

CGDCT: Cute Girls Doing Cult Things

by /a/non

I

“Do I have to, dad?”

“Yes, Aiko, you have to transfer schools. I wish I could let you commute out here so you could stay in touch with your friends, but it’s just not possible with the train schedule.”

“But Kamiagari—”

“I know. Kamiagari has a reputation about bullying going too far. But I looked into it—I asked my coworkers and sought former students whose parents I knew—and they all said that those were nothing but rumors, and that no one they knew was ever bullied at that school. Besides that, it’s a great school, and I don’t think you’ll have trouble fitting in. Can you put up with it for a year and a half?”

Akiba Aiko recalled the conversation she’d had with her father last week while she adjusted the complicated style she’d unwisely decided to foist upon her usually unruly navy-blue hair. The little braid she’d tied around her head was trying its best to come undone, and she used a nearby shop window as a mirror to see how it looked after adjusting it.

“I guess...”

“Thank you, Aiko. I know this is hard on you, too.” Dad had ruffled her hair with a head-pat back then, and she was grateful he wasn’t walking her to school to do the same thing and erase the effort she’d put into the waterfall hairstyle she’d read about online.

*Just in case there is** a bullying problem, I want to make a good impression*. The best defense against the kind of students who take advantage of others was to get along with everyone, after all.

Satisfied with her once-again corrected locks, Aiko took a quick look at the rest of herself in the mirror. Her pristine sailor uniform, white with blue accents and a red ribbon, fit her just

about right—though it was a little looser in the chest than she would have liked. She'd settled on knee-length for the skirt, for now—any shorter might make her look like she was trying to make a statement, and any longer would surely come off frumpy. Her short sleeves fluttered a little when the wind picked up.

Normally she wouldn't fuss so much about appearances, but she was fighting an uphill battle here—not only was she a new second year, but she was transferring in the middle of summer after everyone had already started making friends and gotten used to their seat-mates. She'd have a very small window of opportunity to get into someone's good graces and make a friend, and if she missed it she was doomed to, at best, eat alone on the roof every day, wishing there was someone to chat with.

With a sigh, she finished fretting over her looks and marched on toward Kamiagari Girls' School. A pair of girls in the same uniform walked past, one tan redhead with wild, but short, hair and the other with long, forest-green hair tied into a single, enormous braid that hung over her shoulder and large bust. The redhead was much shorter, and slimmer, than her friend.

"Rumi," the redhead began, walking with her hands clasped behind her head. The posture caused her shirt to lift up slightly; Aiko could see from her pearly-white back that her tan hadn't come from lying on the beach. She clearly played some kind of sport, further evinced by the nearly complete dearth of visible body fat on her and the bicycle shorts she wore under her short skirt. "Are you *sure* you can't make it to club today?"

Rumi, who Aiko seriously doubted played the same sport as her tomboyish friend based on her fair complexion, coke-bottle glasses and , nodded. "Sorry, Hina-chan. I want to, but I have to head home early to walk Kaze since mom and dad have their date night tonight." Were it not for the rough-looking company she kept, one might have presumed this Rumi was a proper lady; she walked with her book bag held in front of her, just out of reach of her knees. Her skirt nearly reached her ankles.

The two chattered about how cute Kaze, which must have been a dog, was as they rounded the corner ahead. Aiko might

have tried to break into the conversation—they seemed like nice enough girls and it wasn't a bad idea to introduce herself early—but, thanks to her unfamiliarity with the terrain and with her route to school, she instead tripped on a piece of sidewalk that was jutting, uneven, from the ground. She managed to catch herself with a stomp, but the contents of her purse weren't so lucky. By the time she'd collected her things, the girls, who hadn't noticed her spill, were too far ahead for her to catch up.

That's a bad omen. She shook her head, clapping her palms against her cheeks. "Be positive, Aiko. No one likes a whiner," she mumbled allowed.

The imposing school building was visible from a ways off, but it wasn't until she reached the gate that its sheer size struck home to her. For an all-girls' middle school, and a public one at that, Kamiagari had managed to create a truly remarkable campus. It was almost on the level of a college in some ways—there were several full-size sports fields (baseball, lacrosse, and soccer each got their own), outdoor tennis courts, an olympic-sized outdoor swimming pool, two huge classroom buildings, a large gymnasium with its own building, a dedicated auditorium, and even a *shrine* on the grounds.

That was at least something to look forward to—if this school made one thing available, it was opportunities. It was, by far, the nicest middle school in the country—some articles online that Aiko had read even suggested it may have been the most luxurious public secondary education facility in the entire world – and that sort of accolade carried a lot of weight on private high school applications. Indeed, many Kamiagari graduates went on to fill prominent roles in the science, art, literature...many were experts of some renown in their fields, and they all paid their respects to the education with which they were blessed from Kamiagari Girls' School. She took a deep breath and walked inside.

As she crossed the threshold of the school gate, the atmosphere shifted noticeably, but only for a second. Every single eye that could have fallen on her had at the same instant, as if she'd set off an alarm by treading on the campus, and with all the con-

tempt reserved for someone who just barged into a party uninvited. After a split-second interval, the students resumed their usual morning chatter about the upcoming exams, the sports teams, and so on right away.

Strange...she thought.

One pair of eyes lingered on her longer than the rest, though, and no doubt their owner was sure that Aiko hadn't caught on. She managed to keep herself from looking at them directly, but the leer from the shadows was difficult to ignore as it followed her footsteps into the main building.

The teacher, at least, was polite, and Aiko made sure her introduction went as smoothly as possible. It wasn't easy to write what had happened earlier off as a simple bout of surprise at a new face—at a school this big, it wasn't unlikely that there were plenty of students any given person may have never laid eyes on before—but she did her best to put it out of her mind as she bowed before a classroom of her fellow second-years. She noted that none of the girls in the seats before her resembled the pair that had been chatting on the way in that morning.

Classes passed by mostly uneventfully, and before long the lunch bell sounded. Aiko leaned over in her seat to grab her bento, which was surely scrambled after the tumble she took that morning, and by the time she looked back up the entire classroom was empty save the seat on the back left, by the window.

"Akiba-san, was it?" The brunette spoke up; Aiko recognized her as 'Satou-san,' or so said the teacher who had called on her during that morning's math class to answer a question. Her voice was of a surprisingly low register for a middle school student, and brimming with the quiet confidence of a girl who knew she was as pretty as Satou was. "Would you like some company for lunch?"

"Of course!" Aiko turned toward her, offering a friendly but polite smile. "Satou-san, right?"

"Satou...Rin, yes." The brunette smiled back, then sauntered over to the desk in front of Aiko's and turned it around; as she took her seat, Aiko noticed her ears were pierced.

Trying to break the ice she remarked, "Your earrings are cute!"

"Hm? Oh, these? Thank you. They are charming, aren't they?"

Aiko raised an eyebrow, but played along. "They suit you."

"Like everything else does," answered the girl, who was looking quite intently at Aiko's disheveled meal.

Aiko blinked, trying to process if that was a joke or something. Satou caught an errant strand of her long hair and tucked it behind her ear, with the rest of her light-brown locks, without breaking eye contact. Hoping to move on without looking stupid, Aiko offered a muted chuckle.

Satou, who didn't seem to notice how awkwardly her play at humor hadn't landed, asked, "How has your first day of school been, so far?"

"It's a very nice school. I knew the campus was gorgeous from looking at photos online, but I never imagined there would be so many facilities. I didn't believe it until I saw it," she managed after swallowing a slightly-too-big bite of rice. Satou produced a bottle of green tea and handed it to Aiko; the latter nodded, but drank her own water instead, slipping the tea into her bag's drink pocket for later.

Satou's smile faded almost imperceptibly. "Yes, we have lovely grounds here at Kamiagari. The cafeteria in particular is magnificent—the food is delectable, and because it is free, none of the students pack a lunch. You must try it."

"Oh, sure. I'll make sure to stop in tomorrow to check it out." She snatched up one of the octopus-shaped hot dogs she'd packed.

Satou nodded. "You will love it, surely..." She seemed to realize something, her eyes widening slightly. She continued, "By the way—are you interested in joining the student council?"

Ah, that explains why she hung back. Recruitment. "Well, I haven't had a chance to put any thought into joining a given club. Are you in the council, Satou-san?"

“President, in fact,” she said, smirking. Before Aiko could process her surprise at a second-year student holding such a position, Satou continued: “You have a lot of potential. We would love to have a smart, well put-together girl like you among us. It’s important to put great minds toward keeping the school in good order, after all.”

Aiko couldn’t pretend she wasn’t proud of the invitation—she was surprised she’d made such a strong impression through such benign interactions, but the idea that her potential, as Satou put it, shone through even as she sat alone in a classroom eating a lunch that looked like it had been through a whirlwind made her chest swell. She knew it was just honeyed words and the reality was that the council was under-staffed thanks to the breadth of options at the students’ disposal, but she was still happy all the same. “That’s a real honor...I would be happy to come by after school and check it out, Satou-san!”

The brunette grinned, her yellow eyes glinting. “Great. You’ll get along with the others. We’ll see you there.” She stood, sauntered toward the classroom door (probably heading to get some of the supposedly delicious cafeteria offerings she’d boasted about before), then paused. “Oh. There’s one more thing.”

“Hm?” Aiko wiped a stray grain of rice off the corner of her mouth.

“Even though Kamiagari is a great school, some not-so-great students have managed to form a little clique here. Be careful not to get involved with suspicious people.” She turned back toward Aiko with a smile. “If anyone tries to give you trouble, you can always ask us for help. We meet in the room at the end of the West wing of the third-floor hallway in this building.”

“Right...thanks.” Aiko made a mental note of the location. With that, Satou left Aiko alone in the classroom to finish her meal. By the time she was done, the rest of the students began to file in for the afternoon classes.

II

Aiko spent the rest of the day half-attentive. Her mind was stuck on what Satou had left her with when she departed the classroom for lunch.

Suspicious people? Aiko wondered, playing mindlessly with her mechanical pencil. As it rolled between her fingertips, she tried to determine what ‘suspicious’ meant to Satou.

Maybe there is a bullying problem*.* It would make sense, she thought, for the student council president to be so concerned about bullying given the tangential way it could be perceived as her responsibility (though, really, if there was bullying it was a failing of the school staff and the bullies’ parents, thought Aiko), but why wouldn’t she just say that outright? It sounded instead like there was a faction whose presence Satou wasn’t thrilled about, and which she didn’t want to grow.

Thoughts like this danced around in her head until the final bell rang and the rest of her classmates began to file out of the room.

“Right...I was going to check out the council. Okay.” Aiko stood, straightened out her skirt, and made for the stairwell after slinging her bag onto her shoulder. The sun shone through the hallway windows, casting shadows along the polished wood as she and the other girls meandered through the halls. Looking at those shades, she noticed the other girls’ tended to move just a bit further out of her path than they already were, despite the impossibility of bumping into one another.

She might have worried, but she had a feeling people would open up to her if she joined the student council. She was brainstorming a way to introduce herself to the other members as she walked, stroking her chin in deep contemplation. It was imperative to make as strong an impression on them as she had appar-

ently made on Satou (if her compliments weren't mere flattery, anyway), but she didn't have the easy route of answering difficult questions in class despite having just transferred in.

Lost in thought, Aiko found herself facing the student council room (which was labeled plainly) at the end of the hallway, arriving much quicker than she expected. There wasn't any sound coming from the room despite the relative quiet in the hallway, so she thought she might have beaten the rest of the girls here. She decided to knock anyway, just in case.

Right before her knuckles rapped against the wooden door, she heard a familiar pair of voices.

"Tell your mom I said hi, okay?"

"I will. See you tomorrow, Rumi." Recognizing the sound of pair of girls that she'd briefly tailed on the way to school, Aiko turned toward the source of the noise. Rumi, the green-haired girl, held her bag in front of her just as she had before school that day. 'Hina-chan,' as Rumi had called her, walked the opposite direction and descended the flight of stairs that led to the main building's rear exit—probably on the way to the sports club that earned her the tan she wore.

Oh, so they're third-years. Aiko wondered why she hadn't seen them wandering the second-floor hallway throughout the day; between the fiery red hair and Rumi's prodigious height (she stood at 5'8", nearly a full head above most girls her age—most women in Japan, really), the two would be impossible to miss if they were in her peripheral vision. It made sense, then, that they were older.

What didn't make sense was how obviously and intentionally Rumi was approaching her, someone to whom she'd never spoken. The tall girl, whose full-length skirt must have been custom-ordered, practically jogged toward Aiko, stopping just a few inches before her impressive bust crashed into her junior's face. Aiko was forced to take a step back to make eye contact.

"Are you the new transfer student?" She was smiling, but Aiko could tell right away that she wasn't actually interested in her recent entrance into Kamiagari. "I heard we were getting a

new second-year soon, and I don't think I've seen you around before."

"That's right. I'm Akiba Aiko." She bowed to her senpai. "I transferred in today."

"Ebihara Rumi," said the third-year, her massive braid dangling toward the floor as she returned Aiko's gesture. "I'm glad to meet you. It's rare we get a transfer in the middle of the year like this."

"Yes, it's nice to meet you, t—"

"Are you thinking of joining the student council?" Ebihara-senpai asked so quickly Aiko hadn't even had a chance to finish her sentence; her expression became a little tense, too.

"I was invited by president Satou to. She's in my class." Aiko noticed that senpai's gaze was bound to the bottle of tea from Satou in her book bag's drink pocket.

Again, teetering just on the edge of interruption, Senpai blurted out her reply. "I see! I forgot she was a second year. Isn't it bizarre that we have a second-year president of the student council?"

It is, thought Aiko, but not so strange as to be impossible. The way Rumi asked, she might have been questioning that an octopus was prime minister. Before she could retort, the doorknob on the council's entrance twisted with a click. A girl Aiko didn't recognize with black hair in a bob cut poked her head out. "Please refrain from conversing so loudly next to our door. We are trying to..." She paused. "Are you Akiba Aiko-san?"

"I am," she replied, bowing again.

"Please, come in. We've been waiting for you." She stepped away from the door, holding it open for Aiko and gesturing for her to enter. Her eyes were locked with Ebihara-senpai; the two glared at each other like a mongoose and snake. Aiko wasn't sure which was which.

"Right...it was good to meet you, Ebihara-senpai." She bowed again, excusing herself and entering the dimly-lit room.

"See you around, Akiba-san!" The council member stared daggers at Ebihara as she closed the door behind Aiko.

As the door clicked shut, Aiko took in the scene. There were five members of the council, not including Satou herself, and they sat in a single clump of six desks which were arranged to face each other in a makeshift table at the center of the room. Atop the unoccupied desk lay another bottle of green tea, a form whose fields she couldn't make out, and a pen. The rest had nothing on them. Satou sat behind a larger desk, like a teacher might use, propping her elbows on its surface. Aiko could see a slight smile behind her interlocked fingers.

"Welcome, Akiba-san," she called. "We're glad you made it; we were beginning to worry you'd decided not to join us." The blinds behind her were shut, and the lights were low; one could be forgiven for thinking it was much later in the day than it really was.

Aiko raised an eyebrow. She didn't recall saying she was certainly going to join the council during her chat with Satou at lunch. "Well, I wanted to see what it was like," she replied, suddenly feeling a little sheepish—Satou's yellow eyes glowed like a cat's in the dim room, and the other girls were totally silent once the one who had opened the door returned to her seat.

"Of course. Please, have a seat at the empty desk." Satou gestured to it with her palm upward.

"Okay...I wanted to ask—"

"Sit, first." Her tone shifted slightly, from pleased to impatient, but she still had the air of a fancy party's host beckoning a guest inside.

"Alright..." she didn't like that tone, as if Satou was trying to order her around already. Maybe joining the council wasn't such a good idea. Still, she slipped into her seat. The bottle of tea sloshed slightly as she removed her backpack.

"Oh...you didn't drink any yet." The brunette sounded disappointed, somehow.

"No, I wasn't that thirsty after lunch."

"Make sure you stay hydrated...heat stroke is a real risk this time of year."

"Mhm," Aiko managed, working out in her mind how she could get out of this situation without creating too much bad blood. In just a few seconds, Satou had obliterated any good impression she might have made with her. Obviously, spitting on Satou's kind (if forceful) invitation would do her no favors, but she did not like the idea of the president breathing down her neck like this regularly.

"Akiba-san," continued Satou, pulling her from her thoughts: "consider this a formal invitation to join the student council. As a representative, your duties will consist of activities that will ensure that the students are getting along, treating each other fairly, and enjoying a healthy student-life balance. All you'll need to do is sign the form there, and—"

"Hold on," Aiko interrupted, holding her hands out to 'stop' the conversation. "I didn't agree to join yet, Satou-san." She swallowed when she looked up at the president—her countenance was ice cold, and her smile replaced with an intense gaze. "I don't even know if I *want* to." What followed was three seconds of silence that felt like three hundred.

"That isn't a good way of thinking," said one of the girls, all of whom had been silent up to this point. Her black hair was up in a ponytail; she was slightly overweight.

"It isn't," said the rest of the girls, one at a time.

The portlier girl continued, "if you don't join the council, how can you be sure that the school is serving its purpose as a safe place for us burgeoning youths to explore, play, and learn, both about ourselves *and* each other? We all have to rely on one another if we want to make our way in this world, and there's no better place to get into the habit than the student council at Kamiagari, under Satou-senpai's leadership." Aiko wondered how long she'd rehearsed that line, sure that Satou put her up to it.

"That's right," said the rest of the girls, all politely waiting for the one which preceded her to finish before parroting her exactly—down to the inflection, tone of voice, and even the cadence. Whatever was happening here was decidedly *not* normal,

and *not* something she wanted anything to do with. Her best option, given that she was outnumbered, was flight. “Well...I’m sure I can leave it up to you all for now.” She scooted her chair back a few inches, but the way the entire council leered at her made her too self-conscious to rise.

Satou clicked her tongue, which stopped one of the other girls from attempting to convince Aiko again. She closed her half-open mouth and made space for Satou to speak, which she did—with barely-disguised anger. “That’s a shame. You were a good candidate. Still, we can’t force you to join us.” She stood, which Aiko took as a cue to stand for herself. “We were hoping you might at least give it a chance.”

Who would ever do that? Aiko bit her tongue and made for the door. She wondered how such an uncharismatic person had ever managed to win a student council election, and recalled Ebihara-senpai’s remark about the unusual nature of Satou’s presidency. Not only had she won, *she’d beaten the odds*. What a strange school this was turning out to be—though not for the reasons she thought.

“I just wouldn’t feel right joining student government the day I transferred in, before I even met anyone. You know?” Aiko hoped her reasoning would get through to the eccentric brunette, who had followed her to the door.

“Sure,” said Satou—the light from the hallway shone on her pale skin, dimming those yellow eyes. “Wherever you go, we’re sure you will get along great. Of course, don’t hesitate to approach us if you reconsider.”

As if. “I will,” she lied.

“And, another thing.” She produced the bottle of tea that had been sitting on Aiko’s temporary desk. “Please, take a cold drink. You wouldn’t want to get heat stroke on your walk home from school, would you?”

“Are you sure?” Satou nodded, and her smile returned as Aiko swapped the old bottle with the new one. “I appreciate it.” *She’s not all* bad, at least.**

“Be safe!” Satou watched her from the half-open door as Aiko made her way down the hallway; she didn’t hear the door click shut until she rounded the corner toward the stairwell which led to the front entrance.

III

As soon as Aiko stepped out of the air-conditioned building and directly into the summer sun, she realized just how right Satou had been about the heat. A bead of sweat began forming on her forehead the instant she was outside; by the time she approached the school gate, she was already reaching into her bag for the cold tea.

“Watch out,” called an approaching voice; Satou recognized the somewhat strident tones as those of Ebihara Rumi’s red-haired friend. Aiko turned toward the sound and saw the tomboy running alone, wearing the school’s gym uniform—a loose-fitting t-shirt with the sleeves tucked in, tied up so her midriff was visible, and a pair of red shorts. She must have been running for some time—she was so sweaty, she practically glowed.

Aiko stepped back to clear a path, but to her surprise, the girl stopped right near her. She was panting, but didn’t seem exhausted; rather, she looked like she could run another dozen miles without much effort. She pinched the bottom of her t-shirt with one hand, flapping it to cool off while she wiped her forehead with her other arm.

“Sorry to shout like that,” she started. Aiko wasn’t sure how to handle this interaction—the still-sealed bottle of tea hung in her loose grip, swinging like a pendulum. “Oh, is that for me? Thanks!” The redhead grabbed the bottle before Aiko could react. “That’s pretty nice of you, to give something away to a girl you just met. I’m Tanima Hinata.”

“Akiba Aiko,” she replied with a bow. She was a little miffed that her drink was stolen; thankfully, there was a vending machine right across the street.

“Oh, are you the new transfer? My friend Rumi mentioned meeting you earlier. How did you like the student council meet-

ing?" She wiped some wet, matted hair off her forehead, grinning brightly. Her red eyes were intense, but kind.

"Well...I decided not to join."

Immediately, Tanima-senpai's expression relaxed a shade. "Ah, is that right? Well, it's not for everyone. If you want, you can check out my club before school tomorrow. We didn't meet today, since Rumi had something to take care of at home, so we were going to meet twice to catch up on things."

"I'll think about it." She tried to end the conversation quick—she didn't want to be rude to her senior, but she felt like she was seconds away from dying of thirst. Fainting was not off the table.

"Good enough for me! We meet in the last room in the West wing of the third floor of the lab. You can't miss it. Meet us there before school starts."

"Right. I'll come by." A club in the lab building—which, she recalled, were mostly science-based—was about the last thing she expected from the athletic Tanima-senpai, who still hadn't taken a drink of the tea she'd pilfered.

"See ya!" She waved and started jogging back toward the school, presumably to take a shower and change in one of the dozens of locker rooms on offer. Aiko had a lot of questions, but decided to save them for tomorrow (if she even wanted to check out the club—the previous invitation had been a bust, after all) and go slake her thirst with a sports drink.

* * *

The walk home was uncomfortable, but uneventful. Not many people were out and about, naturally—the oppressive heat was enough to keep all but the most rambunctious kids in their homes, enjoying the A/C or a fan.

Of course, Aiko's younger brothers were nothing if not rambunctious. As soon as she breached the entrance to her new house, the twin boys ran toward her at full tilt, stomping on the hard floor the way only little boys can. "Nee-nee! You're back!"

Even if they could be a bit annoying, it was hard not to smile at how excited they always were to see her.

She did not expect to see full-frontal nudity from them when she faced them, however. They wore their birthday suits proudly, still too young for shame at four. Shouta, the older, began recounting the day's mundane events with an enthusiasm reserved for a day of heroic exploits. Youta nodded along, equally proud of their adventures (imaginary though they might have been).

"I'm home," she called, ignoring their undress. Then, kneeling down to the boys, she asked, "is dad still here?"

"In the living room," replied dad's familiar voice. "Are they naked again?"

"As the day they were born." She grabbed them by the hands and pretended to be *very* interested in their made-up story about how they had saved dad from an alien while she was at school, before he went to work. She walked into the living room, where dad was frantically searching.

"They hid my keys," he grunted, flipping up couch cushions and checking under knick knacks.

Aiko knelt down to her blue-haired brothers' level and asked them where dad's key ring was. They looked at each other and shrugged.

"Okay. Can you two go get dressed while the two of us look?"

"Mhm!" They bolted into their bedroom, and immediately started playing some game involving sentai heroes—hopefully their 'transformations' involved getting dressed in *normal* clothes.

As soon as they were gone, dad produced his keys—hidden inside the old VCR they still used for home movies—with a triumphant smile. "Got 'em. They'll have to come up with a better hiding spot if they want to pull a fast one on me!"

"Good thing, too—you wouldn't want to be late for your first day." Aiko set her bag down and got to rearranging the furniture; between the boys' play and dad's frantic search, the room looked like a typhoon had passed by.

Dad replied, "That's true—and I will be if I don't run off soon." He slipped his keys into his uniform's pocket and mussed Aiko's hair (which she'd tied into a ponytail to stave off some of the heat) with a headpat. "Thanks for being flexible. The babysitter came by this afternoon to introduce herself and meet the boys, but she won't be starting officially until tomorrow."

"What's she like?" Aiko asked, somewhat cautious—not that dad was a poor judge of character, but anyone who was going to get essentially free access to their home, and her brothers, needed to be scrutinized thoroughly.

"She's a high school student. One of those 'gal' types—blonde, at least, but she didn't have the tan. Real energetic, and the boys took a liking to her when she showed them some game on her smartphone. Kind of an oddball, though." He looked at Aiko for a second. "I bet you two would get along, actually."

"Are you saying I'm weird?" Aiko feigned offense.

"You got it from me," he replied. He checked his watch and said, "I have to run. Thanks again for watching them tonight. Starting tomorrow, feel free to hang back after school—maybe join a club or something." She could tell he felt guilty for having her babysit on her first day. "I'll make breakfast and a bento for you!" His talked as he walked, and by the time he said this he was outside the house.

"Be safe," she called after him, watching as the door closed behind him.

* * *

That afternoon was one of the hardest she'd had with the twins—they didn't *misbehave*, necessarily, but they were so lively (and she so exhausted) that it was nevertheless difficult to manage. By the time she'd fed them, bathed them, and put them to bed, she was ready to fall asleep herself, nearly fainting on the couch.

Before she could do that, though, she knew she needed a shower. She tossed her uniform onto the bed in a pile and gave herself another once-over in the mirror, like she had that morn-

ing. She hadn't gained any weight during the move, thankfully...though there was one area she'd have liked to put *some* mass on in the last year, she thought as she cupped her small breasts through her training bra and pouted. *I wonder when mom's came in.*

She peeked out of her bedroom to make sure dad hadn't come home early for some reason before walking to the shower in just her underwear, pajamas tucked under her arm. Normally, a proper bath would be in order given how uncharacteristically tense her muscles were, but she didn't have the time to run one and didn't save the twins' bath water in case there was an unspoken 'accident' in it.

The warmth running over her shoulders, which were far too tight for someone only in middle school, did wonders to help her relax. She stood still for so long she was worried about wasting water, but that didn't stop her from standing there for a few seconds more before she actually got to work washing the day's grime and sweat off.

While she scrubbed, she thought about the school day again. It was obvious, in retrospect, that Rumi and Hinata were probably who Satou had been referring to when she warned Aiko of "suspicious people" at Kamiagari. There was a clear antagonism between the former and the student council member, anyway, and anyone could see that Hinata and Rumi were friends—even if Hinata had never done anything herself to get on the council's bad side, she would have most likely been on their radar by virtue of her association with her green-haired buddy.

Aiko decided to shave her legs, realizing that she hadn't since the move when she bent over to wash them. *But what could the two of them have done to get on Satou's bad side?* It might have been any number of things, based on Satou's eccentricities. Maybe they caused some serious trouble, or maybe they just did some innocuous thing that Satou didn't like that set her off. Aiko didn't think she was *all* bad, but there was certainly something strange about that girl, and it didn't end with her early election to council president.

Her razor swept from her ankle to her knee, scraping away the shaving solution she'd hastily slathered on it. She hadn't gotten very good at this yet, and didn't have mom to teach her how, so nicks were common—however, today's operation went well and her shins were bald without incident.

I think I'll just have to ask them myself, she thought, returning to her previous idle wondering. She decided to give their club a chance, if nothing else than to see how two totally different people might have gotten to become such good friends with one another. Not that it was impossible for the two to share a common interest, of course, but it seemed more like they were total opposites.

After toweling off and getting into her pajamas (a rather childish pair with unicorns and fairies plastered on it), Aiko took one last peek into the kids' room—where they were either sleeping, or faking it better than they possibly could have been—before flopping into her own warm bed for a night of much-needed rest.

IV

Aiko went into the club room Tanima had described the day before outside the gate with certain expectations. For one, she expected a classroom, or a laboratory. She expected to see a handful of students there—after all, Kamiagari’s minimum headcount for a club was four. Perhaps there might have been some equipment for club activities, a sign-up sheet, an advisory teacher...

What she did not expect was to walk into a windowless storage closet with a single light bulb dangling overhead, its dim glow bathing the room in yellow and casting faint shadows. Dusty shelves covered in half-open, unlabeled cardboard boxes liked the walls, further cramping the already limited space in the ‘club room.’ Another pile of boxes was stacked against the far wall, and as a result the three girls (for there were only two members of this ‘club’) didn’t have much room to move around in.

That wasn’t what shocked Aiko the most about the club, though; what really struck her was when the tomboy got ‘down to business,’ as she put it.

“Kamiagari Middle School is being covertly operated by a cult to a dark god.” When she said it, she grinned as if it was supposed to blow Aiko’s mind.

“I’m leaving.”

“Wait!” the redhead called after her. “I promise, we’re not making this up. We have proof!”

“Aren’t you third-years? Shouldn’t your chuunibyou phase be over?” She reached for the door.

“Hey! We’re serious here! If you ignore us, you’re gonna get brainwashed before you know it.”

“How do I know this isn’t some kind of prank?” Aiko looked back over her shoulder. “You two could be bullies, trying to rope

me into some scam. Or maybe you're after my money? 'Pay up and we'll teach you how to avoid getting indoctrinated,' right?"

"No! It's nothing like that," Tanima started. Ebihara put her hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay. We tried, Hina-chan. We can't force her to listen to us."

"But—"

"It's okay." She offered a reassuring smile. "Akiba-san, you know where to find us if you decide to hear us out later, okay?"

"We'll see." She left the closet without further consideration and made for home room—there was no doubt that, at best, those two were just as nuts as Satou was.

* * *

"Akiba-san." Aiko knew before she looked that it was Satou calling to her—she couldn't mistake that mature-sounding voice for any other student's. "Are you going to come with us to lunch today? You *must* try the cafeteria's offerings." The brunette sauntered over after everyone else had already left the classroom. She stood just a little bit too close to Aiko's desk, looking down at her.

"Well, I planned on it, but my dad ended up packing me a lunch yesterday. It would be a shame to waste food, so—"

Satou's voice was noticeably louder when she said, "What a shame. Perhaps tomorrow you'll join us, then," and faked a smile. "You really are missing out." With that, she left the classroom without another word; she began chatting with another girl outside as soon as she crossed the threshold. Aiko was going to say that she could eat her own lunch in the cafeteria, but didn't get the chance—instead, she ate alone, like yesterday.

After a few bites, she heard the sliding door open. Expecting to see Satou or another classmate of hers, perhaps one she could try to make friends with, she turned to wave at the newcomer.

Instead, she was faced with one of the teachers—Marunouchi-sensei, who taught English. He was an imposing man, and his presence was made larger by the staggering differ-

ence between his height and that of the waifish middle schoolers she spent most of her time around. “Akiba-kun.” He nodded politely, and she returned the gesture. She didn’t think English was the next class...maybe he was here for someone else.

“I wanted to talk to you. Do you mind if I join you for lunch?” He took a seat at the student desk next to hers and set a packed lunch upon it. Aiko nearly choked on her food, she was so surprised. She started hacking and coughing, and he gave her a pat on the back. “Are you alright? I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’m...fine...” she managed, panting to catch her breath. After she took a drink of the water she’d packed, she asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” He was sitting in the chair such that he could face Aiko without turning; up close, she noticed the stubble growing on his cheeks. “I wanted to make sure you were getting along okay, is all. Adjusting to this school can be hard.”

She thought for a moment, then replied, “it’s been a little strange. It seems like some people are trying to get me tangled up in the school’s dramatic politics, rather than make friends with me.”

He nodded, finally cracking open his lunch box. Inside was a *lot* of beef. That sort of diet went a long way toward explaining his stature—he was tall, but his broad frame filled out his clothes well. “That’s not far from what I was expecting. It seems like a lot of new students come in expecting one type of student culture before getting blindsided by what’s actually happening here.” He started scarfing down his meaty meal.

Aiko replied while he chewed. “Do a lot of them end up going along with it?”

Another nod from sensei. “From what I’ve seen, just about everyone at this school ends up getting on with Satou in some form or fashion. Only a handful don’t, and she’s quick to label them ‘troublemakers’ regardless of how they actually behave.”

“Should you be talking so frankly about a student like this?” Aiko wondered what the staff room conversations were like.

Marunouchi chuckled. "I guess not. I just think it's a little strange, how she seems to get along with almost everybody. I never saw anything like that when I was in school. Sure, there were popular kids, but nothing like I've seen since I started here last year—even the other teachers are on her 'side.' "

Before Aiko could respond, or inquire further, sensei's phone started to buzz. "Sorry, that's my alarm. I have to hurry to the next class. I'll see you tomorrow." He stood, wiped some crumbs off his shirt, and split, leaving Aiko with a mouthful of food and a confused, raised eyebrow. *Are all the students and staff at this school out of their minds?*

* * *

The sad answer to her question appeared to be a resounding yes. "Are you *sure* you don't need any more members?"

"We're sure," said the president of the shogi club curtly, who Aiko had overheard bemoaning the lack of recruits through the club room door. "Please, leave, so we can focus on the game." There were three girls there—insufficient for a club at Kamiagari—and two of them were staring at a yet-undisturbed shogi board with the kind of intensity usually reserved for the finals moves of a game.

"Alright, then." Aiko shrugged and left. Once the door closed behind her, she leaned back against the wall across the hallway and slid down it toward the floor. *That's the third one. Three clubs in a row that clearly could have used more members, but turned me away.*

She looked up at the overhead, fluorescent lights. What was going on? It wasn't like she had done something to cause anyone serious offense—surely people didn't worship Satou to the point that they wouldn't even talk to you if you broke a lunch appointment with her, right? Wouldn't that be a completely asinine reason to dismiss a promising transfer student from even getting the opportunity to join your club? No interviews, not even any real conversations—the best she got was, "maybe we'll be looking some time in the future," from the drama club. Was she going

to end up passing the entire second half of her middle school career a social outcast? Why? Did she stink? Bad breath? Maybe it was her face, or something else she couldn't help.

While Aiko was wrestling with the turmoil of being a loner at 14, some students walked past, chatting about their own club (from the look of their equipment, badminton or tennis). As they passed, she noticed they widened the berth between her and themselves—as if they were consciously afraid of getting close to her—without even looking in her direction or acknowledging that she was *sitting on the floor of the hallway*. They didn't look, they didn't ask if she was okay, they didn't even point and laugh at her or whisper.

Normally, Aiko was a calm and collected girl. However, today had been remarkably *abnormal*, and she decided she had had enough.

"Excuse me," she called after them. They pretended not to hear her and walked on.

"I *said*, excuse me!" Aiko stood, wiped any dust that might have been on the floor off her rear, and shouted. "It's rude to just ignore someone like that!"

They kept walking.

"Hey!" Aiko marched after them and grabbed the two by their shoulders. "I'm talking to you two!" She turned them around to face her.

They were white as sheets; it was as if they'd seen a ghost. "Sorry," said one—a skinny girl with a bob cut. "We didn't notice."

"That's impossible! We're the only three people here!" She was shouting in their faces could probably lower her voice, but was too angry to consider that right now. "Why is everyone blowing me off? Is it something I did?"

"Leave us alone!" The other girl, with a pixie cut, started shouting back. "If no one likes you, maybe that's your own problem! Don't get us involved."

"I'm asking *why*! I've only been at this school for two days—what reason would anyone have not to like me?"

“Why should we know? We’re just trying to go to our club, so get off our backs! Come on, Shiritori-chan.” The pixie cut shoved Aiko, breaking her grip, and began to storm away.

“Wait!” Aiko realized she was begging. “Just tell me why you tried to avoid me when you walked past, at least!”

They didn’t respond before they hastily rounded a corner. Despite the shouting, no one had come out of their club rooms to investigate. Aiko contemplated chasing after the two skirt-clad girls, but figured accosting them further wouldn’t help matters. Instead, she collected her backpack (she set it on the floor when she sat down) and made for the school’s exit, heart heavy.

She hadn’t felt so down since she lost mom. Part of her wondered what she might say, if she could ask her for advice right now.

V

Doing her best not to cry, Aiko headed toward the school gate. It was another scorcher, and the sun beating down on her from the cloudless sky did not help her feel any better about today's cascading rejections. At the gate stood a couple of familiar figures—Ebihara-senpai and Tanima-senpai, the third-years with delayed chuunibyou. The taller, Ebihara, smiled and waved as Aiko approached.

At least they see me*.* She wasn't thrilled at the prospect of these two weirdos being her only friends, but right now she needed company to keep from falling into a spiral of loneliness. Anyone would do, frankly, so long as they weren't abusive.

"Akiba-san!" Tanima noticed Aiko's approach a second after her big friend had. "Do you have plans after school today?"

"I was just going to go home early," she replied, returning their wave with a polite smile.

"So were we!" Aiko noticed that Hinata was wearing her normal uniform, rather than the gym outfit she'd donned yesterday after school.

"No track today?"

"Huh? Track?"

"You were running yesterday, right?"

"Oh, that? I'm not in any of the sports clubs here. That's just for fun." Aiko decided the tomboy really *was* a weirdo—who ran for fun in heat like that? "I do it when I can't hang out with Rumi. It helps blow off steam. You should try it!"

"Maybe when the weather's a bit cooler..."

"Come on! The heat's what makes it so fun! There's nothing like working up a sweat—"

"Hina-chan," Ebihara chided. "Don't twist her arm, now." She turned to Aiko with a warm smile. "Would you like to join us? We

were going to go get some parfaits in town.”

“Eh? Even after this morning?”

“What do you mean?” Ebihara looked confused. “What about this morning would stop us from inviting you out? You’re a new student, after all. We want you to feel welcome.”

“But I said such mean things about your club.”

“Don’t worry about it. We don’t have to be in the same club to be friends, do we?”

“...no, I guess not.” Aiko nodded, smiling slightly. “I’d like a parfait.”

* * *

The little silver bell on the café door chimed as Ebihara and Aiko practically fell inside, panting. Tanima, who had ran ahead because, “walking is too boring,” was seated in a comfortable-looking booth with dark red leather seats, looking intensely at the menu. Aiko took a seat across from her and immediately felt relieved as the cool fabric hit the exposed skin on the back of her thighs.

Ebihara, on the other hand, was still struggling. She fanned her face with one hand and wiped the sweat off her forehead with the other. Aiko might have been a little jealous of her bust, but at times like this it paid to be light. She made space for Rumi to sit next to her, which the latter took.

Tanima didn’t seem to notice Ebihara’s discomfort. She immediately started pestering her friend with questions about the menu. “You’ve been here before, right? Which one is the best?”

“I don’t know,” Rumi managed. “I’ve only tried the strawberry one.” She was leaning her head back against the booth. Aiko could practically feel the warmth radiating off her.

A waitress with a wavy haircut approached their table with a menu for each of Ebihara and Aiko. Tanima immediately ordered strawberry, and after a second of browsing Ebihara decided on kiwi and Aiko went with blueberry.

“So,” Tanimma chimed in as the waitress left, “Akiba-san. What do you like to do outside school? You already know about my running.”

“Oh, well...until recently I’ve been spending most of my time watching my twin brothers, since my dad works late. When they’re in bed, though, I like to read to relax. And I’m a pretty good cook!”

Ebihara looked surprised. “That’s a pretty impressive responsibility at our age...do both your parents work late?”

“My dad works second shift,” she said. “My mom died two years ago, so it’s just us.”

“Oh...sorry I brought that up.” The green-haired giant looked guilty.

“It’s okay! You couldn’t have known, and I’m used to it by now anyway.”

“Still, it must be hard on you, right? You said it was twins. I bet that’s a handful.”

“Definitely...there are two of them, but sometimes it feels like there are ten.” She laughed a little to try and lighten the mood. “But they’re good boys. I don’t regret any time I spend with them.”

The three sat in silence for a moment before Tanimma started, “Anyway! What kind of books do you like to read when you aren’t busy?”

“It’s a little embarrassing...” she could feel herself blushing at the thought of explaining it to her two senpai.

“Oh, come on! It can’t be that bad, right? We won’t make fun of you *too* much.” Tanimma leaned forward, unintentionally exposing some of the untanned skin under her uniform’s blouse.

“...well, okay.” Aiko steeled her resolve for their reaction. “I really like to read fairy tales.”

“Fairy tales? Like, Cinderella?” The redhead raised her eyebrow.

“That kind of thing, yeah...all kinds, from all over the world.”

“Huh.” Tanimma shrugged. “Is that embarrassing, Rumi?” She turned to her friend, who was looking at her lap. “Rumi?”

Ebihara murmured something.

“What? I couldn’t hear—”

“Cute!” Ebihara grinned. “I didn’t expect you to have such girly taste!” Her voice, which was normally quite soft, had the undertones of some kind of pervert – the setting sun reflected off her glasses from the window. “What do you like about them? Do you wish you were a princess? Do you have a perfect prince charming in mind?” She was almost drooling, turning and putting her face just inches from Aiko’s own; Aiko got the sense that she badly wanted to hug her and it took a lot of restraint for her not to.

The enthusiastic reaction encouraged Aiko to open up a bit more. “I mean...it would be pretty nice to be a princess, I guess. What I like about them, though, is that everything always works out in the end. I guess it’s childish, but I really like happy endings...even though I know, in the original stories, the endings weren’t always happy.”

Ebihara was nodding intently at Aiko’s every word. “Do you want a princess dress? Maybe I could make you one! We could find a tall, handsome prince with blonde hair to sweep you off your feet and you could ride on his white horse into his castle and fall in love and—”

“Are you hearing yourself?” asked Tanima, who waved her hand in front of her friend’s face. “Sorry, Akiba-san. Rumi *really* likes ‘cute’ things, with lots of frills and ribbons. Bad luck for her that *I’m* her best friend.” She rolled her eyes. “Earth to Rumi?”

“Huh? Oh.” Ebihara sat upright again, giving Aiko room to relax. “Sorry. I guess I got a little ahead of myself.” She rubbed the back of her head like she’d just made a minor social faux pas rather than an outburst so loud it got half the restaurant’s attention.

“No...problem?” Aiko was just relieved they hadn’t made fun of her for liking something that, realistically, she should have grown out of years ago.

Before the conversation could advance further, the parfaits arrived. Aiko was surprised at just how generous the portions

were—the dishes alone were nearly as big as her head, piled high with berries, syrup, and whipped cream.

“Man, is this all?” Aiko looked at Tanimma like she had three heads. “I’m way too hungry for just this.” She took a single, enormous bite that the poor spoon could hardly contain. Her cheeks went as red as the strawberries. “Mmmh! It’s good, at least! How’s yours, Akiba-san?”

Aiko had a much more conservative nibble. The tartness of the berries and yogurt mingled with the sweetness of the blueberry syrup and whipped cream, dancing on her tongue. “So good!”

Rumi took a bite of her own green dessert, cupping her face with her free hand. “Mmm!”

They ate the entire parfaits like this, savoring the indulgent flavor as the orange glow of the evening sun bathed the restaurant in warm light.

* * *

It was dark by the time the three filed out of the café—the stars were faintly visible overhead, and the lamp-lit street was nearly empty save an elderly couple walking hand-in-hand in the opposite direction. The three had discovered that Aiko’s house was on the way to Ebihara’s, and Tanimma lived just a street away. As they passed the couple, Aiko asked how her two senpai had gotten to be such close friends, since their interests were pretty different—Ebihara was obsessed with cute things while Tanimma liked to work out.

“We met in first year, here,” said Tanimma. “We didn’t really get along with anyone else, so we had to stick together.”

“Really? I’m surprised. I figured you two would be quite popular.”

“Unfortunately, that isn’t possible for us at this school.” Ebihara looked remiss in the lamplight. “Not knowing what we know now.”

“Oh, right...” Aiko had forgotten, after getting to know the pair, that they both believed in a crackpot theory that there was a cult to a dark god pulling the strings at their middle school. Then she remembered how bizarrely everyone had behaved that afternoon. “Say...how did you two come up with that idea, anyway?”

“It wasn’t us,” said Tanima, who was walking with her hands behind her head like she had the previous morning. Aiko got the sense that she was dying to run off and get the excess energy she somehow still had in her system out. “Fukuda-senpai was the one who told us about it.”

“Fukuda-senpai?”

“Two years older than Rumi and I,” she continued. “Fukuda Kazuko. She transferred to Kamiagari partway through the year, like you did, and she noticed some very strange things going on. Nobody believed her until Rumi and I enrolled during her second year.”

“Why? I mean, why did you two choose to believe her?”

“For me, I could just tell that she really believed it herself. You know how people talk when they *know* something is true? She was like that.”

“I saw it firsthand,” said Ebihara. “I got lost on my way to the cafeteria, and I overheard President Satou talking with some adults about whether the ‘special deliveries’ to the first years went out on time. She said it was very important that we had ‘it’ in our systems before school started. One of them saw me—the math teacher, Tachibana-sensei—and I scrambled before I could hear more. When senpai approached me later, I knew exactly what she was talking about.”

“It?” Aiko realized she was getting pulled into their delusions, but this could make for a fun story if nothing else. After all, it was impossible for Satou to have been enrolled when the two of them were first-years, given that Satou was a year behind them.

“The first-years at Kamiagari get a care package before school starts. It makes sense for such a ‘prestigious’ school to make that

kind of effort to look the part, right? Well...included in that care package is an assortment of snacks."

"So?"

"The snacks," Ebihara continued, "are laced with whatever 'it' is supposed to be, as a way to expose students to it preemptively. At least, that was senpai's theory. The cafeteria food and drinks are also chock full of the stuff. There is some ingredient that brainwashes people into following Satou's instructions."

Aiko recalled Satou's strange insistence that she come with her to eat the school-prepared lunch. "But what about you two? Didn't you eat it?"

"No—Hina-chan didn't eat them because she has a pretty strict diet for her training. My dog, Kaze, got into mine before I could stop him, then threw it all up." She seemed to stop herself from going into a long diatribe. "...anyway, if you don't have 'it' in you, those who do will steer clear."

That last sentence gave her pause. "Like, ignore you?"

Tanima answered as they rounded the corner to Aiko's street. "If you don't try to talk to them, yeah. If you do, they'll just treat you like a freak and turn you away. I could go into school tomorrow morning and ask around for something as simple as a pen to borrow, and everyone would blow me off saying they didn't have one. Anything—joining a club, walking down the same hallway, you name it."

"Why is that?" She was now genuinely interested, given her strikeout with club applications.

"Senpai's hypothesis was that there is some kind of pheromone it gives off to tell people who are affected by it that the other person is, as well."

"And this senpai...did she graduate?"

"She did," Ebihara smiled. "Satou couldn't wait, I bet. As far as we know, senpai is the first student to figure out what was going on. She tried to bring it to the police, but they told her they didn't have time for kids' games. Her next best choice was telling as many people as possible about it and hoping to spread rumors about bullying, so people wouldn't enroll."

"Any idea where she is now?"

Tanima shrugged. "She wasn't allowed to have a cell phone because her parents were kind of strict, so we never got her contact information before she graduated last year. I don't blame her for not coming around. I don't plan to visit after I graduate."

They reached Aiko's house just when things were getting good. With a million and one questions floating around in her head, she stopped in front of the doorway. "This is me. Thank you for walking me home, senpai," she said with a shallow bow.

"Don't sweat it," Tanima assured her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "We're friends, right?"

She smiled back. "I guess so. I'll see you two tomorrow." The two of them waved and started walking together toward their own homes. She watched for a moment, contemplating whether she should stop them and invite them inside so they could finish their tale, which Aiko was beginning to believe wasn't so tall after all, but decided it was better to get inside and get some rest.

* * *

The door was unlocked, and she crept in quietly as she could lest she wake the twins. Her eyes darted from left to right to see if the sitter was waiting for her—after all, she did get back quite a bit later than her dad had probably suggested. She wouldn't blame the girl for being angry with her.

With no one in sight, Aiko breathed a sigh of relief and shut the door behind her with a soft 'click.' She slipped off her shoes and—

"Don't move," whispered someone right before her face. Aiko couldn't make out who it was, except that it was a girl with light-colored hair. "I don't know who you are, but I'm not letting you in."

"Wait," Aiko whispered back. "I live here."

"That's just what a thief would say!" The blonde—Aiko realized after her eyes adjusted—crossed her arms impatiently.

"I mean it! Look, my school ID. I'm Akiba Aiko." She reached into her bag to retrieve the badge, but before she could the guard interrupted her.

"Oh!" The girl flipped on the hall light, which nearly blinded Aiko. "Sorry. I heard you were in middle school, so I didn't think you'd be so small." She said it the casual way one might refer to the color of a shirt.

Aiko already didn't like this girl—not only did she seem to mock her figure, but the slovenly way her high school uniform was arranged did not call to mind one's ideas of a 'good kid,' as her dad put it. Her chest was practically out in the open with so few buttons fastened. "Anyway. I'm back, so you're free to go. Dad said he'd pay you in advance, right?"

"Hang on." The gal knelt down next to Aiko's hand. "Is this a Kamiagari ID?"

"...yes...?"

The girl stood tall, grabbed Aiko by the shoulders, then bent down and took a long, loud sniff. "Weird. You've been sweating, so maybe I just can't tell, but you don't have a 'smell' on you."

Aiko, whose face was so red she might've been sunburned, shook the groping hands off and stepped back. "What's the matter with you?" She did all she could to keep her voice down.

"I guess that was a little weird of me, huh?" The blonde rubbed the back of her head. "Sorry about that. My friend went to Kamiagari, and she said something about a weird smell or something like that. Hormones, I think she said. Anyway, I thought I might check for myself. Now I get to tell her she really *is* crazy."

"Huh?"

"By the way, I'm Yoshino Rinka. You can just call me Yoshi." She gave a little peace sign when she introduced herself, winking and sticking out her tongue.

"Hold on just a second."

"What? Are you still mad? Want to smell me? I use a great perfume."

"No, it's not—" Aiko stopped herself mid-sentence to keep from stammering. "You said your friend went to Kamiagari."

What was her name?"

"Fukuda. Why?"

"Kazuko?"

"What, you know Kazucchi? I thought you just transferred."

"I don't," Aiko said, "But I want to. Can I have her contact information?"

Yoshino raised an eyebrow. "What, was she super popular or something? Was it like, you saw a picture and she was so cute you just *had* to meet her? Because Kazucchi is super cute. Even though she's kind of nutty..."

"It's not like that!" Aiko covered her mouth after shouting unintentionally. "I just have a question for her about the school, is all. It's important to me. Please?"

The gal shrugged, pulled her phone out of the pocket in her skirt, and gave her the contact info.

"Thank you! And thanks again for watching the twins. I know I was back late today."

"Huh? Oh, it's no biggie. I just live across the street." She pointed through the open door.

"You do? Didn't you go to Kamiagari, then?"

"Nah, I just moved here this year, for high school."

"Oh...well, thanks anyway." Aiko bowed.

"Don't be so serious! I'm working for you, Ai-chan!" Yoshino ruffled Aiko's hair before crossing the threshold. "See you tomorrow! Don't send Kazucchi anything naughty!"

Aiko rolled her eyes, shutting the door after ensuring that the gal had made it safely home.

VI

“No, that’s not right...” Aiko muttered, erasing yet another text message draft wherein she politely introduced herself before asking if Fukuda-senpai actually had evidence of occult activity having taken place at Kamiagari. She tried starting with an explanation of what she’d heard so far from Tanima and Ebihara, tried a more blatant, interrogative approach, and tried to open with a more ‘normal’ question about the school and work the cult stuff in later, but in the end it was simply too awkward to barge into someone who she had never met’s life with questions about a school that she, regardless of the veracity of the allegations, was surely glad to leave behind her.

The blue light from her smartphone reflected off the blanket under which she was laying, the little cursor blinking in the text message box. It occurred to her that she’d forgotten, or hadn’t even considered, obtaining her two new friends’ contact information. She was just so absorbed in the conversation, both the mundane and the fantastical, that by the time she thought about it they were already long gone. Otherwise, she might have given *them* senpai’s number, as well, or asked them how they might recommend approaching her.

“Oh, just do it already.” She typed a short, but polite introduction into the message box and hit send before she gave herself a chance to erase it. “Hello. I am trying to reach Fukuda Kazuko-senpai. I know this is sudden. My name is Akiba Aiko. I’m a new transfer student at Kamiagari Girls’ School. Can I ask you something?” Immediately, she closed the screen and pressed her phone against her chest, the heart within which was thumping surprisingly hard.

It nearly skipped a beat when the phone vibrated against her body almost instantly.

"Hello. This is Fukuda. Where did you get my contact information?"

Fair question. Aiko's thumbs were shaking slightly, and it took her a couple of tries to manage "Yoshino Rinka, your classmate, gave it to me. She babysits for my brothers."

There was a brief pause, then Fukuda replied, "Why do you want to ask me? How did you even know to ask Yoshi for my number?"

She sounded a little paranoid, which lent some credence to Aiko's theory that all this cult talk was nonsense. Then again, if the cult *was* real, she could be worried that they were after her. "I learned about you from Tanima-senpai and Ebihara-senpai."

"Oh, I see. You're in the know, then."

"In the know?"

"I don't want to talk about it over text messages. If you have questions, ask Tanima and Ebihara. They know everything I do."

"But how did you find out? They said you saw strange things."

"I said I don't want to elaborate over text. Who knows who might read these records?"

"Why would someone read this conversation?"

"I don't have time to keep turning you away. I'm turning the phone off."

"Wait, please!" She sent that by itself, hoping Fukuda would at least give her a chance. "Just tell me one thing. Who was student council president during your second year?"

There was a lengthy gap between her having sent that message and the next reply, but the read receipt meant Aiko was sure Fukuda saw it. Just before she gave up, a message began to load with a picture attached. Beneath it, Fukuda said, "this girl."

"This girl" was unmistakably Satou Rin, in a yearbook photo featuring the other graduates from two years ago, when Fukuda would have been a second year and Satou *should* have been a sixth grader.

"That's impossible," she replied. Fukuda did not read the message.

“Explain this.” Aiko showed the photo Fukuda, who apparently hadn’t turned her phone back on, had sent her to Tanima-senpai and Ebihara senpai, crammed into the storage closet they called a club room after school. She didn’t even say hello or give them a chance to react, simply thrusting the phone in their faces with the photo at full screen.

“What? Is that a photo of Satou?” Tanima was visibly confused, Ebihara less so.

“I got Fukuda-senpai’s contact information from my brothers’ babysitter. I tried asking her about what you two were talking about on the walk home yesterday, but she wouldn’t answer me. She said this was the student council president when she attended this school.”

“Mhm.” Ebihara nodded. “That’s the case.”

“But that can’t be. This girl graduated two years ago. Satou would have been—”

Ebihara cut her off. “It’s the same person.” Tanima, who seemed to have caught on, nodded.

“There’s no way. I’m going to the student council to ask Satou about it.” She turned to leave and both girls grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Don’t do that! There’s no telling how she’ll react!” Tanima cried. “Look, would you give us a chance to explain instead of running off again?”

Aiko stopped short, sighed, and turned around. “Fine. I defy you to explain how the same human being was student council president two years ago, *and* this year, and was *older* two years ago than she is now.” She crossed her arms impatiently, squinting from the harsh light shining off the uncovered lightbulb.

“It’s best if you just watch the video.” Ebihara knelt down and started digging through one of the myriad boxes in the room, labeled ‘A/V club’ in hastily-scribbled marker.

“Video?”

"Here, I'll help you find it." Tanima started looking, too.

The two of them rifled through the box for a moment before producing a camcorder tape that had the date for eight years ago on it. "This should clear it up."

* * *

The three of them sneaked into the A/V club room after the usual occupants had left; Tanima grinned when she flashed the spare key she had for it. Aiko thought it best to question where she got that *after* she knew more about whatever this video was going to entail.

Ebihara slotted the tape into a VHS shell and slid it into the deck—it was one of those old CRT televisions with a VCR built-in—while Tanima lowered the lights in the room and shut the blinds. There was a flicker on the screen, then a grainy video started to play.

The video was shot at night. It was almost impossible to understand what was happening at first—the opening thirty seconds consisted entirely of blurs and unintelligible mumbling. A male voice muttered behind the camera about 'showing something to the world' and 'letting the evidence speak for itself,' but it wasn't very clear and was further muffled by an evening breeze. While the substance of the video was something out of a found-footage horror flick, the quality reminded her of the home movies her dad showed her brothers to teach them about mom.

Her nostalgia didn't last long. The camera's perspective suddenly changed to an extreme close-up of the cameraman; he was surrounded by leafage and looked to be in his early to mid twenties, with bedraggled, unkempt hair and the beginnings of a stubbly beard. His glasses reflected the camera lens, and behind them she could see heavy bags. He fiddled with the camera for a bit before his vision snapped to something out of view.

"They're going in now," he mumbled. The camera turned, and she saw a procession of hooded figures walking single-file along the path that lead to the school's shrine from the main build-

ing. The video was shot from behind a bush with the flash turned off, so it was hard to see much, but when they passed under the few overhead lights they each appeared to be carrying some kind of vase or pitcher, whose contents sloshed back and forth inside their containers in time with their steps.

The cameraman waited for them all to walk inside before crawling out of the bushes and scrambling over to the shrine. He held the camera up to a crack in the door. The hooded figures, which numbered twelve, all stood in a ring on an elevated platform. Thanks to the very limited view, it was almost impossible to tell what they were doing.

“...prepared...?” said one of the distant voices; that of an adult woman. One of the figures nodded. “Good. Then, let us begin.”

The documentarian’s breathing grew heavy as the ring of figures opened up, revealing a girl in the school’s uniform—the same one Aiko wore now—at the center. She stood with her head hanging, lifeless, and her long brown hair reached her waist.

“President Satou Aoi,” spake a voice, “We congratulate you on your graduation.”

The hooded figures repeated the speaker in unison. Aiko felt a lump form in her throat.

“Satou Misaki. We welcome you to Kamiagari Girls’ School.”

The figures repeated the speaker again, surrounded the president, then dispersed again. Satou stood totally nude on the stage, then, head still drooping as if she had fallen asleep upright.

“What the hell...” Aiko murmured. One of the figures neatly folded up the old uniform and set it aside. Then, the group left the dais for a moment. Aiko was a little embarrassed to look at the naked figure of a girl she knew in person, but didn’t dare to look away as the figures started slowly marching back on stage, now holding the jugs they had brought in with them.

One at a time, they approached Satou, lifted the pitcher over her head, and dumped its contents on her body. It was a viscous liquid and the way it left the vessels reminded Aiko of the way a wet dough or batter might ‘crawl’ out of its container, sticking to the side and ‘peeling’ off. Unlike those, though, this liquid flowed

as quickly as water, and its off-purple coloration dyed Satou's exposed skin before splatting onto the floor in sloppy mounds.

The figures all performed the same task, then knelt before the nude president.

"Satou Misaki, we congratulate you on your election to student council president."

When they stood again, it was clear that Satou had *shrunk* slightly. Not only her height—her bust, hips, and even the amount of pubic hair had all regressed. It was as if she'd aged in reverse, realized Aiko, who also realized that all the liquid that had been poured over her was *gone*, no longer piled at her feet like it had been.

The cameraman gasped when came to what must have been the same realization.

"Who's there?!" shouted a voice.

"Shit!" whispered the man behind the camera, scrambling a bit to stand before shutting the camera off. The video ended there, and Tanima stood to turn the lights back up.

Aiko sat in stunned silence, replaying the video in her head. She tried to convince herself that it was some kind of special effect or AI-generated footage.

"Crazy, right?" Tanima pulled her out of her stupor—she was staring at the blank TV screen for several seconds. "I couldn't believe it when Fukuda-senpai first showed it to me, either."

Aiko nodded. She had about ten thousand questions trying to climb out of her mouth at once, but the one that escaped first was, "Who was the man in the video?"

Ebihara replied, in a tone that clearly seemed to be trying to placate Aiko's nerves, "Fukuda-senpai didn't know. She said she was asking around on a message board about the school, if anyone had heard any rumors, and someone told her to check underneath the bushes outside the school the following morning. She found the tape there, already labeled, in a metal box."

Aiko couldn't imagine watching that video alone, without any of the buildup she got to it—her nerves were raw as it was. "So...what was that stuff?"

“We’ve never seen it in real life before. Only that video.”

“Is there...anything else?”

Ebihara nodded. “The box also contained some photos, mainly featuring Satou throughout the years, but it’s hard to glean much from them that the video doesn’t already explain.”

“There’s also this picture that I took when I sneaked into the school late one night, last year,” said Tanimi. She held her phone out to Aiko, who took it—in the hastily-shot photo were three hooded figures walking in step in the courtyard with Satou, who appeared to be gesturing in a manner consistent with giving orders. “She was telling this short one to confirm all the preparations for the alumni dinner were going according to plan, I think. Then they went into the shrine. I followed, but by the time I reached the door they had disappeared.”

“Alumni dinner?” She’d never heard of a middle school having one of those.

Tanimi replied, “Yep. That’s how Satou keeps the graduates brainwashed—she subjects them to more of the tainted food supply. Fukuda-senpai’s theory was that the cult was trying to install followers in powerful positions so it could exercise Satou’s influence the world over. Well, I guess it’s been pretty successful for some time, now that I think about it.”

“Wait a minute...” Aiko held up her hands. “I just realized something. How do we know that food outside the school isn’t also infected with whatever ‘it’ is?”

Ebihara nodded. “I’ve thought about that before. The simple fact is, we don’t know. I would guess that Satou either doesn’t have the right kind of influence to make that happen, or doesn’t know how to implement it. Maybe ‘it’ is in too limited a supply to be used on a massive scale.”

Aiko could feel her heartbeat accelerating at the idea of ‘not knowing’ that some horrible monster was contaminating her food with a drug that turned her into a mindless slave with no will. “I just...I don’t...damn it!” Her friends flinched at her sudden outburst. “How am I supposed to accept this? The student council president has brainwashed most of my classmates into

being zombies that follow her every whim, and has untold influence *all over the world*? And she's a...some kind of monster, to boot?" Her breathing grew ragged as the anxiety burrowed deeper into her mind. "What, I'm supposed to just let that happen and be okay with it?!"

"It's alright, Akiba-san." Ebihara tried to approach her. "Calm down."

"It's not okay at all! You want me to be calm after I just saw that video?!"

Ebihara pulled Aiko into a hug. "I know it's frightening. We're scared, too."

Aiko tried to break out of Ebihara's embrace, but the state of shock she'd found herself in weakened her to the point that all she could do was shake. Thanks to their height difference, she found herself pressed against senpai's chest, burying her face in it to cry.

"What can we do?" she asked, muffled somewhat by senpai's uniform. "There has to be something we can try." Ebihara relaxed her hold and Aiko stepped back, looking up at her sympathetic, but sad, smile.

"The fact is, the three of us are just middle school girls. We're up against something much bigger than we can even conceptualize. Whatever impact we had would be tiny."

Aiko's hands shook. She knew, of course, that Ebihara was correct—the battle she was suggesting was more than just uphill, and carried with it the kind of risk that would make even the most addicted gamblers turn away—but the idea that all she could do was suffer in silence stirred an anger in her she may have never felt.

"I'm pissed, too," said Tanimi; apparently Aiko wore her emotions on her face more honestly than she'd realized. "We've thought about it a lot—and Fukuda-senpai did, too—but everything we came up with was just small potatoes that wouldn't really change much, or was way too risky and extreme. The kind of stuff that could ruin our lives if we were found out."

She opened her mouth to say something else, but Aiko interrupted her with a whisper. "What if we burned it down?"

"Huh?" Ebihara and Tanima asked in unison. Then Ebihara said, "You don't mean...?"

"Burn the whole school down." Aiko could tell she had gone mad. "Had you considered that?"

"Akiba-san, that's—"

"Crazy? Risky? So what?" She laughed a little. As she continued, her voice rapidly grew louder and more frenetic. "What we're *fighting* is crazy. If we burned down the school, we would destroy whatever 'it' is, and without that in the food supply the students would go back to normal. Then—"

Tanima's slap shook Aiko to her core. Despite her diminutive stature, her athleticism shine through in the open-palmed strike that took Aiko by surprise. "Don't be ridiculous! That's the kind of crazy, risky thing I was talking about. The other students are innocent, and I think most of the teachers are too. I don't want to put them at risk."

Aiko rubbed her cheek where Tanima had hit her.

"I don't want to do that, either," said Ebihara. "They can't help that they've been made into servants, you know?"

"..you're right." Aiko nodded. That slap, though maybe a bit harder than necessary, knocked some sense back into her. "I'm sorry. I just can't stomach the idea of living in fear. Even if you two don't do something, I will."

Tanima put a hand on Aiko's shoulder. "Now, now. We didn't say we won't do *anything*."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't show you here. Are you free to come by my place after this?"

"Are you hitting on me?" Aiko recoiled a bit.

"No!" Ebihara yelled, then covered her mouth. She lit up like a Christmas tree, blushing. "She's definitely not."

Tanima looked over at Ebihara, blinked once, then turned back to Aiko. "Anyway...I'll text you my address. What's your number?"

Tanima's bedroom was exactly as austere as Aiko expected from someone who spent as little time there as a tomboy like her must have. A simple bed with generic, white sheets, a desk with a lamp, and a half-open closet full of t-shirts and shorts were almost more than she expected. As for decorations, there was only a single one: a poster featuring a famous Japanese Olympian. This was a room for sleeping in, and not much else.

Aiko found herself looking at the laptop screen over Tanima's shoulder as the redhead, who had changed into a tank-top and shorts after getting home, explained their activities. "So, what we've been doing is going on all sorts of message boards and spreading rumors about the school. The same thing, basically, that senpai did when she attended. Actually, I think she might still do it. We go to the kinds of websites that parents use to check reviews of the school and post believable things like 'my daughter was bullied mercilessly, so we had to move her somewhere else,' or 'the food made my child sick, so if you choose to enroll, make sure you pack lunches.'"

"The teachers are abusive, and excessive corporal punishment goes unanswered by the school board." Ebihara, who was laying on her back on Tanima's bed and eating a piece of strawberry-flavored pocky, still in her uniform, chimed in. She continued, "One time, we posted that a cross-dressing boy had managed to enroll in the school and was peeping on the other girls before he was expelled. We said that the school kept it under wraps, of course, since that never really happened and there's no news story, but we got a lot of concerned comments on that one." She grinned—it must have been her idea.

Aiko nodded. "Do you think it's having any effect on the cult?"

"On the cult itself? I don't know. But enrollment numbers are down enough for them to commission articles like *this*." She pulled up another tab, one for the website run by the city news-

paper. In it, the journalist gave an 'unbiased' review of the facilities at the school, and remarked on how well put-together the students were. Obviously, it was written as a promotion.

"So what's the plan? To shut the whole school down?"

"I don't know if we can achieve that with how small our operation is. At the end of the day, we're saving people from what must be a terrible life of slavery, though." Ebihara snapped off another bite of her pocky after finishing her sentence.

"What if we uploaded that video online?"

"Huh?" They both looked up at her.

"The tape you showed me. What if we digitized that and uploaded it onto OurTube?"

"You can do that?" Tanima looked like Aiko had just told her she could jump 20 feet high.

"..yes..." Aiko pursed her lips. She expected to hear about why that was a bad idea, not that they hadn't even been aware of the possibility.

"I don't think it's a good idea." Ebihara, who clearly *had* considered it, spoke up. "Most people would just dismiss that as a fake, or part of some alternate reality game. Plus, we could get in trouble for uploading a video of a nude teenager online."

"We could find a way to keep it from coming back to us. If people think it's fake, fine, but that's not dangerous. And if they believe it, maybe something big will happen. What if it made the news? We could title the video, 'what is really happening at Kamiagari Middle School,' or something like that.

Ebihara stroked her chin. "It isn't like you're wrong...I just wonder about the risks."

"Let's try it!" Tanima was suddenly excited. "If we can make sure there's no way it comes back to us, that would be a great way to spread the word!"

"Hmm...okay, how about this?" Ebihara stood, then, straightening out her skirt. "Bring the tape back here tomorrow. I'll research ways to mask your identity online at home, and if I find one, we can upload it." The other two nodded.

“Ready?” Tanimma held out her hand, palm down. The other two looked at her quizzically. “Come on, like a cheer! Don’t you guys know anything?”

Ebihara and Aiko looked at each other, smiled, and nodded before putting their hands on top of Tanimma’s. “One, two...”

“Go, team!” They threw their hands up into the air with a cheer.

VII

Aiko had spent the rest of the day anticipating the fallout of their plan. She could hardly sleep, she was so excited. The best case scenario—adults who aren't brainwashed get involved, the investigation is successful, Satou's true nature is revealed and she is dethroned, letting Aiko live a normal school life—kept playing in her head all through the night.

Because of her lack of sleep, she struggled to stay awake in class. Despite the bright sun shining through the school windows, and despite Marunouchi-sensei's booming voice, Aiko found herself fighting back yawns all throughout English. By lunch, she was ready for a nap, but there were more important matters at hand. She stood along with the rest of the students to leave, rather than going for her bento as usual.

"Akiba-san." Satou's familiar voice called to her as she made for the door. "Are you actually going to the cafeteria to eat with us today?" Knowing what she knew, and having seen what she saw yesterday, it took all Aiko had not to vomit at the sweet council president act.

"Oh, not today," Aiko said, hoping she managed to play the part of the 'friend' who was interested, but just so darn busy that she couldn't possibly make it. "I was actually going to go to the library to get some extra studying in."

"Oh..." Satou's facial expression said disappointed, but the way she looked directly at Aiko with her head tilted down, so her eyes were narrow, said anger. "Well, if you reconsider, we'll be there." She walked off, catching up with some 'friends' and chatting with them about some school-related nonsense. Aiko let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding, hoping that today's operation would be successful enough to obviate further need for her to be so alert.

“Okay, Aiko...” she whispered to herself. “Time to get to work.”

* * *

Instead of going to the library, she slunk into the school lab building and made for Tanima and Ebihara’s ‘club room,’ where the two stored the tape. Visions of the normal school life she could live flashed in her mind as she pulled it from its storage box, as planned—the idea was to secure the tape now, when everyone was eating lunch, and then leave the school with it while everyone was busy with their clubs. This way, the fewest possible people who might say something to Satou or a teacher about it might see her.

What she hadn’t counted on was seeing Satou’s smiling face on the other side of the storage closet door, after she closed it behind her.

She yelped like a surprised puppy, and must have jumped a foot. “S-satou-san...” She swallowed the lump that suddenly gathered in her throat, choking her. “Wh-what are you...I didn’t expect to see you here!” Even Aiko could tell that her acting wasn’t fooling anyone.

“You said you were going to the library. We saw you heading this way, and wondered why. So, here we are.” She gestured to the area around them, then stepped forward a bit to close the distance. “What are you doing in the storage closet?”

“I, uh...” her brain’s circuits might have been smoking, she was working so hard to cook up an excuse. “The truth is, I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night. I came in here to try and sneak a nap in, but there wasn’t anywhere to rest my head...” Faking the guilty laugh someone gives when they’ve been caught doing something just bad enough to warrant a mild scolding, she reached up to scratch the back of her head; it was only too late when she realized the hand she went to scratch with was holding the video tape. She thrust her hand behind her back, hoping it wasn’t too late.

It was. "What's that you have there?" Satou crept closer, looking like she knew very well what Aiko was holding.

"Oh, this? I was thinking of joining the A/V club, and—"

"Give it up." Satou stepped forward again, bending down slightly to meet Aiko at eye level. Her hands were behind her back. "You aren't fooling anyone." She had never looked so grim.

"What do you mean?" Aiko tried, despite knowing that everything was crashing down around her, to keep up the innocent act. "I got this tape from the A/V club—they asked me to digitize it, so—"

"Don't lie." By this point, the brunette's burning yellow eyes were inches away from Aiko's blues. "Lying to your fellow students is unbecoming of a student of this school. So is spreading rumors." Her hand snapped forward and took Aiko's by the wrist too quickly to react, like a striking cobra. Her strength was shocking—it reminded Aiko of how tightly her father had clamped onto her with his grip once, when she nearly ran out into traffic as a little kid. Not only was she strong, but she squeezed as if her life depended on it.

Satou continued, her breath hot against Aiko's closed, quivering mouth. Her eyes flitted over to the tape for just an instant before locking onto Aiko's own once again. "Who would have thought there would be another copy of this floating around? Thank you for finding it." She clenched her grip even harder, a feat Aiko thought impossible, compelling her to drop the tape onto the wooden floor with a clatter. Aiko looked down at it in horror, gasping through her nose out of an inexplicable fear of opening her mouth even a bit.

Satou, however, did not release, or even relax, her grip. Her other hand slammed into the door behind Aiko, nearly busting it off its hinges. "Now, Akiba-san." She emphasized the honorific in what could only be described as a 'cruel' way. "Did Fukuda Kazuko tell you about this?"

"H-huh?"

"Pay attention, now." She leaned in closer, her lips almost touching Aiko's left ear. "Did Fukuda Kazuko tell you about this

tape?"

Aiko managed to choke out a whiny, "No."

"Did Ebihara Rumi or Tanim Hinata tell you about this tape?"

Aiko's eyes went wide.

"Answer." Satou's whispers crawled into her ear like worms, burrowing into her mind.

"No," she gasped. If she hadn't been as horrified as she was, she'd have noticed her knees knocking. "I don't know any of these people."

"Liar. You spoke to both of them on your first day of school, and they introduced themselves. Your memory is good enough to recall their names—especially since no one else has introduced herself to you. Lying," she repeated, "is unbecoming of our students."

Aiko gulped. Sweat was beading on her forehead. Satou didn't relent. "Who showed you?"

Before she could reply, she saw a familiar silhouette round a corner. "Satou-san? Akiba-san?" Aiko had never felt so relieved to hear a teacher's voice. As Marunouchi approached, Satou turned, released Aiko, and faced him in record time.

"Sensei! It's good you're here. Akiba-san seems hurt, and she got lost on the way to the nurse's office." She gestured to Aiko, who was holding her aching wrist. "Can you help her find her way?"

"I can..." he was clearly suspicious of the situation. "How did she get hurt?"

Satou turned to her. "She fell, and tried to break her fall by holding out her hands. Maybe she sprained her wrist." Aiko looked at the ground where she'd dropped the tape, begging for an opportunity to reach down and grab it while she rubbed her aching arm.

Marunouchi-sensei, who clearly did not believe Satou's specious story, walked closer. "And you were grabbing her by the injured wrist because...?"

"What? That isn't what was happening, sensei."

"It clearly was. Do you think I'm blind?"

"You will stop this interrogation at once." Satou's voice changed, suddenly—it sounded like a second person was talking at the same time as she, and the haunting echo of that voice thundered in the hallway long after she finished speaking.

"What? Who do you think you're talking to?" Marunouchi put his fists on his hips. Satou tilted her head—it was hard to determine from behind, but it appeared she was confused. "Now, you're both going to come with me. I'll take Akiba-san to the nurse, but *you* are coming to my office so we can get to the bottom of why you're physically harassing her."

While Satou appeared to process Marunouchi's disobedience—something, Aiko supposed, she was unused to receiving from the teachers—her would-be victim hatched a plan and executed it on the spot. It was a simplistic idea, and one that was delivered without much deliberation, but it was her only chance to get out of this—and sometimes that kind of thing worked.

"Ah!" She yelped, falling forward. "My ankle!" As she hit the ground, she scooped up the miniature tape and slipped it into her skirt pocket.

Satou and Marunouchi both stopped their dagger-staring contest and turned to face her.

"Are you okay?" Sensei shoved Satou out of the way and knelt down next to Aiko, offending the former greatly.

"I don't know...I think I just twisted my ankle. I can't walk on it..."

"Here." Sensei scooped her up and, in a single motion, Aiko found herself carried in his arms like a princess. She tried not to get distracted by that fact, making sure the tape was safe and secure. "I'll take you to the nurse for now." He turned to face Satou. "I expect to see you in the staff room after classes end." Without another word he started jogging out of the laboratory, leaving Satou behind, stunned with mouth agape.

Once Marunouchi breached the lab's exit, Aiko breathed a sigh of relief. Something about being in a different room from

Satou was enough to take a tremendous weight off her shoulders. However, with that relief came the realization that she was still being bridal-carried by a man twice her age, and twice her size. In a second, she became very conscious of his body pressing firmly against hers.

"Um...sensei..." she managed, squirming a little so they weren't squished so tightly together. She could feel her cheeks getting hot.

"What? Does it hurt?"

"No, I, uh..."

"Don't worry. I'll keep you safe." He looked down and flashed the kind of big, cheesy grin one would expect from a man who didn't get why what he was doing was *extremely*...something. Aiko wasn't sure how to describe how she felt, but that smile pushed her over the edge.

"Let me down, please!" She yelled, then covered her bright red face with her hands. "I'm okay."

"Huh? You sure?" She nodded, peeking through gaps she made between her fingers. "Okay, then. If you think you can walk the rest of the way." He let her down gently, feet-first. Because of how he was holding her, she felt his calloused hand brush against the back of her leg and nearly fell again, for real this time. He caught her mid-swoon and she was now pressed face-first against his body.

"Are you sure you can walk?"

For a single instant, she got comfortable leaning on him before her eyes shot open. She jumped about three feet back, holding out her hands to keep him from coming any closer. Her eyes refused to look in his direction. "I'm sure! I'm sure!" She made a show of marching in place. "All's well here! My wrist doesn't hurt anymore, either." On top of the embarrassment that accompanied being carried, she realized between leaving the lab and getting into the classroom building that going to the nurse, who was certainly under Satou's thumb, was unwise. "I'm gonna head back to class, okay?"

“Sure...?” He was clearly perplexed—in no small part, probably, because of how frequently Aiko’s hand dove into her pocket to triple-quadruple check that the tape was still tucked safely away.

“Thank you for helping me, though!” She waved, turned, and bolted, her mind simply too frazzled to process the array of emotions it was forced to contend with.

* * *

The time left for lunch break was running out—in fact, there was almost none left—but Aiko thought it imperative to apprise her senpai of the new circumstances. Satou’s knowledge of the tape would doubtlessly compel her to obstruct any exit from the school with it in tow. She resorted to a text message, then, hopeful that the pair would read them before going back to class (as Kamiagari was a phones-off school, and even having it ring in class could result in punishment).

Back in the classroom (where she’d left her phone), Aiko exhaled loudly at her desk. She was tired, and hungry thanks to skipping lunch, but she’d survived. Images of Satou flashed in her mind—the memory of those sinister whispers slithering into her ears made her skin crawl. Then again, the memory of how safe she’d felt when sensei held her...that wasn’t so bad.

She shook herself out of her stupor and slapped her cheeks with both hands. *Worry about that later, Aiko! For now, you have to focus on the task at hand.*

Classes were an exercise in agony. Satou’s yellow eyes burned a hole in her back while the teachers droned on, seemingly overlong on purpose. She found herself checking her pocket every ten seconds to ensure that the evidence was still there, and fought back sighs of relief every time it was.

“Now, then, that’s all for today.” Mercifully, her last class was coming to a close. She braced herself to bolt out of her seat and flee the campus as fast as she could manage. The teacher looked at Satou, then, and blinked twice. “Oh, and Akiba-san? Please,

stay back after class.”

“Huh? Me?” Aiko pointed to herself. The other students didn’t appear to react, standing and filing out in the same, chatty manner they always did.

As Satou left, she leaned over to whisper into Aiko’s ear. “See you soon.”

“Rin-chan, are you coming?”

“Yes, yes!” She called after her ‘friend,’ skipping out of the classroom.

“Um? Sensei? What’s this about?”

The teacher was Sakaki-sensei, a woman in her forties with her dark brown hair in a tight bun and a beauty mark under her right eye. She looked down her nose through horn-rimmed glasses at Aiko. “Akiba-san. There have been reports that you have been bullying other students.”

“What?” Aiko was stunned. “That’s...”

“What the reports say. You targeted both the student council and the badminton club.” The teacher crossed her arms, impatiently.

“That’s not the case at all! I was just trying to *join* the badminton club.” She didn’t know why she bothered—it was obvious that the teacher was brainwashed, and working for Satou.

“That isn’t what they said. They said you physically harassed them and screamed.” The teacher started walking toward the desk. “We can’t have that behavior at our school.”

Aiko scrambled to her feet, scooping up her bag and slinging it over her shoulder before scampering to the back of the classroom. “Don’t come any closer.”

The teacher narrowed her eyes. “Is that a threat?”

“I mean it!” Aiko backed up so there was a clear path to the classroom door. “I’m not going to let you take it.”

“Don’t talk back to your teacher. That sort of behavior doesn’t suit a student of this school.” Sakaki reached forward to grab at her, but Aiko dodged to the right—in the direction the door was.

“Get away!” She shoved the teacher as hard as she could, knocking her into a desk. While she was staggered, Aiko bolted toward the door and flung it open.

Before her stood three other teachers—and behind them, Satou grinned with arms crossed. “Take her.”

“No!” She cried, turning again for the other door. Before she could get anywhere, Sakaki grabbed her from behind, covering her mouth with a cloth.

“Don’t worry,” she heard Satou whisper as the light faded from her eyes. “Soon, you’ll get along great with the rest of us, and this will all be a bad dream.”

VIII

The first thing Aiko realized when she stirred awake was just how bad her head ached. It throbbed from the very center, like someone had hit her with a hammer. She blinked a few times as her vision faded in from blurry to clear.

The second thing to occur to her was that she was in a room she'd never seen before. Several large monitors were the only source of light. One screen showed CCTV footage of Kamiagari's campus; another showed what appeared to be a silhouette of a young girl and her vital signs. Based on the shape of the body, it represented Aiko. The other screens were beyond her—the text wasn't Japanese, or any other script she recognized, and the graphics weren't any more help.

Third, she noticed as she turned her head that she wasn't alone. Ebihara-senpai was there, just a foot away from Aiko's position, her wrists bound together and hoisted overhead. She had been stripped down to her bra and underwear. Aiko looked up and down and saw that she was bound, and clad, similarly. Naturally, that realization was a bit embarrassing, but the shame was pretty far from the first thing on her mind.

"Ah. You're awake." Satou's familiar voice crawled over her like a thousand cockroaches. It carried the same echo that it had when she tried to scold Marunouchi-sensei that afternoon—if it was even the same day, anyway. Aiko's eyes darted around the room, but she couldn't see the source of the voice. It sounded like it came from behind.

"You know, Akiba-san..." The voice came closer, despite a lack of audible footsteps. "You have the makings of one of our greatest assets. You're intelligent, you're cunning, and you're not afraid to stand up for what you believe in. The problem, of course, is *what you believe in*." Satou was now mere inches away from Aiko,

speaking directly into her ear.

"Get away from me!" Aiko shouted, writhing in her bindings to little effect. "Let me go!"

"We will," assured Satou. "As soon as we've had a chance to persuade you. To start, how about you finally give the school food a chance?"

"I'm not eating it! I'll spit it out!" She insisted. Satou walked in front of her, still dressed in the Kamiagari uniform. The brightness of the monitors darkened her features—all Aiko could make out was a silhouette and those glowing, amber eyes. Ebihara-senpai stirred, probably thanks to Aiko's thrashing outburst.

"Where am I...?" she muttered.

"You, too, Ebihara-san." Satou walked over to senpai and lifted her face up, holding her by the chin. "With your brains...well, it's no matter. You'll both be part of the team in due course."

"What are you going to do?" Aiko demanded.

"Like I said...we're simply going to share a meal." She walked over to Aiko and drew a circle around her navel. "Once the special ingredient is in your system, you'll happily oblige us." Her smile was like a knife, and her cool touch was like a rat crawling on her belly. "You want to fit in, right?"

"Get off of me!" Aiko squirmed, sucking in her belly as tight as she could in an effort to move away. "I don't want it!"

"You think so," said Satou, "but you will be much better off with it. And we want to see the look on your face when you realize how foolish you were."

"Leave us alone," cried Rumi before she called, "Help!" as loud as she could.

"Don't bother," said Satou, chuckling. "This room is sound-proof. No one outside can hear you." She lightly patted senpai on the cheek, mockingly. Ebihara winced.

There was crackling sound overhead, like a radio tuning, and then a quiet buzz. "This is Sakaki, reporting in."

“Yes? We are busy.” She didn’t look in any particular direction when she replied—in fact, her eyes were locked with Aiko’s.

“The third dissident fled. We are currently unaware of her whereabouts.”

That got a reaction. “Keep looking,” Satou demanded, eyes narrow. “All three of them have been a problem for long enough. There will be no rest until she is here.”

“Roger!” The crackling came again, then the room returned to quiet.

“Now, then. Where were we...” She walked over to a cart that Aiko previously hadn’t noticed—it was the kind hotels used to bring room service, she realized. Atop it were two plates heaping with delicious-looking food. In fact, Aiko had never seen such a fine-looking meal. However, it only repulsed her all the more knowing the poison it hid beneath the surface.

While Satou pushed the cart over to them, Aiko struggled desperately against her restraints. They appeared to be made of some kind of leather, and she wasn’t strong enough to break them—especially with how tired she was.

“You first, Akiba-san.” Satou stood before her once again, holding a pair of chopsticks with a piece of meat between them. “With this little body, it’s obvious you’re malnourished. Say, ‘ahh...’” She raised the utensils up to Aiko’s lips, which the blue-haired captive pursed tight.

“Oh, come now. It will be so much easier if you would just *eat*.” She grabbed Aiko by the chin, attempting to pry her mouth open. Her strength was unlike anything Aiko had ever felt.

Then, there was a metallic pounding sound—it reminded her of when her brothers knocked as hard as they could on the stainless steel refrigerator at their old house. A muffled voice came through, as well, though Aiko couldn’t place it.

“What is it *now*?” Demanded Satou, returning the chopsticks to the tray. She walked silently over to the door, which Aiko hadn’t realized was one at first—it resembled a bank vault more than any kind one might expect to see at a middle school.

Satou flung the door open, prepared to scold whoever it was that had come knocking.

“Take this!” called Tanima-senpai’s familiar, gruff voice as her fist collided with Satou’s face, full-force. The brunette reeled, crashing into the monitors and scattering their light in all directions. Tanima, dressed in her running gear, jogged over to her friends.

“Are you two okay?!” she cried, struggling against Aiko’s restraints. Aiko had never seen such a desperate look on her face. “What did she do to you?”

“Nothing yet, I think,” Aiko managed.

“The tray! There’s a knife on it,” Ebihara shouted. “Hurry, before she gets up!”

Tanima scrambled for the knife. Aiko could see Satou had fallen to the ground, bathed in the blue light from the monitors. She struggled to right herself, pushing against the concrete floor with her palms. There was a faint squelching sound along with her pained groans. “There!” said Tanima. As soon as she did, Aiko felt her hands fall free from their restraints. Her arms ached from being raised up for however many hours she’d been down here, and her wrists were raw.

While Tanima worked to free Ebihara, Aiko picked up the heaviest-looking object she thought she could carry (one of the computers, which she hastily ripped the plugs out of), ran it over to Satou, who was starting to rise, and slammed it on the back of her head. The brunette shrieked, a sound Aiko expected to enjoy but which instead bore an inhumanity that filled her with terror.

“Let’s go!” Tanima grabbed Aiko by the elbow and pulled her thoughts back to the most important thing—escape. She nodded, and started running as fast as she could. The three of them charged through the still-open door onto the platform from the video; atop it lay a single hooded figure, apparently unconscious.

Normally, she did not count herself among the athletic. She got tired quickly, and on a hot night like tonight she would much rather curl up next to an electric fan and read a book than go for a jog. However, a primal energy compelled her, as if an ancestral

memory of fleeing a deadly predator was the very force moving her legs into the night.

There was a prodigious crash behind them, and Aiko dared not look over her shoulder to see the source. It sounded like a piece of steak and a pewter paperweight had been dropped together into a food processor, filling the air with a sickening, fleshy crunch.

“Get...back...here...!” shouted a voice that was far too deep and raspy to be Satou’s, yet was unmistakably hers. The metallic sounds had stopped at this point, and those which rapidly approached could only be described as the din of a raging river filled with so much starch that it was viscous. Aiko was sure that looking back would be a tremendous mistake.

As if to confirm her suspicions, Tanima peeked over her own shoulder. Her eyes went as wide as dinner plates, and the fear that overtook her mind was so palpable it frightened Aiko by proxy. Had she been of a weaker constitution, or perhaps if she wasn’t moving on pure adrenaline, she might have fallen to her knees right there. Instead, she faced forward and cried, “Don’t look back! Just run!”

The most obvious path to take was through the school’s main classroom building—any detours might slow them down too much to get away, and it was possible that the doorway was too narrow for whatever Satou had become to pursue them through. The double doors were held ajar by rubber stops, presumably set up by Tanima to aid in their escape.

“Quick! Inside!” Tanima pointed to them now, and to the fluorescent light that leaked out of the doorway and into the night. Aiko had never been so happy to see that building as she was now. The three flew through the doorway as quick as they could, their breathing haggard as if they’d run a full marathon. Aiko and Ebihara’s states of dress didn’t help matters—these were decidedly *not* garments for sprinting, and Aiko’s chafing thighs burned like they’d been lit on fire.

Tanima kicked one of the stops out of the way so the door shut behind them. As they hoped, Satou’s pursuit stopped at the

doorway, but that didn't slow them down until they made more space.

"Wait! Please, I have to catch my breath!" Ebihara shouted. She had been working even harder than Aiko to keep up with Tanima, and was now stopped in the hallway with her hands on her knees, wheezing. Aiko took the chance to slow down a little, too; her chest burned as much as her legs did, and her bare feet cursed her for every pebble trod upon in the courtyard.

"We don't have time! She might try and beat us to the gate, and then we'll be boxed in. Come on!" Tanima urged, jogging in place while the other two tried to swallow as much air as they could.

"Who might try and beat you to the gate," asked a familiar, man's voice.

"Marunouchi-sensei!" Aiko wasn't sure what he was doing here so late, but was glad to see him anyway. "Quick! We need to run!"

"Hold on a second," he demanded, cutting through the atmosphere like only an adult who doesn't fully understand the situation could. "What the hell is going on?" He was panting, as if he'd been running as well. "What was that noise outside, and who are these people?" He pointed to a pair of hooded figures sprawled out on the floor of the corridor he'd just exited. "They attacked me."

"We can explain later!" She grabbed him by the wrist, despite the futility of trying to move the massive man with her meager strength. "If you don't leave with us, it might get really bad!"

"I'm not going anywhere until you explain what's—"

"Akiba! Ebihara! Tanima! Get back here!" bellowed the inhuman voice of the monster that had taken the guise of Satou. There was another metallic sound—this time, several snaps, then a distant slam. Something had been torn out of something else's path.

"What the hell was *that*?" asked Marunouchi, looking down the hall.

"It's why we're leaving, sensei!" Aiko tried vainly to pull him again, grabbing his hand.

"We don't have time for this. Come on, Rumi!" Ebihara nodded, and she and Tanima began to run down the hall again.

"Please, sensei, we have to hurry!" Aiko did her best to look at Marunouchi imploringly, though she was sure that the anxiety shone through on her face and made it look like she was trying to get out of a punishment for whatever uncouth activity he thought she was getting up to in her underwear. She pulled at his arm and tried to yank him forward.

Thankfully, he wasn't a stupid enough man to try and scold someone in this situation after hearing those sounds come from the exit. "Alright, we'll talk at the gate. Let's go!"

She went to start running, but to her surprise sensei scooped her up and carried her for the second time today. Unlike earlier, though, he simply slung her over his shoulder and started sprinting at full speed, his arm wrapped around her bare back.

Aiko's first instinct was to complain, but when she looked up she saw just how much they'd been delayed—Satou was practically staring at her face-to-face. From the neck to the waist, she was essentially Satou—though her skin had become the same sickly purple shade that it had when the cultists poured that strange liquid on her in the video. Like then she was nude, and drenched in slime.

Where her legs should have been, however, was a tremendous mass of mottled, dark-purple flesh that crawled with black varicose veins which visibly pumped what must have been her blood. It moved unlike anything Aiko had seen—tentacles burst from the school floor and grabbed the main body, yanking it forward along its path. Aiko worried that some might sprout in front of Marunouchi and trip him up, or worse.

"You belong to us!" cried the monster as it lurched forward, reaching one of its 'human' arms forward to swipe at Aiko. She narrowly missed, but some of the ichor splashed onto Aiko's face. She wiped it off frantically, but only then did she realize just how

foul the *smell* that emanated off of Satou had been. The pungent sweetness made her gag, coughing violently.

"Hurry, sensei!" called Tanima, who must have come back after helping Ebihara escape. Marunouchi picked up the pace, sprinting as hard as he could.

He cleared the threshold, and they were back in the dark—Satou burst out and destroyed the metal door frame in her wake. Splinters flew in all directions; Aiko covered her face with her forearms to protect it and felt some pierce her skin.

Then there was a wet, slurping sound. "Shit!" Marunouchi shouted before stumbling forward and dropping Aiko onto the grass. She rolled, and in the unusually bright moonlight she could barely see the tentacle slither back underground after tripping him. She saw him scramble to his feet and reach his hand out to her. Just as Aiko took it, she felt two clammy hands grab her ankles.

"She's *ours*!" All Aiko could do was scream in agony; she felt like she was going to be pulled in two. Tanima and Ebihara ran over to help sensei free her from Satou's unbreakable grip.

"Let her go!" strained Tanima, pulling as hard as she could. Ebihara's face was contorted from the effort she was making to save Aiko, who could feel her friends' grips slipping. They tried to grab at her wrists, then her elbows, but every adjustment they made only seemed to give Satou the chance to tighten her own grip and pull her back toward the school.

Just before she slipped from their fingers, over her own cries of pain, Aiko heard a sharp crack, then a bloodcurdling, wet scream. She flopped onto the grass with a soft thud.

"Run!" Aiko didn't recognize the voice from past the gate that commanded her, but she didn't need to be reminded. With her friends' help she managed to get to her feet and limp-run out of the school gate. Just after she cleared it, the gate swung shut behind her.

The bright light from before—that which she mistook for the moon—shone onto Satou's grotesque form from the safe side of the exit. Aiko looked toward its source and saw a girl in a

school uniform she didn't recognize holding a smartphone. She looked intently at the screen; Aiko realized that she must have been recording this. At her feet were two more figures in cloaks, but whose hoods were removed—Sakaki-sensei and Tachibana-sensei. They were bound and gagged.

"Fukuda-senpai? What are *you* doing here?" asked Tanima, who braced herself to break off into another run as soon as she had to. Satou's body sat in a lifeless heap on the grass—her head was leaking a viscous ooze that shimmered in the light of the phone's flashlight.

"Saving you, it looks like," she replied; Aiko saw her slip something metallic into her skirt's waistband, part of it sticking out in front of her tucked-in blouse.

"But how did you know to—"

"Akiba's babysitter was worried that she hadn't come home yet. I knew she went to this school and she was asking around about the cult, so I thought something bad might have happened. Looks like I was right, as usual." She walked a little closer to the gate, tucking a lock of her pink hair behind her ear while she filmed—actually, when Aiko saw the screen, she realized that Fukuda was streaming the chaos on OurTube.

"Is it over?" panted Ebihara, clearly eager to stop fleeing.

"Don't bet on it." Fukuda zoomed in on Satou; Aiko realized that the only sound besides their pained wheezing in the night air was a quiet cracking, as if a broken bone was healing rapidly.

Marunouchi-sensei approached the gate, wide-eyed. "What the hell is that thing?"

"Your student council president," said Fukuda. "I *tried* to warn you, sensei."

Before he could get in a retort, Satou sprang to life. She slithered up to the school gate like a bus driving down the freeway, but stopped short just before crashing into it.

"Fukuda?!" she growled, her 'human' voice now nearly completely gone. Her jawbone hung on a single hinge; the other was detached, and tendons slithered out to try and re-establish the connection. Every time Satou moved her head they would loose

their grip and be forced to start over. Aiko had to concentrate hard not to vomit.

"That's right, president," spat the older girl. "Thought you were rid of me for good?" Satou glared daggers through what were now completely yellow eyes—sclera and all, like a snake's. "I finally get to show the world," continued Fukuda, "the monster I always knew you were."

The stream chat buzzed with conversation.

"Scary!"

"Is this real?"

"It's an ARG, right?"

"There's no way this is fake"

"Show the green-haired girl again!"

"I heard rumors about that school"

"My sister almost went there...crazy"

"www fake"

"She's disgusting"

"You don't get fanservice like this these days!"

The messages flew by in a whirlwind, too fast for Aiko to keep up with in her delirious state. People generally seemed to believe what they were seeing, which gave Aiko a small sense of relief.

Satou, on the other hand, panicked. "Turn that off! Lies don't suit an alumnus of our school!"

"Why don't you come out here and stop me, freak?" Fukuda taunted. "Can't leave?"

"..yeah! Why don't you come out?" asked Aiko.

Satou cursed, slamming against gates that refused to budge for her. It was like she was trapped there, bound against her will to the campus grounds. "Fine! Show the world—no one will believe it! Do you think that's going to be enough to stop what's coming?"

"I know it will," said Fukuda. "But just in case, I'll make sure you don't get the chance to prove me wrong." She reached back into her waistband and brandished what Aiko realized was a firearm. It was chrome plated, and shone in the flashlight's bright white light.

"Fukuda, wait!" called Marunouchi, reaching forward too slowly to stop her. She unloaded seven rounds into Satou, eliciting sickening splatters and shrieks from the monster with each hit. Black blood painted the sidewalk in front of the gate with a squelch. At least, that was what Aiko thought it must have sounded like—all she could hear was a high-pitched ring.

The monster reeled with each successful hit before it slumped forward. Marunouchi snatched the empty weapon from Fukuda, screaming something Aiko couldn't quite make out at her. In fact, her vision was going blurry, too...

* * *

When Aiko awoke, she was faced with fluorescent lights overhead. Fearing that she'd been captured by Satou or her goons and forced back into the school, she jumped up with a fright. Where she expected to meet restraints there were none, however; instead, she was faced with Tanima, Ebihara, and Marunouchi-sensei, each of which sat in uncomfortable-looking chairs at her side. She looked down and saw that she was in a hospital bed.

"Oh, you're back," said her teacher, who stood and approached her. "I was starting to worry you might not wake up again at all."

"Sensei? Why am I here?" She propped herself up with her arms—a task more difficult than it should have been; on closer inspection, it was bandaged. "What happened at the school?"

"You passed out after Fukuda shot Satou. The cops showed up, and they called you an ambulance since you were unresponsive. It's only been a couple hours."

"My brothers...where are they?"

He smiled. "The babysitter decided to stay the night with them after I talked to her."

"Good..." she forced herself to turn in the bed so she could more easily sit upright, with her feet dangling over the edge. "And Fukuda-senpai? Where is she?"

He sighed; his face was full of consternation. "They arrested her. She wouldn't say where she got the gun, or why, or what she shot, so they took her in. They also arrested Sakaki and Tachibana, since I insisted they attacked. I already called her parents and tried to explain it to them. I'm hoping to put in a word with the police, but it's hard to defend smuggling a gun into the country."

Aiko looked down. "Well...it was for good, right? Maybe we can—"

"I think the best we can hope for is juvenile reformation or something, if we *really* push the idea that Satou and the teachers were stalking and threatening her and she felt she had no choice in the matter. Her parents will probably catch hell, too, for letting it happen on their watch."

"What happened to Satou, anyway?"

"Huh? Oh." He nodded. "She melted into the ground. I couldn't believe it—first the flesh, then the bones disappeared into the dirt. None of us dared to open the gate to check on it, either. I *hope* that means that monster is gone for good. Fukuda said she was bound to those grounds, somehow, but we didn't get time to get many details before she got loaded into the squad car."

"Are Tanimi and Ebihara okay?" She pointed to the girls, who must have gone home to change their clothes before coming to visit Aiko. They were leaning against each other, sleeping quietly.

"Yeah. Just tired." He turned back to Aiko. "How about *you*? How are you feeling?"

"Confused. Overwhelmed. Tired. I think I should transfer schools."

Sensei raised an eyebrow, then cracked a smile. "I was thinking of doing the same thing."

Epilogue

What followed her brief stay in the hospital was a whirlwind. The school was closed off as the scene of a serious crime, and while the police collected evidence and interviewed students the curriculum was converted into an online classroom (an effort spearheaded by Marunouchi, who seemed to be the only teacher that had his wits about him in the wake of Satou's disappearance).

Aiko returned home to her father and brothers, who were none the wiser about her involvement thanks to dad's tech illiteracy and Yoshino's aptitude for keeping secrets. She insisted that Aiko 'owed her one,' but never took her up on it. She was able to convince her dad to transfer her to a school that she could commute to by train because of the 'inferior quality of an online-only education.'

Tanima and Ebihara decided to wait it out until graduation. Transferring schools at such a late stage was unrealistic, so they focused instead on trying to get into the right high school—one they were *sure* wasn't operated by a cult. The two of them had a lot of free time during the day, so they would often visit Aiko's station to walk her home from school. The three grew to be such close friends that Aiko eventually enrolled in the same high school they did.

Fukuda's live stream went viral in a big way, and her arrest lent credence to the reality of the video (though some insisted that the whole thing was marketing or a hoax). Thanks to everyone's insistence on Satou's malicious nature, as well as her age and, most critically, a confession of harassment from the arrested teachers (after an initial refusal to speak which was likely compelled by the brainwashing they'd undergone), she received a relatively lenient punishment and was able to graduate high

school on time. The police did not openly believe the cult story to be real, though the responding officers that saw Satou in the flesh vouched for its authenticity.

Kamiagari Middle School remained closed after the incident. In time, the effects of Satou's brainwashing wore off on the teachers and other students, though they were mostly unaware that they had ever been under her influence. The alumni, similarly, were eventually cured. The school shut its doors entirely due to difficulty in enrolling new students after the bad publicity after a few years of online classes. Students who saw the video and believed it refused to go; parents of those who didn't were scared off by the threat of gun violence on the premises. The teachers managed to find jobs elsewhere; by pure coincidence, Marunouchi ended up working at Aiko's high school. She never managed to work up the courage to confess her feelings to him.

Thus, eventually, the once-beautiful campus was left derelict and in disrepair. The buildings still stood, abandoned, for a long time. Two young boys with blue hair peeked through the rusty iron bars of the school gate.

"Do you think it's really haunted, Shouta?"

"Of course it is, Youta." The older twin looked for a way to climb inside.

"Then I don't think we should go in..." muttered the younger. "Besides, what if someone sees?"

"No one's watching," Shouta insisted, finding a foothold in the fence. "Come on. Aneki went here for a while, right? It can't be that bad. Besides, it was *your* idea."

"Well..." Youta started climbing. The truth was, he just had to be talked into doing what he already wanted to do anyway, but which a little voice in his mind suggested was a bad idea. Other such bad ideas included, "wake dad up with a water balloon," and "steal Aneki's big friend's underwear." That last one was a particularly fond memory...

As his sneakers landed softly on the grass inside the school campus, Youta came back to the present. His brother urged him

forward, and in a moment the two seven year olds were staring up at the school's classroom building.

"It stinks." Shouta held his nose shut, fanning in front of his face.

"Come on," Youta started. "Let's go in." It was his turn to lead the way, and he was the first in years to cross the threshold into the classroom building. As soon as he did, he heard a noise inside.

"Nevermind. Let's go back."

"No way! It's probably a bird or something. Don't be a chicken." Shouta marched forward, then stopped in his tracks. He was staring at something down the hallway.

"What? What is it?" Youta had forgotten his glasses and couldn't see—it was so dark, he couldn't even make out a figure.

"Welcome," said an unfamiliar girl's voice. "To Kamiagari Middle School. To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"It's a ghost! Run!" Shouta turned on his heel and bolted as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Huh? Wait, what?!" Youta started running before he even realized he needed to.

"Not so fast!" said the ghost; Youta felt something snatch him by the collar and screamed.

"Youta!" Shouta shouted, looking over his shoulder before grinding to a halt with his heels. "Let him go!" He charged back toward Youta, who was dragged forcefully toward the school.

"Yes, yes, come on in..." the voice beckoned.

Just before Shouta reached them, a massive figure ran in from outside Youta's peripheral vision and snatched him up.

"Bro!" Youta reached forward vainly. Tears formed in his eyes. "Don't hurt him! It was me!"

"It's too late, now...you're going to make a nice meal, Akiba-kun..." said the voice, whispering in his ear.

"No! Please, don't!"

"No? But you came all the way here to this haunted school...even though your big sister warned you not to..."

"Please, I beg—" he paused. "Huh?!"

When he looked over his shoulder, he saw the face of a perfectly ordinary woman. She had pink hair and matching eyes, and she sported the biggest grin he'd ever seen. Her clothes were the only thing weird about her—she was dressed in an outfit that made her look like a walking bush.

He heard giggling from behind her, then. When he peeked around her face, he saw Aneki and her tan friend, Hinata, holding their stomachs, trying not to laugh out loud, then laughing harder than he'd ever seen them laugh, falling to the grass. He looked where Shouta had been taken; he looked about as pissed off as Youta was beginning to feel. Aiko's other friend, Rumi, was holding him upside-down by the ankles.

"Gotcha!" Aiko managed, finally catching her breath. "I hope the video turns out."

"It will," called the familiar voice of their old babysitter, Yoshi. She appeared from around a corner, holding her smartphone and flashing a peace sign. "You-chan's face was priceless!"

"That's not funny, Aneki!" Youta wrestled himself free from the pink-haired girl's grip. "I thought you said this place was haunted!"

"It is! That's why I warned you. I could tell from the look on your face that you were going to test it for yourselves, though." She wiped a mirthful tear from her eye. "You two always have to learn the hard way. Now, let's go home. No more messing around in here."

"Let me down, Rumi!" Shouta pulled his shirt up to hide his stomach.

"No way!" she said, carrying him along as they made for the gate. "This is revenge for the stolen panties! I liked that pair!"

"Yeah! I did, too!" Blurted Hinata. Then she blushed and covered her mouth like she said something she shouldn't have. "Anyway...Youta, I'll race you to the gate!"

The two ran off, Youta already forgetting how mad he was about getting pranked. The rest of the group followed in short order, climbing the fence and leaving the school behind once and for all.

Aiko looked back through the gate one last time, sure she saw a pair of yellow eyes looking down on them from one of the windows.

Afterword

Thank you for reading my story. I hope it was fun. Originally, I intended to write a much more relaxed, ‘slice-of-life’ story about the three girls you see here having summoned a Lovecraftian entity and treating it like the fourth, totally normal member of their school’s club. They were going to defend it from accusations of monster status and insist it was cute. That idea didn’t have much in the way of legs, so I scrapped it, but “cult in a school” sounded pretty fun so I stuck with that.

At one point, the girls were going to rationalize all the cultish behavior as ‘what school is like in this town, I guess,’ and live otherwise normal lives without really questioning what was going on. This is probably the most realistic approach, but when I started writing Aiko it quickly became apparent that she wasn’t the kind of person who would just go along with some of the things I was planning to implement, like a crazed ritual summoning or some other such extreme behavior.

So I ended up landing on a much more serious story than I originally intended to write. It’s funny how much more difficult comedies are to write than dramas—it goes to show that just because something seems simple, doesn’t mean it is, and in fact the creative process for simple, joyful things can be much more taxing than writing a dark story with a mostly happy ending.

This time, I wanted to include a decent amount of fan service. I hope I didn’t go too far overboard with it, but I really like stories that feature nudity or near-nudity without it being explicit. I also included a more subtle romance than in my previous efforts—I tried to keep Hinata and Rumi’s (Tanima and Ebihara, as Aiko’s narration refers to them almost exclusively—is that kind of thing annoying, or does it make sense for her to ‘think’ of them as she would speak to them?) relationship a background

element. I didn't expect that to happen at all, and originally it was Rumi who had a thing for sensei, but the development came naturally as I worked on the characters. Aiko inherited the crush on sensei, and I think that worked much better given his nature as a 'prince charming,' though I probably could have weaved it in more elegantly. I also wonder if I should have had them get together after she graduated high school, but I didn't think

I could say that (about weaving things in more elegantly, I mean) about a lot of elements in this story, to be frank. For example, the cult figures at the end, during the chase sequence, were a bit random. I wanted to give the sense that the school was devolving into chaos, but I also didn't want to drag out the chase; aren't they supposed to be quick, after all? As a result, though, the handful of hooded goons that appear have already been disposed of and pose no real threat. At least the monster is intimidating enough.

I'm sure a lot of people are wondering about why Fukuda has a gun. The simple answer is that it's cool, right? But really, I tried to portray her as deeply paranoid, and I think that kind of person would go to such extreme lengths in this situation (think of the kind of people who set up shotgun doors in their homes—I don't think 'owning a gun' is necessarily crazy, but 'bringing it to your old school in case the president is trying to kill someone' probably is. In this case, of course, crazy was right). I don't know what the process of smuggling a weapon into a country that doesn't allow them is like, but I don't think that's that important. In a way, she's the 'main character' of the cult story at large, while Aiko is the protagonist.

I wish I'd used Yoshi more since I find her quite cute and fun, but she filled her role nicely and if I put her anywhere else she wouldn't have fit. I also wish Dad got a larger role, but in the end he's simply a good man who is struggling to keep his family afloat without his late wife and working as hard as he can to that end. There isn't much more for him to do unless he gets involved directly, which I didn't want.

I wondered about a bad ending for a long while, but I decided

to give Aiko the fairy-tale end she always wanted. Perhaps in a few more decades the school will reopen and the monster will try its hand again, but it isn't something Aiko will need to fret about for now. She can relax with her prince charming, whenever she finds him.

As for Satou—I chose that name because it's the most common in Japan, with the idea being that the monster would want to have a veneer of plausible deniability in case someone got suspicious of her repeated installation as council president (say, someone less bright than Fukuda or Aiko might have bought that excuse). She's meant to represent the ethos of the population at large, which is why she never (unless I missed one) uses a singular personal pronoun. The idea is that she (it?) attempts to corral everyone into a single state of mind, which is obedience. Maybe that came across, or perhaps she just seems like a crazy cunt. If that was your impression, that's also correct. As for her plan, it boils down to the same result—compelled obedience and subservience. She isn't a very deep villain, but then again, the average person isn't either.

Anyway, I'm sure you were able to guess most of that. I don't think the story was terribly subtle about its themes. I do wish I'd developed Aiko more as a character, but I tried to convey a sense of 'wanting to belong and fit in' changing into 'wanting to belong with specific people, who she cares about' over time. I'm not sure if I managed, but if not, at least she got naked.

I think that's enough for now. Thanks again for reading, sincerely.

– Anonymous