab her, but I didn’t really need specific instructions right now. We were just cleaning. I could simply gather up the trash in my little corner.

The cleanup went smoothly, and we put our desks and chairs back in place. Not long after, the banner team returned.

“Oh, welcome back! How do the banners look?”

“They’re amazing! Seeing them all hung out like that really drives home how huge they are!”

Everyone was full of excitement, chatting like we were on break. For a while the volume rose, but then our teacher took the podium, and the noise died away.

His sullen gaze swept the room, and he began to speak.

“...All right, everyone. Solid effort. You worked together well. This class isn’t running a shop, so there’s no shifts to worry about, but stay on your best behavior tomorrow. There’s always someone who gets out of hand and finds themselves in trouble. Don’t let that be you... That’s all from me.”

The student on duty barked at us to stand up, bow, and sit back down. Then our brief homeroom came to an end, and noise once again filled the classroom.

“What are you gonna check out tomorrow? I wanna get cotton candy from Class two!”

“Me too. Should we go around together?”

Today, we were allowed to leave once we finished our preparations. Class 2-5 started dispersing as everyone chatted about their plans for the following day.

I joined them, grabbing my backpack and jumping into the flow of students.

We were leaving early. Other classes were still practicing waiting on customers or sampling their wares. Everywhere was bustling—the classrooms, hallways, stairwells. It was like the festival had already begun.

Class 2-5 headed through the noise toward the shoe boxes.

“We won’t have any cleanup to do, so maybe we could hold a get-together after the festival.”

“That sounds great! Let’s make a reservation somewhere.”

Some excited students were already making plans.

I knew I wouldn’t be invited, so I kept moving. But as I got my shoes out of the locker...

“Hey! Stop right there. *Tch*, shrieking and squealing—like fingernails on a chalkboard!”

...a shrill male voice sliced through the fun.

“This is the front entrance! Not your classroom! It’s a public space, so shut your worthless mouths.”

It didn’t take long to spot the source—our math teacher, Furukawa. He was marching in our direction.

The noise died instantly, and the cheery mood turned to ice.

Furukawa glared at each of us in turn and swore under his breath.

“Class five, huh? I’m sure you’re excited about the festival, but remember a student’s job is to study! And you’re a pack of idiots who can’t even remember what you learned in junior high.”

As he yelled, we all got very still, like we were in class again. Nobody dared move. We were all just waiting for the storm to pass.

“I swear. None of you deserve to have fun, not with your test scores.”

What an absolute piece of garbage. Can’t stop himself from lecturing us, huh? Ridiculous. I should just ignore him.

I headed for the doors... But I didn’t make it.

“Especially you, Natsume.”

...Huh? What was that? Did he just call my name?

I slowly turned around. His cold eyes were boring into me.

“Your final exams were a disaster. Thirty-seven points? You barely avoided failing. You think I’m gonna take that crap? I’ll *end* you.”

It felt like someone was pressing dry ice to the back of my head. Goose bumps rose on my skin. Cold sweat poured down my back. How long had it been since I was on the receiving end of this abuse? Three months now?

...Right. I rebelled against this school once. Long before I met Kurumi.

I’d forgotten how privileged that made me. I’d been taking it for granted. Living a normal, quiet life at this school was never possible. They’d agreed not to hurl insults at me, but that was an empty promise they never planned to keep.

“I suppose that’s all you can expect from someone so dumb, they fail right

back out of the better classes. Get your life together, you nitwit.”

“.....”

“What’s with that look? If you’ve got something to say, spit it out. Do I have to make you write another essay? Is that what it takes? Just drop out already!”

The moment I heard that, my blood boiled over. Every cell in my body was screaming. Of all the teachers, I could never forgive this guy. I couldn’t let him get away with this.

I clenched my right fist, then swung it all the way back.

I hurtled forward, momentum building behind my fist, and punched Furukawa’s cheek with all my might.

I’d put my full weight behind it, and the impact sent him flying.

He landed on his butt, and I stomped on his face, grinding my heel into him, hurting him so badly, the trauma would keep him from ever yelling at another student again.

...Yeah, right.

“Tch, how dare you ignore me, you dunce.”

If only I could do that for real.

But it was all just a fantasy. I was merely punching my enemies in my mind.

My silent treatment worked, and Furukawa stalked away.

“...Screw you,” I hissed. This was the only way I could vent my anger.

A hand patted my shoulder.

I turned to find one of my classmates. I didn’t even know his name.

“Damn, Natsume, you drew the short straw there.”

That got the others talking.

“Brush it off, brush it off. These things happen.”

“Don’t let it get to you. Our scores weren’t much better.”

Everyone was being extra friendly, like we were old chums.

Where did this come from? Sympathy for my public humiliation?

That was my first theory, but the next thing they said proved me wrong.

“I finally feel like we can get along, Natsume.”

...Furukawa yelling at me had made me one of *them*.

I saw Tanaka smiling pleasantly nearby.

“Isn’t that nice, Natsume?”

Nice how? What’s she talking about? Is this supposed to be a good thing?

“...Uh, hey. Wait. Natsume, where are you going?”

Before I knew it, I’d broken into a run. I bounded up the stairs and into a seldom-used bathroom on the top floor.

I went into a stall, shut the door, and slammed my fist into the wall.

“What the *hell*?!”

I felt sick. Damp clothes stuck to my clammy skin.

Not long before, I’d never have felt like this.

✱

I had my first cigarette in ages.

After all the kissing and rebelling Kurumi and I had done, an empty gesture like this could hardly scratch my itch. But I had to do *something*, or I’d never pull myself together.

I stayed in the stall till I caught my breath, then headed for the roof.

I walked all the way up the stairs and reached for the metal door like I always did.

“Huh? It won’t open?”

I turned the knob, put my back into it—but the roof door wouldn’t budge.

Oh. I guess that makes sense. Our class’s students had just been up here to hang the banners. This door had only been open because someone else had

forgotten to lock it. I should have realized—the next time someone used the roof, they'd fix that little slipup.

Now what? I don't know anywhere else to smoke. Am I out of luck?

"....."

I looked at the ceiling. No smoke detectors.

Why not just smoke here? I was past caring.

I pulled out a cigarette and a lighter right there on the landing.

Holding the cigarette butt to my lips, I lit the tip. It turned red, then black, then white. I slowly inhaled, just enough to fill my mouth, not letting the smoke into my lungs.

"Whew."

I blew it back out, and the gray smoke curled upward. It lingered, caught against the ceiling, bumping the walls, filling up the room. It writhed clumsily. *What's with this?* No matter how much smoke I made, I didn't feel any better.

There was a lump in my chest, and none of that guilty pleasure I used to feel. I kept smoking, but it was making me sick. Frustration was eating away at my stomach.

"...Ugh."

Had I built up a tolerance? Or had I just finally snapped?

How can I feel better? How can I find an outlet for this rage and hatred and grief and discomfort? Somebody tell me. Please.

"We're really gonna do this here? If they catch us, we'll be in big trouble."

I was about to release another puff when I heard voices.

"...?!"

I quickly ducked down. There was a little wall at the top of the stairs, and I hid behind that. I put out my cigarette and stashed it in my portable ashtray.

I pricked up my ears. The voices' owners didn't seem to be climbing any farther. I'd moved in time and hadn't made any noise.

Am I good? ...They must not have noticed me. That was close. I was almost caught.

...Isn't everyone supposed to be rehearsing? Who the heck is it? Why are they up here?

"I was about to leave for a party with my friends."

"Sorry, sorry. I just had to see you."

"Please. You're always so impulsive."

It was a boy and a girl. From their tone, they seemed pretty intimate. A couple? That was against Saigou High rules.

I held my breath, intending to wait until they'd passed.

"C'mon, face me. Tilt your head up a bit."

"...Like this?"

.....

Wait a second. I know that voice.

I was absolutely sure. I'd just heard it earlier today.

It had to be her. I'd know that soprano anywhere.

I peeped out around the edge of the wall.

And there she was. I could see everything.

"Yumi... You're so cute..."

"Mm... Thanks. You're pretty cool yourself, Takumi."

A floor below me, Tanaka was kissing a boy I didn't recognize. Both were acting bashful about it, but they were staring into each other's eyes, their faces close, noses bumping.

And then their bodies pressed together, and their lips locked. He had a few centimeters on her, so she had to look up.

Tanaka's cheeks were red, her eyes unfocused.

"Mmph... Yumi... Mm."

“Takumi... Can you...? Mmph...”

I pressed my back to the wall, then slowly slid down into a crouch.

There was smoke in my mouth, and I slowly let it all out.

What awful luck. With them making out down there, I couldn’t exactly leave.

“Mm... Yumi... *Smooch*... Yumi...”

“*Slurp*... Takumi... Mmph!”

I could hear heavy breathing and wet, smacking sounds.

I was in no frame of mind to witness anyone else’s happiness. This was torture.

Just as I considered clapping my hands over my ears, the sounds stopped.

“*Gasp!* ...So, Yumi, how long you gonna stay in the bad classes? I’m taking the time to help you study when I should be focusing on entrance exams. Get a move on already!”

“...I will.”

“You can’t keep hanging around with those idiots. You’re dating a good student. You’ve gotta get on my level, or you’ll embarrass me.”

“...Mm, I know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not looking for an apology! Mm.”

The conversation ended, and they were kissing again. I could hear the wet, sloppy noises echoing off the walls. They were like a solvent, slowly dissolving the shell that had been covering up the real Yumi Tanaka.

“.....”

Suddenly, I was forced to think. What had she meant to me?

From what they’d said, the guy with her was in a good class.

That didn’t bother me, but the way she’d apologized when he said she was embarrassing him did. Was she that corrupted? That brainwashed?

I’d been happy to receive her pity. The pity of someone like that. How stupid *was* I?

“Mmph... Yumi, come closer.”

“Mm... Mmm...”

How long is this going to last? Get the hell out of here!

There had to be more to kissing than just this...basic sexual relief. More guilt, illicit thrills, a jolt of anxiety.

Don't take how I feel—how we feel—and waste it on tawdry shows of empty affection.

“Yumi, I bet you're bragging about having a boyfriend in the upper-ranking classes.”

“.....I guess.”

She'd just confirmed it. I gnashed my teeth.

Bad classes, good classes. Those who had to listen to abuse and those who didn't.

Don't bring all that baggage into your goddamn personal relationships.

Was that normal? Did everyone go through life conscious of their status, obeying whatever values they were taught, without question? Did everyone stick with those they saw as peers, sucking up to their “betters” without thinking about it? Didn't they see anything wrong with that?

That wasn't friendship, and it wasn't love. It was just playing at life, letting yourself be propelled by inertia and resignation.

Who cared about studying? What did grades matter? Screw the SaiHigh Law! None of this was funny. How did no one see that our very humanity was being twisted all out of shape?

Bringing back the festival hadn't done anything. Nothing had changed.

I'd been a fool. I should never have suggested calling it off. I'd let myself be swayed by fleeting emotions, and I hadn't fixed one damn thing.

I'd made the wrong choice. I'd been wrong about making the “right” choice.

Now I understood. I had to blow this cesspool up.

“Mm... Takumi... *Smooch*...”

“*Gasp!* ...Haah... Yumi...just a little longer...”

When they locked lips again, I shared a kiss of my own—with a new cigarette.

Clutching the butt to my lips, I lit it up.

I didn’t know much about tobacco, but my father’s brand must have been pretty heavy-duty.

Right then, I realized that for the first time.

✱

Time marched on regardless of my lack of enthusiasm. Before I knew it, it was the day of the festival.

It was morning, around the time we usually held homeroom, and the school was much noisier than usual.

“The Saigou High School festival is about to begin.”

The students of Class 2-5 were chatting as an announcement came over the PA system, declaring the start of festivities.

Saigou High had a lot of students, so only a portion of them, such as the student council and the festival committee, attended the opening ceremony. The rest of us just listened to it over the PA system.

“I’ve got a friend in Class six who says they’ll give us a discount on their crepes.”

“Where should we go first? I don’t wanna wait in line, so let’s hurry to one of the popular spots.”

Our class wasn’t running a shop, so we were free to go where we pleased right from the start.

Classmates were forming packs, getting ready to enjoy themselves. Off in my corner, I quietly rose from my chair.

I intended to slip out of class the moment the festival began. I didn’t want some classmate I barely knew coming up and trying to talk to me like yesterday,

so I planned to sneak away quickly and go hide somewhere.

I took as little as I could with me and hurried quietly to the door ahead of the crowd. Luckily, I made it out without anyone noticing. Even Tanaka, who sat beside me, didn't seem to realize I'd left.

"Guests incoming! Cooks, are you ready? Got your ingredients prepped?"

"Class four, open for business! Come on in, we've got free seats!"

The hall was already bustling. Students not working shifts were pouring out of every door. Those manning their class's shops were snaring people from that first wave at speeds that would astound even the most skilled bar touts.

Anyone who saw me probably thought I was just enjoying the festival—a fact I resented.

I moved away from the noise, no real destination in mind, just wandering. I refused to meet anyone's eyes and turned away whenever I heard chatter. I kept walking past all the sweet scents, cheery music, and happy shrieks.

I was moving as if pursued, and soon I followed a wave of people outside.

"...It's so hot."

As soon as I left the front entrance, I raised a hand to my forehead and shielded my eyes.

It was midsummer. The sky was a deep blue, full of vapor trails and big, fluffy clouds. It was the middle of the season, and the skies were full of expectation.

Sunlight leaked through my fingers and past my hand, blinding me. It was far too bright.

"Hey, hey! Come on in! Want some french fries?"

"Kitchen staff, keep working! There are more customers waiting!"

There were a bunch of stalls along the path from the entrance to the front gate. These were basic tents with signs advertising things like fries, *okonomiyaki*, and hot dogs.

"Excuse me! Can we get two? Can you break a thousand-yen bill?"

"Hey, junior high school kid! What do you think? We're making *yakisoba*.

Want some?”

They’d opened the gates to the public. It wasn’t just Saigou students milling around.

People were forming lines at every stall. The skewer shop run by Class 3-1 was doing especially well. They’d stolen equipment and space from the soccer captain’s class and had both spots running at full tilt, keeping the lines moving.

One of their people was with a customer right now. A junior high girl ordered yakitori. The student taking orders relayed that to the student cooking, and when it was ready, he handed it over to the girl, sweat on his brow.

The whole class had smiles on their faces. It made me sick, and I could hardly stand to watch. And yet I felt obligated to keep my eyes peeled—to witness the truth.

Hold in your disgust and watch. See? This is the festival you made Kurumi cry to protect.

“.....”

The students in Class 3-1 were frying a lot of meat at once, and plumes of smoke rose from their tents. It trailed upward like the smoke from one of my cigarettes, reminding me of that day I’d been sulking on the roof, sullyng the sky.

The memory didn’t make me crave a smoke, though. The smell of cigarettes repulsed me now. And yet the sight of smoke made my mouth feel lonely. Not the rest of me—just my mouth.

...I’m really messed up. What’s wrong with me?

Our class had no shifts to work. I could have just called in sick and stayed home. If I was going to feel this disappointed, I shouldn’t have even shown up.

So why was I here? There was only one reason.

I was hoping to see Kurumi.

It was time to admit it—I wanted to talk to her again. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to talk about or what I should say to her. But I was sure that the only way I’d ever rid myself of this resentment, remorse, and discontent was to

Speak with her one more time.

She hadn't read any of the messages I'd sent her. It was still complete radio silence. That meant I would have to meet with her face-to-face.

The festival was open to the public. She could still attend, even if she'd dropped out. If Kurumi felt like too much time had passed to simply message me back... If she felt like I did, and wanted to talk to me one last time, then...

That faint hope alone had brought me here.

...I know, I'm being a pussy again. But can you blame me for it? I didn't even know Kurumi's train station, much less her address. All I could do was wait for her. That was the best a boy like me could do—a boy who'd refused to look at his own heart, who'd only managed to act when a girl threatened him.

"...This is ridiculous."

I tore my eyes off the stalls, and my feet led me away from the crowds once again.

I moved back inside, pushing forward toward the quiet, toward solace. I stared straight ahead as I walked, and soon I was somewhere familiar: a dimly lit hall, with signs bearing club names beside each door. I continued toward the back. I was now far from the bustling crowds, in the old club annex. I felt like I was in another dimension—a secret back half of the world.

I reached the end of the hallway and pulled up short outside the final door. I stood frozen, just as I had the first time I'd come here.

I couldn't tell if I'd made my way to this place consciously or unconsciously, but I'd wound up in front of the Stargazing Club.

I reached for the door. It wasn't locked.

"...Kurumi?"

My heart leaped. *Could she be inside?*

But that breathless anticipation lasted only a moment before giving way to disappointment.

In the room I found a table, two folding chairs, and a set of shelves. Nothing

more. The space itself was unchanged, but Kurumi was missing. It was like she'd been erased from a photo, like there was a hole where she was meant to be.

"Not here, then." A faint sigh escaped me.

If Kurumi had come to school hoping to see me, this was where she'd be. I'd thought I might find her here. She'd look up at me awkwardly and say, "Oh, Natsume... Hey, there."

I'd been thinking way too optimistically. All that was over. I was too late. Our paths would never cross again. It was sad, but that was reality.

Just in case, I checked my phone, but she still hadn't read a single message. All I saw were a whole bunch of notifications telling me my stamina had been replenished in some stupid phone game.

I headed into the room, pulled out a chair, and took a seat.

I ran my fingers across the table, but there was no residue left from her tears. The room was all cleaned up, and looking around it, I felt like I knew why she'd cried.

Kurumi couldn't bear the idea of me becoming yet another lower-ranking student.

I should have thought back to how we started our resistance. Why had I admired Kurumi Hoshimiya when I met her on the roof? It was because I was happy to know there was someone else who couldn't stand this school.

She wasn't like the teachers, the good class students, or even the other bad students. And that had dazzled me—I'd loved her unwavering morals, her convictions.

I hated all the teachers here. I hated how the better students lorded their status over us. But I hated the lower-ranking students just as much. After all, not one of them questioned the discrimination, and no one ever fought back. They simply laughed off the abuse.

In our final strategy session, I'd said some crap about the two of us not having the right to hurt anyone. But we did have that right. And we should have hurt them, if only for the simple reason that I hated everyone in this hellhole.

“Ugh... Augh...”

When Kurumi had said she didn’t want anyone else to end up like her, she wasn’t talking about the other students in the bad classes.

Sorry, Kurumi. I read that all wrong.

“Goddammit. What am I even doing?!”

I gave in to impulse and slammed my fist down on the table. There was a loud thump. My hand hurt, but it was the only thing that felt real.

I’d always lived trying to avoid making mistakes, and this was the first time I’d regretted anything so much.

I collapsed onto the table. I covered my eyes with one arm, wiping the tears as they formed.

I’d managed to stave it off for a while, but now the torrent of emotions whirling inside me burst through the levees.

I didn’t want to see anything anymore. I didn’t want to keep existing in this world.

I closed my eyes and let my mind slip away, like I was fleeing reality.

✱

As I slept, I dreamed.

In that dream, Kurumi and I met under ordinary circumstances and forged a healthier relationship. This time, we were just two students in the same club.

We’d meet up after school and chat about nothing in particular. To be honest, we didn’t do a lot of actual club activities. She’d tease me, and we’d banter back and forth. That was our routine.

Eventually, we started turning to each other for advice and got to know each other better. Neither of us really fit in, and so we started dating. We were each other’s support.

Our first kiss came during club. The mood was right, and we just went for it.

“Natsume, how’d your first kiss taste?”

“Hmm. Like strawberries, I think.”

We both blushed—then we laughed.

Was a future like that ever in the cards for us?

*

I woke up with a pounding headache and peeled myself off the table.

“Ow...”

Sleeping in a weird position had left me stiff as a board. My arms, shoulders, and back were all killing me.

How long had I been out?

I turned my bleary eyes to the window and saw that it was much brighter outside than before. The sun had now fully risen. A heatstroke warning had been issued this morning. It was only going to get hotter from here.

“...Huh?”

That was when it hit me...

It wasn't hot in the clubroom at all. It was actually pretty nice.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to focus my vision.

No one else was here, but the AC was on. It had been off when I arrived, and I hadn't turned it on. There could be only one explanation.

“...Did someone else swing by?” I muttered. Then my hand touched something, and I heard a noise.

I looked down and saw what it was—and the shock almost made me throw up.

My pulse went into overdrive, and my mind cleared in an instant.

My wishful thinking no longer seemed so unrealistic. Next to me was a pack of cookies left over from our party—and a notebook.

It was open to a new page, with “Brought you these, Natsume,” written on it.

“Kurumi?!”

I leaped out of my chair and bolted to the door.

The long hallway stretched off toward the main building, but I couldn't see a soul out in the gloom. I looked around in vain, calling her name. The only answer was my own echo.

When did she get here? How long had it been since she came? Why hadn't I woken up?

I went back inside. Kurumi was an incorrigible tease. Maybe she was hiding somewhere, watching me overreact. I might find her if I looked.

I checked under the table, inside the drawers, behind the curtains. I searched every nook and cranny, but Kurumi was nowhere to be found.

When I was done ransacking the place, I flopped back down on my chair.

"...What the hell?"

Why wasn't she here? Hadn't she come to school to talk to me? Why hadn't she woken me up?

Was she going to end things like this? Had she just come here just to drop off a gift for me to remember her by? A smooth gesture to satisfy herself before she headed off for good? Was this the sentimental conclusion to our story?

I couldn't let that happen.

I... I still hadn't told her I was sorry.

"....."

No, this isn't over. I'm not letting it end this way.

I picked up the notebook and looked at the yellow cover. I'd know this book anywhere. It was Kurumi's Notes on Revenge.

...Let's peek inside. Maybe I'll find a hint about how to see her again.

In hindsight, I'd never actually read the notebook myself.

I opened it to the first page.

As it turned out, the notebook was a collection of plans for our rebellion...but it was also Kurumi's diary.

May 15:

My parents don't even care that I'm planning on dropping out of high school.

They only said, "It's fine," just like they do whenever I get bad grades.

It doesn't make sense.

I can never manage to catch up with my brother. How is that fine? Dropping out of high school isn't fine. But neither of them batted an eye.

I want them to look at me. I want them to see how messed up I am.

That's why I swore vengeance against the world—the world that refuses to see me for who I am. I'm gonna make everyone see me and realize that I'm not fine.

I'm nowhere near fine, and I need my parents and my brother to know that.

So starting today, I'll be writing in this notebook. My Notes on Revenge. These pages will be the sole evidence that I fought to be myself.

May 16:

Getting vengeance against the entire world is a tall order, so I've decided to limit my scope to this school.

If the teachers weren't allowed to hurl insults at us students, I would have been fine with my life here. Maybe I would have simply learned my limits, resigned myself, and led a mediocre life.

The question now is how do I fight a school? I'm gonna work on that for a while.

Currently, my best idea is to try to get everyone to do imitations of our teachers.

June 2:

Yesterday, I caught an older boy smoking on the roof. I probed further, and it turns out he smokes because he hates the school and smoking makes him feel rebellious.

I called him a pussy. But when I kept digging, it turned out he had fought back.

Today, I forced him to join my cause. If his hatred is that strong, I can probably get him to help me take on the school. I could certainly use the support.

We'll have a proper meeting tomorrow. I'm thinking of a nuisance tactic involving eraser stamps. I call it the "Student Insult Redistribution Campaign."

June 11:

Natsume was awful at making stamps but pulled off the plan without a hitch.

He seemed to really enjoy striking back. Listening to him describe what he'd done and hearing everyone in school talking about us was a lot of fun.

The juice we drank to celebrate tasted way better than it usually does. I know that's a trick of the mind, but it felt special.

Now that I think about it, my classmates back in junior high used to throw parties at the slightest excuse. I wonder if they felt anything like this? I wouldn't know, since I never went.

I was invited, of course. I just chose not to go. No biggie.

June 16:

I kissed Natsume.

I did it on impulse, nothing more. I was just curious.

It was my first time, but... It was very, uh, stimulating.

I feel like I'm starting to get why he smoked.

I kissed someone I'm not even dating. At school!

It was so immoral. I think I'm getting further and further away from fine, and

it feels great.

And it was kinda cute how he tried to act all calm even though he was clearly worked up. But that crap about dark chocolate was so cringe.

The words she'd written were like a dagger to my heart.

I felt awful. Why'd I have to say something so dumb?

But for some reason, as I read...I felt myself smile.

June 23:

We're gonna make and break the festival.

It was his idea to bring it back, and mine to ruin it again. It's a good plan, and it should hit 'em where it hurts.

I'm gonna cut up some newspapers and make a threat letter.

June 29:

We're going with Natsume's plan to revive the festival. It looks like it's working.

Today, we started planning how to ruin it once it's back on. Scheming with Natsume is so much fun. I hate to resort to clichés, but it really feels like we can do anything. I'm so excited, my heart is pounding.

We decided to broadcast the teacher's insults over the school PA system. I'll have to buy some blank CDs.

July 9:

A lot happened, but Natsume's plan to restore the festival worked out.

He started making other allies and kept his real plan from me, and to be

honest, I felt a bit left out. But he picked up on my frustrations and kissed them all away, so I forgave him.

I'm glad he's getting more into our fight.

July 15:

I skipped out on festival preparations to buy some blank CDs and ran into Natsume.

He was with Tanaka. They were out shopping for supplies.

His class is back at the festival. It makes sense he has to run errands...

But I've got a bad feeling about this. I remember the two of them talking in the cafeteria.

Maybe he wasn't getting excited about our fight against the school. Maybe he was only interested in restoring the festival.

Was I getting hopeful for no reason? Did I read him all wrong?

July 16:

My bad feeling was right. Natsume suggested calling off the attack on the festival.

He was never really into our resistance. He only ever cared about the festival. He was trying to bring it back for Tanaka's sake.

What the hell? What does he mean, "Do we have a right to hurt them?" Who cares about that? What was that about "lower-ranking students just like us"? They're not like us.

I wish he'd stop making excuses and running away.

He didn't even know why I was crying. He doesn't know how I feel or what I'm thinking.

He doesn't know how much having him meant to me.

If I'd pulled out the photo then, would he have stayed? I don't want to strong-arm him anymore. I want him in this with me for real. That's why I tested him.

I'm afraid there's no place left for me now.

I hope I can forget how much I cared about you, Natsume.

When I finished, I was crying again.

Even I thought it was weird for me to cry over something like this, but I was so happy to finally know Kurumi's true feelings. And yet I also knew it was far too late. How could I not cry?

For a long time, I'd felt like I was at the bottom of a deep, dark ocean, buffeted by waves. Finally, I could breathe again.

I was overjoyed. The way she told our story brought it all back.

"No place left... Was that what I was to her?"

That phrase in particular got to me.

Being with Kurumi was where I belonged, too. She knew full well I was a worthless loser with no plans to study, who wasted his time smoking up on the roof. But she'd accepted that. That was why I'd wanted to be with her.

Maybe the reason I'd suggested calling off the attack was because I was already happy. Being with Kurumi, letting her blackmail me into fighting the school—all that had begun to fill the void in my heart. And as a result, I started to entertain the tawdry hope that everyone could be happy. That was why I'd wanted to call off our attack. That was all there was to it.

I was an idiot. A stupid, shallow fool.

"Ha-ha... How did I miss it?"

I stifled a sob. Waves of regret, joy, and shame came washing over me.

I cried, then I cried some more. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore, but Kurumi still didn't come back.

It was no use waiting for her. I had to go out and look.

But just as I got to my feet, the pages of the notebook fluttered, and I spotted another entry.

“Huh...?”

The diary wasn’t finished. There was more written after the note about the cookies.

I gingerly turned the page and saw a few sentences marked with today’s date.

July 23:

Natsume, did you like my present? Did you enjoy this fake taste of regular high school life?

“Fake...?”

I didn’t understand. Anxiety shot through my chest, and I quickly flipped through the rest of the notebook.

There was a scrap of paper tucked between the pages, and it fell out and fluttered to the floor.

I picked it up—and froze.

New Membership Application: Stargazing Club. Class: 2-5. Name: Yumi Tanaka.

Aha. So Kurumi and Tanaka knew each other because of this club.

...That couldn’t be all of it, though. Something was nagging at me, but what?

I forced my brain to work. What was wrong here?

A fake taste of high school life. Kurumi asked me if Tanaka said anything about her. The Stargazing Club had no other members. The diary said she’d tested me.

It all added up. A theory was forming in my mind—but just before the last piece fell into place...

I heard a chime, followed by an all too familiar voice over the loudspeaker.

“Festival visitors, please enjoy the sounds of daily life at Saigou High.”

✱

The moment the broadcast began, I shot out of the clubroom.

I knew what “sounds of daily life” really meant.

“Kurumi...!”

I rushed down the hall like I was trying to outrun the heat itself.

My destination: the broadcast booth on the second floor of the main building.

I didn’t know what she’d meant by a “fake taste of high school life,” or what was going on with that membership application, or what Kurumi was really after. But I knew what was about to happen, and I knew what I had to do about it.

Move. You have to get to Kurumi before anyone realizes what this broadcast is really about.

“Saigou High is a preparatory school where students toil together to earn a ticket to colleges with demanding entry requirements.”

By this point, I’d left the club building behind and was hurtling across the schoolyard.

The scene around the school hadn’t changed much—students were everywhere, enjoying the festival. Nobody was paying any attention to the broadcast. They probably assumed it was just part of the goings-on.

“We take pride in the quality of our classes and thought you might like to hear what they’re like.”

I threaded my way through the crowds as fast as I could.

Lack of exercise slowed me down, but I forced my aching muscles to work and took the stairs two at a time.

I reached the east end of the main building. It was filled with special-purpose classrooms, so there weren't any festival displays.

The closer I got to my goal, the more the crowds thinned and the noise subsided.

Halfway down the second-floor hall were some orange cones with a warning bar across the top. From that, someone had hung a sign reading, NO TRESPASSING, FACULTY ONLY.

I ignored this and vaulted over the bar, then raced down the rest of the corridor.

That sign must mean I was on the right track. The broadcast booth had to be down this hallway, and I knew I'd find Kurumi inside.

"I know there are many visitors today considering joining us here at Saigou High, and we hope this will help you make a decision."

I could see it now. A plain, gray door. A red light outside, meaning "on air."

"Please have a listen to a typical Saigou High lesson."

I turned the knob, almost tackling the door.

The inside of the room was purely functional, devoid of color. There were sound-absorbing walls, a rack of audio equipment, and in the middle of it all...

...a girl, perched on a chair. She spun around to face me.

I saw her pale pink lips, her long eyelashes, and her eyes that gleamed like black quartz. She was in uniform, but I could see the ash-gray underlayer of her bobbed hair. She wore her newsboy hat with the cat ears. Before me was a bad girl with a dash of little sister appeal.

"...Kurumi."

It was her. Kurumi Hoshimiya in the flesh.

Her eyes went wide, then narrowed as her lips curled into a mean smile.

"...Oh. Hey there, Natsume. Long time no see."

"Hahh...hahh... I don't think that's...quite right..."

I wheezed, and she snorted.

“You’re out of breath. Why the big hurry? I’m impressed you knew to find me here.”

“I knew what you were up to the moment you started that broadcast.”

“And what, exactly, am I up to? I don’t believe I said anything strange.” As she gazed at me, her face went blank. “I’m just playing a tape of our lessons. Nothing out of the ordinary about that. You’re only here because you remember our plan to ruin the festival.”

“.....”

“That’s why I’m *impressed*,” she said, shrugging. Her voice was dripping with spite.

She was implying that because I argued against the plan, she assumed I’d forget all about it.

I wanted to defend myself, but I didn’t know what would get through to her.

Now that I’d found her, what did I have to say? My regrets, my questions, my emotions—everything I wanted to tell her was all mixed up inside me. My head spun, and I couldn’t form words.

“Natsume,” she said, getting up before I could say anything. She took a step closer and glared up at me. “Did you enjoy the fake taste of high school life I arranged for you?” Her tone was aggressive.

That’s right. I wanted to ask her about that.

“The thing you wrote in your notebook? I read it. What did you mean?”

“You didn’t get it? I stuck a hint between the pages.”

She must have meant the club membership application. I’d seen it, but it hadn’t led to any answers. I’d chosen getting here over thinking about it.

When I said nothing, she scoffed, “Wow, do I really have to spell it out for you? I was talking about Tanaka!”

“What about her?”

“When she started treating you nicely all of a sudden, you didn’t think that

was weird?”

“...What are you saying?”

“Ugh, you are *so* dumb. Let me start from the beginning.”

Kurumi sneered at me and launched into a monologue, like some criminal mastermind.

“I recruited you for my resistance movement. But at the time, I had no grounds to trust you. I wasn’t even sure if you really hated our school.”

“You don’t say... So, what?”

“I needed to determine if you were a true comrade. I racked my brain for a way to do that and realized Tanaka was in your class. She’s technically a member of the Stargazing Club, even if she never comes to meetings. And she feels guilty about that, like she owes me.”

Kurumi was peering into my face, watching me closely.

“I *used* her to test your thirst for vengeance.”

“To test me? How, exactly?”

“Nothing terribly complicated. I just put on a worried frown and told her, ‘A boy named Ren Natsume is in your class, and everyone’s ostracizing him. Could you be nice to him on the sly?’”

“I don’t get it. How is that a test?”

“For better or worse, Tanaka is a typical Saigou High student. If someone like her being nice to you makes you feel guilty about what we’re doing, then you’re not fit to share in my vengeance. That’s it, plain and simple.”

Ah. And I fell for it and got all chummy with Tanaka.

I was lured in by the illusion of a normal high school life and never even realized it was a trap.

“That explains it. That’s what you meant, huh?”

“Yep,” Kurumi said with a nod.

I could suddenly think of a bunch of things that proved what Kurumi was

saying. For example, how we bumped into each other on the shopping trip, and how Tanaka didn't seem surprised that we knew each other.

Of course she wasn't. She already knew. Tanaka speaking to me and trying to help me out was all part of Kurumi's plot. It made me sad, but it didn't shock me. To be honest, it explained a lot.

To me, Tanaka had been like a single flower blooming in a desert. No matter how awful the environment, she was able to keep an eye on those around her and offer them kindness. It had seemed almost miraculous.

But I'd been wrong. She was nothing like that. People like that didn't exist. This was reality, and girls who were nice to you for no reason only existed in fiction.

The first seventeen years of my life had taught me that, and this just proved that I'd been right. It was almost a relief.

"...Hmph. Don't get too mad about it. I called it a test, but sending Tanaka to help you was also a present." She looked away awkwardly. "If you failed my test, at least you'd have a new friend, right? I figured I'd leave you to it. She could help you join the other students again. Wouldn't that be the best ending for you?"

Ah. If I passed the test, I'd be a true comrade. And if I failed it, I could go back to a normal life, with Tanaka's help.

That was Kurumi's plan all along.

It seemed very like her, though I supposed it wasn't like any of the other plans she'd shared with me in the past.

"Do you understand now?" she asked. "For the past two months, you were dancing in the palm of my hand."

A fake taste of high school life. A present from Kurumi. I knew all too well what that meant.

"It's a shame it had to end like this. You failed my test. You made friends with Tanaka, turned away from revenge, and backed out of our plan to ruin the festival." Kurumi shrugged dramatically, and then she took a step forward and

poked me hard in the chest. “I despise your weakness. Begone!”

She was spitting fire, but the brim of her hat hid her face from view.

I started to reach out to her, then thought better of it and turned on my heel.

It made me sad, but she was right. I’d failed to meet her expectations. I hadn’t actually soured on the idea of revenge, but it was true that I’d tried to call off our plan this time for the sake of Tanaka and the soccer team captain. If Kurumi despised me for that, then we were done. Apologizing wasn’t going to cut it. She’d never listen to me.

I no longer had the right to join her resistance, to stand beside her.

And yet...

“...Kurumi.”

I stopped short, my hand on the door to the broadcast booth.

This had happened before. It felt just like the time I’d left Kurumi crying in the clubroom, and I didn’t like that at all.

If I left now, I’d be going straight back into that nightmare, where everyone simply accepted what they were taught and their assigned place in life. I’d be filled with regret all over again.

I didn’t want that. I couldn’t bear to be on my own in this sickening hellhole.

Before I knew it, I’d turned around and started desperately stringing words together.

“You’re just as weak as I am, Kurumi.”

“...What? How so?”

“Why’d you leave your notebook next to me while I was sleeping?”

Kurumi’s shoulders quivered.

“Didn’t you want me to go back to being a normal high school student with Tanaka if I failed your test? If that was true, you’d have no reason to leave me any notes. You wouldn’t need me to find out about any of this. So why’d you show me your hand?”

“...Well...”

“Why didn’t you just let me keep believing Tanaka was some nice girl who approached me at random? Why leave the notebook? Why force me to face the truth?”

That’s right. There’s no upside to her revealing her scheme to me. This doesn’t make anyone happy.

If she wanted to cut me loose, then she should have just let me be.

“Or is this reveal your revenge against me?”

My words were absorbed into the cold walls of the booth. The silence was so complete, I could hear every breath. A solid ten seconds passed.

“...Yeah, that’s right. This is payback,” Kurumi said.

Her head shot up, and her eyes were like daggers. Fury radiated from beneath the brim of her hat, but it was mingled with tears.

“Natsume, you read my Notes on Revenge, right? Then you’ve got a pretty good idea how I felt about things. You don’t have to twist the knife.”

“.....”

We glared at each other for a long moment. Then, at last, she surrendered.

“Fine, I’ll share the rest. I couldn’t bring myself to trust you, so I sicced Tanaka on you to test your resolve. But along the way...I lost control of my emotions. I *really* didn’t want you to leave.”

At first, it was just a few scattered drops.

“I mean...we were having so much fun! Scheming together, carrying out our plots, celebrating our successes! The illicit thrill of making out—that all mattered to me more and more!”

And then it started pouring. A deluge as her twisted love confession gained more and more steam.

“I was caught between my anxiety and those guilty pleasures, and you were the only thing that kept me going. I wanted to keep you with me longer. I wanted you to want it, too. I didn’t want you to go back to being a regular

student!”

Every time she spoke, more tears fell.

“So when you suggested calling off the strike, it broke my heart! I got so sad, I couldn’t stop crying! I tried to forget, but I couldn’t! That’s why I left the notebook! It was my last-ditch effort.”

The torrent passed, and Kurumi deflated.

“...Fine, I admit it. I found you sleeping, left the notebook, and tried to carry out the plan all on my own, hoping you’d follow me here.”

She tore off her cat-eared newsboy hat and threw it at me.

“You made out with me and then chose Tanaka instead. How dare you...?! You left me pining all by myself...like a complete idiot...”

Her hat tumbled to the floor, while Kurumi stood, still weeping.

The hat was a symbol of her minority status, and now that was gone. Her hair was still dyed, but she wasn’t a bad girl anymore. She wasn’t a good girl, either. She wasn’t the Kurumi Hoshimiya I’d admired—she was just a girl.

And finally, I got it.

Just as she’d been my salvation—Kurumi had needed me.

The fact that she’d blackmailed me into helping her was irrelevant. The two of us were in this together. We were both so weak, we couldn’t fight back unless we were holding each other’s hands. That was all this was about.

A hollow laugh escaped her.

“Nothing matters anymore. Natsume, you’re here to stop me, right? To protect the festival? Well, you made it in time. How great for you.”

She turned around and picked something up. Then she handed it to me.

It was the fifteen-minute megabomb—the CD full of insults.

“Go ahead, confiscate it. Turn me over to the faculty. All’s well that ends well. You’ll be free from my desperate clutches, free to live a normal life. Maybe the teachers will even treat you better if they know you saved them from a dip in next year’s numbers.”

I could see a forlorn smile on her lips.

“Ha-ha. Don’t worry,” she continued. “I deleted the photo of you smoking. I won’t tell anyone you were my accomplice. I hate your damn guts, and I don’t want anything else to do with you.”

“.....”

“We’ll never...speak again.” She couldn’t keep up the act, and her voice faded out.

“...Kurumi.”

“...!”

Our eyes met, and she looked scared. Her bold smile had disappeared long ago. She’d put it all out there. My words had forced her to expose everything.

But what about me? I was still scrambling, making a mess of things. I hadn’t sorted anything out or reached any conclusions. I hadn’t managed to tell her a single thing.

It was my turn. *Think! What did you really come here to say? It sure wasn’t this.*

I knew better. Or maybe I didn’t know anything. What was wrong with me?

Answer the question. What did you want to tell her? What did you want the two of you to become?

It was wrong to sit around waiting for someone to give you something. That was why I... *No, that’s not it, either.*

“Kurumi...”

Unconsciously, I moved closer to her.

“No...!” she tried to pull away, and my hand brushed her shoulder. “I can’t...if you take away the CD, the last thing connecting us...”

She closed her eyes and turned her back on me. I took another step toward her.

A bitter taste filled my mouth. As I stared at that fifteen-minute megabomb, I knew.

I hadn't come here to ask what she meant by "a fake taste of high school life" or why she'd left the notebook. I hadn't run until I couldn't breathe to put this look on Kurumi's face.

This wasn't right. Ending things while we still weren't on the same page, while we still hadn't understood each other—that was all wrong.

What are you doing? Just admit it already. You know the truth.

What was it I'd really wanted to do? What drove me here?

"...Listen, Kurumi. I don't want to go back to being a regular student, either."

"Don't lie to me! That's not true! Don't feed me crap like that now!"

"I'm not lying to you! Please, you have to trust me one more time."

"Trust you? After all this? I can't... I mean... I want to, but..."

Her voice caught in her throat. She hung her head, trying to bottle up her emotions.

I moved in and wiped her tears with my fingertip.

"It's okay. It'll be okay. Relax. I've figured it out. I've made up my mind."

"....."

"I won't do anything to upset you, Kurumi. I'm only here to do bad things."

Kurumi's head slowly came up. Her expression was equal parts hope and fear.

"...What do you mean?"

I nodded at her, then gently plucked the CD from her hand.

I'd never wanted to turn her in and go back to being a regular student all by myself.

I headed for the back of the room, to the control panel full of audio equipment. The machine was simpler than I'd expected. I could tell right away which buttons to press. I opened the black box-shaped CD player and fed it the disc.

"Kurumi! I didn't come here to stop you!"

Watch this, Kurumi. This is my answer. This is my revenge.

“I came here to blow this festival up!”

I cranked up the volume, hit play...and opened the gates of hell.

“Do you want me to kill you?!”

A stream of delightful, joyous Saigou High classroom scenes played over the PA system.

“Drop dead. Nitwit. Quit school.” The insults flew like a hail of bullets.

Everyone in school must have been shocked—terrified, even. The teachers were probably reeling, panicking, scared of what this would bring.

Just imagining it sent an indescribable icy shock down my spine.

That sure hit the spot. I was hopelessly addicted to this feeling.

“Natsume...?”

I tore my eyes off the control panel and turned to look at Kurumi.

She stood stunned as I approached, facing her head-on.

I’d taken the long way to get here. Beat around every bush. And that had hurt her.

I’d gotten it all wrong. And ever since I reached this room, there had been only one thing, one emotion, that mattered to me.



I just wanted to tell Kurumi how I felt—to describe this urge bubbling up in my chest.

“After you vanished, I had a really bad time,” I said.

Frustrations welled up inside me—the ones smoking hadn’t done anything to relieve.

“We got the festival back, but the soccer team captain’s still kissing up to the better students. That piece of garbage Furukawa reneged on his promises and chewed me out. My classmates saw that and suddenly started being kind to me. Someone even said ‘Isn’t that nice?’ I wanted to die on the spot.”

My true feelings, the ones I’d bottled up and buried, all came pouring out.

“I’m sure of it now. Everyone at this school is awful. I was wrong to ever worry about them. I never needed to feel guilty. There was no reason for me to hesitate.”

If someone asked me if I was having fun playing at revenge while everyone around me worked hard at their studies, I’d look them right in the eye and say, “Hell yeah!”

I didn’t care if it was childish. I had to walk the path of vengeance. I needed payback.

“Kurumi, I still feel the same way. I wanna mess up this awful school. I want to get revenge and force the faculty to change. But like you said, I’m a bit of a pussy.”

My vision was starting to blur, and my voice was shaking. But somehow, I kept going.

“You knew how much of a loser I was, but you still accepted me. That’s why I want to do this with you. I don’t want anyone else to end up like us, and I mean that the way *you* meant it.”

“.....”

“I’m sorry I tried to cancel our plans for the festival, Kurumi. I’m sorry I thought the other lower-ranking students were the same as us. I was so wrong. I didn’t know anything.”

I paced myself, making sure I got everything across properly.

“Right now, I want revenge, from the bottom of my heart. I want to be with *you*, Kurumi.”

My words were direct, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

“I half-assed a lot of things, but I hope you can forgive me.”

A few seconds of silence passed as we held each other’s gaze. And then she laughed, listlessly.

“...I know I shouldn’t let you off the hook so easily. You’re weak—a total pushover. You’re a liability. I should really cut you loose.” She sniffed as tears welled in her eyes. “So why do I feel this way? Why am I so happy that you did something bad?”

A beat later, I saw that mean-spirited smile on her lips again.

“You coming back just made my day.”

“Kurumi...”

“All right! If you insist, I’ll let you back on board.” She rubbed her eyes with her arm and smiled through her tears at me. “You’re sure you prefer me to Yumi Tanaka? You’d rather have me than an ordinary girl?”

“I’d much rather have you, Kurumi Hoshimiya. I don’t want to be with anyone else.”

“Heh-heh. Glad to hear it! Let’s do this together. Let’s go as far as this impulse takes us.”

We each took a step closer to each other. Our foreheads bumped, and our noses rubbed together.

We were both saying a lot of cringey things. But I didn’t mind. I’d never been happier.

We knew how ugly this school was and how unprepared we both were. We knew that kissing wouldn’t solve a damn thing.

And yet—no, *because* we knew, we were happy. Pushing back against that misery brought us joy.

We stared into each other's eyes, smiling.

"We really took the long road," she said.

"Yeah."

"It's all because I cried, isn't it?"

"No, it's because I was an idiot."

She sealed my lips, and our tongues began to wrestle. This made the bitter taste in my mouth turn ever so slightly sweeter.

"Mm... *Gasp!* Natsume...?"

I pulled away much faster than usual. We had to wrap this up fast.

It was hard to tell from the broadcast booth, but pandemonium was settling over the school. The fiendish arm of reality was closing in on us.

We had to bring this to the best possible end. It was time to employ my final plan.

"Kurumi, the teachers will be here any second. We'd better run."

"...Can we get away?"

She looked worried, but I flashed her a confident grin. Then I picked up the cat-eared hat and placed it back on her head.

"Trust me. It was my job to plan our escape route."



Kurumi and I ditched the broadcast booth.

I looked both ways down the dreary hallway. The coast was still clear.

"Okay... No teachers or committee members in sight."

They weren't here yet, but they had to know where we were. We had no time to spare. We had to move.

"Kurumi, we'd better run."

"R-right."

I led the way, and we dashed off.

We'd been in a soundproof room, so we were only now hearing the ruckus. All sorts of voices were yelling over the ongoing stream of insults. The cheer of the festival had long since given way to an uproar.

On we ran, past the warning bar and to the stairs.

There were no shops near the broadcast booth and still no sign of anyone pursuing us.

"Natsume, the west stairs will get us to the entrance faster!"

"That's not where we're going. Odds are they'll seal off the exits! If a crowd forms, we'll be trapped. And—"

A roar cut me off.

"Hey! You two, stop!"

A teacher was running toward us from the west staircase.

"N-Natsume, what now? They'll surround us!"

"Don't worry, this way. Follow me."

I took Kurumi's hand and pulled her along.

I had no choice. The only way to get her out of here was to carry out a certain plan I'd been working on.

We took the stairs—not down, but up.

We climbed through the dim lighting two steps at a time. We passed a NO TRESPASSING sign and climbed higher still. We went all the way to the top and arrived at a metal door we both knew well.

"Um, Natsume? Why'd we come here?"

"Isn't it obvious? We're gonna jump off the roof and make our escape."

"...Huh? Do you really mean that? Are you insane?"

Kurumi gaped at me, but I just nodded.

"Only crazy people seek vengeance."

“No! No, no, no, that is *not* helping!”

In truth, she had nothing to be worried about. I wasn't trying to commit suicide with her. I had a solid plan. As for the details... Well, she'd soon find out.

“C'mon, before they catch up.”

I grabbed the knob and turned it, slammed my shoulder into the door...

...and heard a clang. I'd forgotten something very important.

“Oh, crap.”

“Hmm? What is it, Natsume? What's wrong?”

Kurumi looked worried, and I scratched my cheek.

“Uh, Kurumi... You don't happen to have the rooftop key, do you? I forgot they locked it up.”

“.....”

Kurumi's jaw dropped.

I assumed, at first, that she was horrified... But apparently not.

As I started to slump, she snorted, then burst out laughing.

“Ha-ha-ha, you really are hopeless, Natsume! Of course I have the key.”

“What? Seriously? I was clutching at straws...”

Kurumi pulled a key out of her pocket and brandished it proudly.

“Of course I have a key to the roof. I'm the Stargazing Club president.”

Another puzzle piece snapped into place.

...Oh, that explains a lot.



I'd always wondered who left the roof door unlocked. It had been Kurumi the whole time. Since the first day I went up there to smoke, we were destined to meet.

"Let's go, Natsume."

"...Yeah."

I took the key from her and opened the door to the roof.

*

A pleasant breeze blew past us, and our view opened up.

Blinding sunlight struck our eyes. There was a clear blue summer sky stretching over our heads. The rainy season had finally ended.

Tiles stretched out from below our feet toward the fences beyond. We were back on the roof, where we'd sworn to change this school.

"So? What now, Natsume?"

"First, let's get over the fence. That one, directly opposite the door."

"Augh... Are we really gonna jump?"

We made our way slowly forward.

At the far end of the roof, our fingers grabbed the safety fence. I gave Kurumi a boost, and once she was on the other side, I used everything I had to hoist myself up and over as well.

We were on a small ledge between the fence and empty air, standing together.

"We're so high up...," said Kurumi. "But what a great view. It's like we're standing on air."

Like Kurumi said, we could see far into the distance, all the way to the horizon. Below us, I could spot the river, all the houses, the little vending machines, cars trundling along, the open school gates, the welcome arch.

Perhaps because of our broadcast, there weren't many people down below.

I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with summer—a season full of hopes and expectations.

When I'd been sulking up here with my dad's cigarettes, I'd been sure I could never make this jump. But now I could. Today, I'd take the leap. With Kurumi at my side, we could fly as far as we liked—or fall together.

"Hey, Natsume." Kurumi took my hand. I turned to look at her. She seemed anxious. "I can trust you, right? We'll make a clean getaway?"

"Yeah, I promise. I've got a plan."

"Do you? Well, if worse comes to worst, we'll die together." Her voice shook.

"Kurumi, you're okay. You'll be okay," I said, gently stroking the back of her hand.

Kurumi blinked at me, then snorted, an awkward smile crossing her lips.

"Heh, trying to imitate me? I'm not the least bit comforted by you rubbing my hand."

Oh, looks like I blew it. Guess there's only one thing I can do to ease her mind.

With my free hand, I snatched away her newsboy hat.

I leaned closer, bringing my face up to hers. Our lips met, and then our tongues entwined.

"Natsu...me! ...*Gasp*. Heh-heh... You sure went for that kiss. Damn."

She grumbled, but it *had* eased her nerves.

I put the hat back on her head. She'd be fine now. It was time to go.

"Our time's almost up. Are you ready, Kurumi?"

"I am. Let's do this, Natsume."

Huddling together, we locked eyes and nodded. That was the sign.

I put one arm around her and jumped.

It felt like we were floating. My body was melting into the summer sky, blurring the line between life and death.

But before gravitational acceleration could catch us...

...I turned and reached a hand out toward the wall.

I'd made sure we were standing above my target—a long cloth stretched tight against the wall of the building. I got a good grip on the top of it.

Our bodies bounced once, then stopped.

"Oh! Natsume, that's—!" Kurumi yelped from under my arm. She'd worked out my plan.

Just in the nick of time, I'd grabbed the banner my classmates had made.

"Where are we hanging these things?"

"From the school roof! We'll hang all three in a row. Right, teacher?"

I knew exactly where they'd be. That's why I'd been confident we could make the jump. I knew how we could kill our momentum.

"Kurumi, hang on tight! It's a long way down."

"Right! Good point!"

I'd intended to adjust my grip and slide down the length of the fabric—or that was my plan. The banner was pretty sturdy—but it *was* just cloth. In the end, the weight of two teenagers proved too much for it. There was a nasty tearing sound, and it started to rip.

From the place I was gripping, I watched the characters for "Traditions and Connections" tear right in half.

Kurumi and I descended like we were riding a giant zipper. This wasn't the way I'd planned things, but it *was* slowing us down. *Fine, let's roll with it.*

"Aiiiiiie! This is going a lot faster than I thought!" cried Kurumi.

"Hang in there! Argh, that smarts!"

The cloth was chafing my hand pretty badly. It felt hot. I was going to have some pretty nasty friction burns. But I couldn't exactly let go. I had to hang on. For Kurumi!

The sky was getting farther away, while the ground and the sounds of the crowd grew rapidly closer.

My pulse was racing, my brain overheating, and my soul screaming. One more second... *Now!*

“Kurumi! We’re gonna land! Can you jump?”

“Eaurghh?! I have to jump? Dammit, fine! Here goes!”

A few meters above the ground, I let her go, and she landed first. Then I kicked off the wall and followed suit.

The wind whistled past us, and my feet touched down. I tried to mimic a safety fall I’d seen once, but I wasn’t sure it helped. I rolled across the ground and landed in a heap.

“Hahh...hahh... Damn, Natsume. That was insane.” Kurumi was lying on her back next to me.

“*Koff*... Haah... I made it! Kurumi? Are you still in one piece?”

“Yeah, I think. Somehow. Every part of me hurts, though... Hup!”

She got up and dusted herself off while I scrambled to my feet. If we could both stand, we were fine.

“Thanks for trusting me, Kurumi. Looks like we made a clean getaway, just like I said.”

“Not sure you can call this clean! But that was certainly quite the plan.”

She flashed me a snide grin, and I laughed. She hadn’t praised me in some time—and it felt really nice.

“Hey! Did someone just fall?!”

As we grinned at each other, we heard people yelling in the distance.

“Crap, they saw us. Kurumi, we’d better get moving. Can you run?”

“No rest for the wicked, huh? I’ve got some energy left. But I think you’ll have to hold my hand.”

“Sure thing. I’ll pull you along. Let’s go.”

“Heh-heh, sweet.”

A smile bloomed on her face as she took my outstretched hand. Her fingers

were thin, beautiful, and filled with human warmth.

Hand in hand, we ran away from the crowds.

“I’m glad I met you, Natsume.”

“I’m glad I met you, too, Kurumi.”

The path of vengeance wasn’t going to lead us to a happy conclusion.

Kurumi had dropped out, and our school still wasn’t fixed. Our attack had made people unhappy, and more misery awaited them.

But at the moment, none of that mattered. For now, I didn’t want to think—I just wanted to keep on running.

I wanted to move, to yell, whenever the impulse hit. And when I was worried, I’d take Kurumi’s hand and we’d kiss until we felt better.

That was how we found happiness as two people who refused to be warped by all the messed up stuff around us.

EPILOGUE

The insult broadcast caused some big problems.

The teachers stopped the CD shortly after we left, but it was already too late.

Who knew how many people had overheard that damning recording? Even a few minutes were more than enough. The students were in an uproar, and the visitors were terrified.

The festival ended on an ominous note.

The next day, we came in to clean up, and the faculty had dramatically altered their behavior. Every single teacher was speaking politely, clearly watching what they said.

“Attention, everyone. The festival broadcast is still under investigation. If any third parties ask you about the incident, please refrain from commenting.”

Our homeroom teacher was trying to silence us, but rumors were flying among the students.

“That was Furukawa, right? The math teacher?”

“The Board of Education’s involved. He might get fired.”

Because the festival had been restored to its former glory, the attack had affected a lot more people outside the school.

These were solid results. Like we’d hoped, our attack had struck home.

Despite that, I spent the morning craving a smoke.

We finished cleanup, and when we were done, I swung by the Stargazing Club

room. It was empty except for a table and two folding chairs. I stood inside, all alone.

“...Kurumi,” I whispered, but no answer came.

After our jump from the roof, we’d successfully escaped. The school had no idea we did it—the best possible ending.

...And yet Kurumi had already dropped out, and that wasn’t going to change.

If I’d worked out how I really felt sooner, maybe things would have been different. Maybe we could have changed this school before Kurumi withdrew.

“Oh, Natsume! You’re here early.”

As I stood, lost in thought, a voice called out to me from behind.

I swung around and froze.

I wasn’t hearing things. This was no hallucination. Kurumi was standing there, in uniform, her gray hair hidden.

“...Kurumi? How are you here? Didn’t you drop out?”

“Huh? Where’d you hear that? I still haven’t filed the paperwork.”

“Wait. But you haven’t been to school since—”

“Yeah, I played hooky to avoid running into you.”

What?! I guess Tanaka never actually said that Kurumi dropped out...

“But summer vacation starts tomorrow! You said you’d be gone before that.”

“Oh, I guess I did. But I’ve decided to put it off for a while.” Kurumi blushed a bit and rubbed her nose. “I figured if I’ve got you by my side, Natsume, it might be worth sticking around.”

“Okay, then. Right. I see.”

“Now, don’t you go reading too much into that. I might be sticking around, but I have no intention of taking my studies seriously. I’m gonna spend the whole time enacting nasty, petty little revenge plots.” She thumped her chest, a very smug look on her face. “All’s well that ends *badly*. That’ll be the first line in our Book of Revelation!”

“...You’ve lost me. Maybe tone down the cringe.”

“Oh yeah?! Like you aren’t the king of pretentious nonsense.”

Kurumi let her gray hair free and donned her newsboy cap before plopping into a folding chair.

“The teachers sure changed their tune fast!” she said.

“They sure did. Their jobs might be on the line, and everyone’s nervous.”

“Excellent. I’m stoked it turned into such a big deal. Should we celebrate our success?”

“I’m in. Wanna make a snack run?”

Kurumi hummed, then pointed at her lips.

“I’m more in the mood for dark chocolate.”

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That’s what I wanna know!”

She shot me a glare. How long was she gonna hold that line against me? Not that I really cared.

I leaned down, tilted her head back, and kissed her.

“...Mm. *Smooch*... *Slurp*... Mmph...”

We started slow and gradually got more into it. Our lips were glued together as our tongues rubbed and we swapped spit.

“...*Gasp!* Heh-heh.”

After making out for a few minutes, Kurumi flashed me a mean grin.

“Natsume, since we’re both here, should we plot our next attack?”

“Yeah, okay. Next time, I wanna change this school for good.”

We were fighting back and making out.

Our vengeance was as bitter as it was sweet...and it wasn’t over yet.

AFTERWORD

As I revised this story, I kept asking myself what personal experience had led me to write it. A long time passed before I finally found an answer.

Back in the summer of my third year of high school, we had an optional mock exam, but I was totally uninterested.

Naturally, I'd informed my homeroom teacher that I would absolutely not be taking part, but I guess Japanese is a tricky language, and by "optional" they meant "mandatory."

Things went back and forth for a while, and in the end, I found myself with my butt in a chair at the test venue.

Answer sheets and problems were handed out, and the mock exam got underway.

The problem was this: I'm a pretty diligent person, and I showed up with mechanical pencils and an eraser, just as I was supposed to. Unfortunately, I'd somehow left my motivation at home (or possibly in the distant past).

I was in no state to solve any problems. But there I was, in the middle of the test, and bored out of my mind. Unable to come up with anything better to do, I used the bubbles on the answer sheet to make eight-bit art.

The bubbles were vertical ellipses, and my attempt at making a girl didn't really work out. Landscapes were much more feasible, however, and I think I managed a pretty decent Tokyo skyline.

I finished off two drawings, gathered up my things during a break, and bailed.

The skies were clear, so I let my feet take me all the way to the zoo. It was a blazing hot day, and I decided that, in the future, I wanted to be a Russian

tortoise.

But where are my manners? My name is Setsuka Narumi, and my favorite season is summer. It's a pleasure to meet you.

A few formalities:

To my editor, thank you for guiding this book to completion. You kept coming back with ideas and information, and they made revisions so much easier. Sorry for being such a cynic. I hope we can keep working together.

To my illustrator, ALmic, thank you for drawing such lovely characters. When I got the proofs, I was astounded by your creative choices. Your ideas proved as inspirational as your art, and I can't thank you enough.

I'd also like to thank everyone in editorial, everyone who selected me for the Eighteenth MF Bunko J New Writer Prize, and everyone involved in publishing and sales.

And finally, a hearty thanks to everyone who picked up this book.

Setsuka Narumi

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