

Kazuki Amamiya

ill. Gin

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START?

► Yes No

4

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+



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Prologue: My Hero

The first time I saw him during our school's entrance ceremony, I thought he looked cool. He was tall and slender—the Ryomei uniform fit him well. He had a handsome face, and his styled hair gave a pleasant impression. Above all, I was drawn to his strikingly calm demeanor.

It turned out we were in the same class, and somehow we ended up in the same friend group as well. Honestly... He turned out to be different than I'd expected. There was a jarring difference between the times when he was calm and when he was being shifty, and his poser act was kind of irritating. I also didn't like how he kept approaching me, and only me, aggressively.

He probably has a crush on me, I thought at some point, but I didn't mind, so I treated him like everyone else. Gradually, my opinion of him changed. *He looks like he can do anything, but maybe he's actually a clumsy person*. At that realization, I became more curious about him.

I was the school idol (in my self-imposed scenario), so I had no intention of getting a special someone. Still, I figured we could get close, but not so close that he'd confess to me. We chatted over RINE and then suddenly started talking over the phone... Over time, I naturally wanted to learn more about him.

It's not love; it's just curiosity. It's intriguing how he's good at studying and sports, and he's got all sorts of hobbies, like cooking and singing. He can do all of that perfectly, and yet it's odd how he's awkward, thickheaded, and has low self-esteem.

Such suspicions were already going through my head, so when I saw him quarrel with Tatsuya on the roof, I wasn't surprised. A sense of understanding washed over me instead.

His everyday behavior was a mask. In order to hide that he had changed himself during his high school debut, he had strained himself more than necessary. After we all found out he'd been putting up a front, Natsuki-kun became more relaxed around us. He wasn't completely his natural self, but he

became easier to approach. It was also a teeny bit cute how hard he'd worked to transform himself. From then on, I began to talk to him more.

Natsuki-kun seemed to enjoy listening to me ramble about novels, and he would even read my recommendations. I liked how he understood what I liked and that we shared the same taste in books. I was happy that I sympathized with what he would say, often piping up with, "I get what you mean!"

When Natsuki-kun invited me to the movies, I acted like I was hesitant to go on a date, and he quickly added that Miori-chan and Reita-kun were invited as well, as though he'd prepared the excuse. He must've cooked up a plan before asking me out. For a moment, his zeal made me waver, but Uta-chan flashed through my head. She had never stated it, but anyone could tell that she was in love with Natsuki-kun. I doubted she'd be pleased if he and I became closer.

I liked Uta-chan. When I was with her, her endless cheer always brightened up my day. It gave even a fake like me the energy to keep going on. *I want to be friends with her forever. There's a chance that romance could ruin our friendship, so I have to reject Natsuki-kun's feelings.*

Logically, I understood what I needed to do. But even with that understanding, as the day of our double date approached, a part of me felt excited. I was indecisive about what to wear, checking my outfit in the mirror multiple times, and before I knew it, I couldn't deny that I was attracted to Natsuki-kun. But I still tried to suppress my feelings.

I distanced myself from him and devoted my time and energy to supporting Uta-chan when she was feeling down. I pretended not to notice the complicated emotions that had taken root inside of me. From a distance, I watched Natsuki-kun and Uta-chan get closer and closer. When I found out that they had gone to the Tanabata festival, just the two of them, one weekend in early July...I was shocked. A part of me was shaken. Somewhere in my heart, I had thought they wouldn't get *that* close. I had thought Natsuki-kun would only have eyes for me forever. I'd be lying if I said that I hadn't assumed he would reject Uta-chan.

I'm the worst. A terrible part of me felt a sense of superiority towards Uta-chan. But she's obviously cute in anyone's eyes. Any boy would be drawn to such

an adorable girl blatantly displaying her affections for him.

The cold, hard truth finally hit me. I had been too slow to realize it. The mood between Natsuki-kun and Uta-chan practically made everyone want to scream, *"Hurry up and date already!"* At the time, I felt dejected, but also relieved. Things would be settled peacefully, and I wouldn't need to fret about what to do any longer. *This is the perfect opportunity to give up on him,* I tried to tell myself. Yes, my affections had grown enough that I actually had to tell myself to let go. I tucked those feelings away, determined to support the two of them.

But then, one summer day, I reached out to Natsuki-kun for help when I was brooding about my family issues.

I had chosen to depend on him. Using the fact that I'd forgotten to pay for my bill at the café as an excuse to see him, in my weakness, I relied on Natsuki-kun. I knew if I did, someone as kind as him would help me. To my shame, I was so caught up in my own problems that I didn't have the presence of mind to think about other things. Looking back, sleeping over at Natsuki-kun's home was a crazy decision. And once my relationship with my father was smoothed out, I knew that my feelings for Natsuki-kun had grown so much that I couldn't keep them in check any longer. On the day of our beach trip, my eyes kept unconsciously following him, which was very embarrassing for me.

Hoshimiya Hikari was in love with Haibara Natsuki. I was forced to admit it. He was my first love.

I want to spend time with him. I want to date him. I want him to hug me. The more such thoughts filled my mind, the heavier my heart became...because I was not the only one who loved Natsuki-kun.

Uta-chan was very observant of her surroundings. She'd likely realized that my feelings towards Natsuki-kun had changed.

Still, I declared to Natsuki-kun, *"I've made up my mind. I won't lose to Uta-chan,"* because I'd decided that I would no longer lie about how I felt. *I need to resolve myself so I can talk to Uta-chan.*

Chapter 1: A Sham

Our fun summer vacation ended, and the second semester of school began.

The summer heat stuck around, but it wasn't hot enough to decisively turn on the air conditioner, which was actually much worse than scorching weather. The teachers compelled us to get by with only electric fans.

I fanned my face with my notebook as I watched my classmates melting in the heat. Eventually, the world history teacher noticed our misery and turned on the air conditioner. "Sorry, guys. It's quite hot today."

Yes! Our pleas that it's too hot worked! Ah, the cool AC breeze feels so nice. Loudly flapping my notebook paid off. Pleased with the result of my efforts, I glanced at Uta, who sat diagonally in front of me. She stealthily sent me a thumbs-up. Through much trial and error, she had quietly grumbled, "It's hot," and the like to contribute to the plan. *Our cooperation has triumphed!*

The sound of chalk scratching across the blackboard echoed throughout the room. Our meticulous world history teacher wrote his explanations on the board in a well-organized fashion, and we copied them into our notes. This teacher usually put the lesson material on the board first and then spent the remainder of the time elaborating on the main points.

I was silently moving my mechanical pencil across the paper when I suddenly felt someone tapping my shoulder. From the seat next to me, Hoshimiya looked at me apologetically, pressing her hands together. "Sorry, can I borrow your eraser?" she whispered.

I handed her my eraser and watched her vigorously rub at her notebook with it while I brimmed with euphoria in secret. The change in semesters had come with a change in our seating order. As a result, I had secured the godlike window seat second from the back, and to top it off, Hoshimiya Hikari sat next to me.

On the downside, we were pretty far from the others. Uta was two seats

diagonally ahead, while Tatsuya and Reita were in the center column. Nanase was on the opposite side of the room by the hallway. Even so, I had no complaints since Hoshimiya was next to me.

Such thoughts flew through my head as I gazed absentmindedly at her profile. Perhaps feeling my stare, she raised her head and locked eyes with me. She blinked a few times and then flushed scarlet.

She's so cute! But the moment I thought that, she glowered at me in displeasure. *What's that for?* I cocked my head in clear confusion. In response, she pouted and tickled my side. *Hello, what's going through your head?! I nearly let out a creepy squeal in the middle of our quiet classroom!*

"Thanks," Hoshimiya whispered, returning my eraser.

So... In the end, what was she feeling during all that? Perplexed, I returned my attention to the blackboard. The world history teacher was outright staring at us, exasperation tinging his eyes. I hastily straightened my back.

After that, I diligently paid attention to class, and before long, the bell rang. World history was actually quite an enjoyable subject because it felt like I was listening to a grand and long novel.

While I stretched, loosening up my stiff body, I noticed Hoshimiya peering at me. "What's up?" I asked.

She blinked at me. "Nothing in particular."

"Why'd you tickle me during class, anyway?"

"Because," she said, trailing off for a moment. "You were staring at me." She turned away, but I could see she was red up to her ears.

She's obviously embarrassed. I feel like Hoshimiya's reactions are... How do I put it? She's been really easy to understand recently.

Her declaration on the day of the beach came to mind. *"Someday, on the night of a full moon..."*

Normally I would've admonished myself for being overly self-conscious, but now that I understood how she felt about me, I knew it was not a misunderstanding. And Hoshimiya seemed to have no intention of hiding her

affections either.

“Classes are finally over,” she said.

“I know, right? I feel like I’m finally getting out of summer break mode,” I said.

“Whaaat? I’m still clinging to the summer vibes. I want to be on vacation forever.”

“Well, same here.”

After a beat she said, “The trip was fun. I want to go again.”

“Yeah. Winter break is next. Why don’t we go skiing or to a hot spring?”

“Oooh! Skiing sounds super fun! But... I might just fall and come out seriously injured.”

“N-Nah. It’ll be fine. I can teach you a bit. Wait, sorry, never mind. That might be impossible.”

“Hey! Don’t give up so fast!” she exclaimed, offended.

After witnessing Hoshimiya’s athletic abilities at the Spor-Cha, it would have been too careless of me to promise that all would be fine. I had skied occasionally during my college days pre-time leap, but I wasn’t good enough to teach her.

“Natsuki-kun, what are you doing today?” she asked, changing the subject.

“After school? I have work today.”

“Th-Then... Wanna walk to the café together?” she said, sounding a little nervous.

I involuntarily froze up for a moment. “Well, we’re short on hands today, so as soon as school ends, I’m going to rush over there.”

“Oh, I see. Can’t be helped, then. Don’t worry about it.” Hoshimiya laughed, forcing a smile.

An awkward silence stretched between us. *I’m not technically lying... The owner told me he wanted me to hurry over there today.* However, he had also told me to prioritize school, and chatting with Hoshimiya as we walked until I got there would have been fine. All things considered, I had simply declined her

invitation.

I loved Hoshimiya, and yet I'd turned her down. Why on earth had I done that? I still hadn't straightened out my feelings, so I was somewhat scared of being alone with her. But Hoshimiya, and Uta for that matter, kept proactively inviting me to do things. And each time they did, I came up with some reason to avoid being alone with them. I wasn't thinking much whenever it happened; it was more of a reflexive response.

I was honestly thrilled to know that two cute girls were into me. I really was thrilled, but at the same time, I was terrified for some reason. A jumble of contradictory emotions swirled around inside my heart.

I sighed. It was lunch break, and I was sitting on the desolate stairs behind the school building. It was dark, damp, and completely silent there. Places like this put me at ease.

Correct, this was a spot where I'd often eaten lunch alone during my first round of high school. I hadn't come here since my do-over, but today my feet had brought me here on their own. As I munched on the bread I'd bought from the school store, I heard footsteps nearing, so I turned my eyes in that direction.

"Hmm? Natsuki, what're you doing back here?" Serika asked, puzzled.

"As you can see, I'm eating," I replied.

"In a place like this?"

"There are times when I want to be alone, you know?" Though I'd said that, frankly, I didn't want anyone I knew to see me here.

She hummed uninterestedly, staring at the nearby trees.

"Anyway, why are you here, Serika?"

"I was wondering if there were any rhinoceros beetles around."

"Huh?" *What the hell is this girl saying?* "Why rhinoceros beetles?"

"There's usually a lot crawling on the trees behind the school."

"No, that's not what I meant. Why are you searching for them?"

“Finding them is amusing.”

I... I can't! I can't make heads or tails of this conversation! Serika and I had gotten closer lately, but I still didn't understand how she thought.

“But their numbers have dwindled since September started. You can't see 'em at a quick glance anymore.” She paced around the trees, her brows scrunched up into a hard look. After three minutes of that, she seemed to lose interest and sat down next to me.

“Um... It's pretty cramped here,” I said. We were on exterior stairs wide enough for one person to walk on, so our legs and hips were squished together.

Serika shot me a blank look and then chuckled. “Can I sit on the step behind you?”

Cheeks stuffed with bread, I nodded at her. She went up one step and sat behind me, her legs sandwiching me. Serika's beautiful, slender legs were on my left and right.

Oho? I nodded without thinking, but this is... Um, wait, if I turn around, will I see her underwear? Out of all the girls in school, Serika wears her skirt shorter than the rest... No, dude, stop. Cool it. Don't think about irrelevant things. I emptied my mind of all emotions and continued eating my bread.

She patted my head. “Oh, you put stuff in your hair,” she remarked.



“Yeah, just a bit... So don’t touch it too much.” Every morning, I styled my hair in front of the mirror as I hummed in approval. It was a delicate process to touch it up properly. However, Serika ignored my request and ruffled my hair.
Hey! Quit it!

“Did something happen?” she asked in a detached tone.

“No... Not particularly,” I replied.

“You wouldn’t come here unless something happened. Same goes for me.”

She had seen right through me; I had no rebuttal. “Serika... Are you worried about something?”

“How can I not be worried about something? Are you making fun of me?” She gazed up at the sky. She looked like she might break out into tears at any moment.

“You just seem like you can do anything, easy-peasy.”

“No way. There are tons of things I struggle with. I mean, just yesterday...” She stopped herself with a shake of her head.

Serika always moves at her own pace, but looks like even she has her fair share of troubles. I guess she just doesn’t show it on her face much.

“What about you?” she asked.

“If I had to say... I’m sick of how uncertain I am all the time.” Putting how I felt into words gave me a sense of understanding. The murky storm of feelings in my chest had finally been defined.

“About Uta and Hikari-chan?”

“What the heck?” I said. “You saw right through me.”

“It was easy to tell from watching you during the beach trip. Also, I’ve heard stuff from Miori. So what’s going on?”

After a beat, I admitted, “Honestly, I’m not sure what to do.”

“Indecision, I see. The problems of a popular guy.”

I knew my worry was a luxurious one to have. I’d wanted to be popular with

girls, so I worked hard to improve myself. That was why, in a way, my current situation was exactly what I had wished for.

But I hadn't understood what it meant to be the target of multiple people's affections. After all, I had never been liked by any girls before now. I'd thought love would be exactly as it was depicted in anime and manga, but this was reality. I couldn't keep being wishy-washy forever.

Now that both girls had made their feelings clear, I needed to respond—I needed to choose one and turn down the other. When I imagined doing that, my mood darkened. I liked both of them, so I didn't want to see either one sad.

"Well, I get it. It's rough when someone likes you but you don't feel the same way," Serika murmured in a lonely tone. She'd likely experienced this herself. She was attractive and easygoing around everyone. I knew she was quite popular with the boys. "Plus, you might not stay friends once you turn one down."

"You think so too?" I asked glumly.

"Even if they say they want to stay friends afterwards, it doesn't usually play out like that. They'll feel awkward, then gradually they won't want to see you or keep in touch, until one day, they won't even want to say hi..." Serika set her chin on top of my head.

She gets way too close. Is this natural for gals?

"In your case, they're both in your class and in the same friend group, so maybe it won't be as bad as you think," she continued.

"Let's say I finally tell them how I feel and start going out with one. Do you think the one I didn't choose will stay in the same group? Do you think I'm being too self-conscious?" I asked.

"Well, it'd be hard for them to stick around if you blatantly flirted in front of them, right? But if it were me, I'd come to terms with it. Because the friends you hang out with are important too," she said, and then added, "But who knows?"

"Those two seem very serious... I dunno." I imagined what might happen. I hated the idea that our close-knit group might scatter.

“I see. Natsuki, you don’t want to ruin the relationships you have right now.”

“Well, yeah. Things are nice as they are right now. I want to be friends with everyone forever.”

“In your own way, your feelings are quite serious too. For your friends, that is.”

“Shut up. I’m a guy with few friends.”

“In the end, whatever will be, will be. You have to let things happen the way they happen.”

“Really? Is it okay to go in with that mindset?”

“It’s fine. Natsuki, you should sincerely think about what *you* want. It’s better for everyone if you do that instead of overthinking. I mean, in the end, that’s pretty much all you can do.”

Sincerely think about what I want? That’s pretty hard to do. I’ve got so many mixed emotions that I don’t even know how I feel anymore. What do I want to do? What choice do I want to make?

“Make such a gloomy face, and you’ll get depressed. C’mon, liven up.” Serika tapped rhythmically on my shoulders and began singing a song I’d never heard before.

She was off in her own little world as usual, which brought a wry smile to my face and cheered me up. In all honesty, though I loved Hoshimiya and Uta, I felt more relaxed spending time with Serika and Nanase than them.

When the end-of-lunch bell rang, Serika said, “Do your best to not have any regrets, okay?” and left.

After school, I quickly left the campus, just as I’d told Hoshimiya I would. Earbuds plugged in, I immersed myself in a song’s instrumentals as I walked down the road. The intense rock was accompanied by lyrics that lifted me up. Currently, I was listening to Blue Encount’s “Memento.” Whenever I was feeling down in the dumps, music always made me feel better.

This was one of the songs in the “Songs for Cheering Up” playlist that Serika

had sent me. We used the same music application, so I could listen to it just by tapping on it. Serika and I shared the same taste in music, and I liked every single song she recommended.

When I arrived at my part-time job, Café Mares, I opened the door. A chime rang, indicating that a visitor was here.

Kirishima-san, another part-timer who had been working here longer than me, turned my way. “Oh, you’re here, Natsuki-chan.”

She’s hell-bent on sticking “chan” after my name nowadays. It makes me sound like a girl, so I wish she’d stop.

Standing next to her was an unfamiliar boy wearing our store’s uniform. He was shorter than Kirishima-san, who was tall for a girl, and he looked quite skinny. He wore thick round-rimmed glasses, giving him an unfashionable appearance, and there was a timid air to him.

“Let me introduce you two. This is our new recruit, Shinohara-kun. He started working here yesterday,” Kirishima-san said.

Oh yeah, I heard someone mention we were getting a new hire.

“I-I’m Shinohara. I look forward to working with you,” he said with a bow.

Flustered, I also lowered my head and introduced myself. “Hello. I’m Haibara Natsuki.”

“Shinohara-kun is going to work in the kitchen too, so be sure to teach him well, Natsuki-chan.”

But I’m supposed to be a newbie too... Wait, I’ve been working here for four months already. Time sure flies! My fun days are passing by in the blink of an eye.

“Why’re you two being so polite with each other, anyway? You guys are in the same year in the same school.” Kirishima-san chortled heartily.

“Huh? Really?” I said in surprise.

“Oh, yes,” Shinohara-kun said meekly. “I’m in class 1-4 at Ryomei, I guess.”

“For real? I’m in class 1-2. Nice to meet you.” Now that they’d mentioned it, I

had a feeling I'd seen him around somewhere before.

"Of course I know that," he said.

I tilted my head to the side, puzzled as to what he meant by that. "'Of course'?"

"Haibara-san, you're famous, after all," he stated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Oh, I see. I'm...famous... Not in a bad way, right? Well, considering who I hang out with, obviously I'd stand out.

"Oho? Natsuki-chan is famous at school?" Kirishima-san asked.

"Y-Yes. He's handsome, good at studying and sports, and extremely popular with the girls," Shinohara-kun explained.

"Thought so. I figured Natsuki-chan was popular. Hmm," she said, wearing an amused smirk.

Getting some praise doesn't feel too bad, but Kirishima-san is going to tease me nonstop now...

"Can I call you Shinohara-kun? We're in the same year, so is it okay to keep it casual?" I asked, deliberately making my tone and expression more friendly.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "Then may I call you Haibara-kun too?"

"'Course! And no need to be formal with me, okay?"

"M-My apologies. I feel calmer speaking politely."

I see. He's that kinda guy. His vibes feel pretty familiar somehow... Oh, he's got the same gloomy aura I used to have!

"Where's Yuino-chan today?" Kirishima-san asked.

"Nanase doesn't have a shift today," I replied.

"Hmm, then it'll just be you, me, and Shinohara-kun. Let's work hard!" She energetically raised her arm, and Shinohara-kun responded by clenching his fist in a reserved manner.

"Okaaaay! I'll go get changed now," I said. *I've got some experience at showing*

newbies the ropes from back when I worked part-time jobs in college. Plus, Shinohara-kun started yesterday, so he must've learned the basics from someone else already. All righty then, it's time to get cracking! I used up a lot of my money during the trip, so I need to save up again.

There were a lot more customers flooding in and out of the café today than usual. Shinohara-kun was not good at learning by any standard, but I liked his earnest personality and how he gave it his all when he worked. Though, I did laugh just a bit when he pulled out a notepad and started taking notes for everything.

"We managed to make it through another day," I said to the weary Shinohara-kun when we were changing back into our school uniforms in the break room.

"I-I'm so tired..." he moaned.

I chuckled. "Yeah, it's tiring in the beginning because you're not used to it."

The door suddenly flew open, and without any regard for the fact that we were in the middle of changing, Kirishima-san enthusiastically yelled, "I'm going home first!"

"You're awfully energetic for someone who just finished working," I remarked.

"Heh heh heh! You can tell? My boyfriend came to pick me up!" she cooed.

"Okay, sure. I'm tired of all your gushing about him."

We watched Kirishima-san leave, veiled in an aura of happiness, and then Shinohara-kun and I locked up the store.

"Man, it's gotten pretty cool at night," I said.

It was 10 p.m., and the sky was completely dark. Shinohara-kun and I walked side by side towards the station. The gentle breeze felt nice. The weather had become bearable to be outside in—autumn had arrived.

After a considerably long pause, he replied, "Y-Yes, it is."

He probably didn't know whether I was talking to myself or talking to him, and

after worrying over it, he decided it would be best to reply with something safe. I really understand that feeling.

I had become quite fond of Shinohara-kun because I felt a strong sense of kinship with him. There was nothing better than having a good relationship with a fellow part-timer, and I'd be thrilled if we became good friends.

"Um," Shinohara-kun said in a small voice before bowing. "Thank you for today."

"No, not at all. I told you you don't need to be so respectful towards me."

"But I caused you a good deal of trouble..."

"You just started, so of course it happens. When I first started, I caused Nanase and Kirishima-san a lot of trouble too." I said that without thinking, but quite frankly, I didn't recall anything like that ever happening. *To be fair, I'm on my second round in life, so I have an illegal amount of experience with working. But I'm pretty sure I caused trouble the very first job I had.*

"Really? Kirishima-san told me you learned very easily, but that you were an abnormal case, so I shouldn't compare myself to you, though."

Stop blabbing so much, Kirishima-san... She's as talkative as always. He looks like he's going to feel bad if we go down this rabbit hole, so it's time for a topic change. "Shinohara-kun, why did you start working?"

"I need money," he said forlornly. "Instruments and equipment are very expensive."

"Instruments?"

"Oh, I'm... I'm in the light music club, I guess. Th-Though it doesn't suit me at all."

Sure, it's unexpected, but if you deprecate yourself that much, I won't know how to respond. Though, I do understand the mentality of belittling yourself first so that no one else makes fun of you. "Light music club? That's cool. What instrument do you play?"

"The bass. I'm not very good, though," he said. "Oh, do you know what a bass is?"

“Yeah. I like listening to rock bands. It’s the lowest one, right?”

The bass is the heart of any band. The main stars are usually the vocals or guitar, but the bass adds the powerful low notes to the band’s instrumentals, stabilizing the mood and rhythm of the song. I had only ever played the guitar, but I admired skilled bassists. They gave off an air of cool and flawless professionalism.

“Yes, that’s right. Do you like rock music?” he asked.

“Yeah, a good amount. I pretty much follow all the popular bands.” *Well, the bands are all seven years old for me, so I know about all of them without having to keep up with the times.*

“Me too. That’s why I wanted to be part of a band,” Shinohara-kun said wholeheartedly. I could tell he was stating his unfiltered thoughts right now. “Until now, I played the bass alone, but I mustered up the courage in high school to join the light music club. Though, I honestly don’t fit in much.” He laughed weakly.

“N-Nah... Speaking of which, how many people are in the light music club?”

“U-Um, I think twelve people. The third-years have already retired.”

“Wow, that’s quite a lot of members. Sounds like enough for two or three bands.”

“There’s a band of four second-years, a band of three first-years, and a second-year duo. I have no friends...so I’m a bandless leftover.” Shinohara-kun let out another weak, self-deprecating laugh and became openly depressed.

Th-This is a touchy subject! “But you said there were twelve people. That means there’s three people left over, right? You could form a trio.”

“They all forgot about my existence,” he replied. “And I don’t even know if the other two want to be in a band.”

Th-This is bad! No matter what I try, our conversation takes a nosedive! Isn’t there anything positive we can talk about? Oh yeah, isn’t Serika in the light music club too? “Do you know Hondo Serika?”

“Oh, yes... She’s one of the other two leftovers I just mentioned.”

“Huh, really? Serika’s my friend.”

“In Hondo-san’s case, she’s too good, which puts everyone off. Her technique and motivation are too different from everyone else’s, so most don’t want to play with her. Though, she was very popular in the beginning.”

Shinohara-kun’s breakdown of the club brought Serika’s melancholy expression during lunch break to mind. Was the light music club related to why she had seemed like she was about to cry? “Is Serika that good?”

“The way she performs and the sounds she produces—everything she does is on a different scale. We’re both leftovers, but it would be much too discourteous for someone like me to play in the same band as her.” Shinohara-kun walked with his head hanging, sounding as if he was disparaging himself. “It’s impossible.”

“But don’t you want to play in a band?”

“Of course I do...but it’s too hard for someone like me.”

“But you found a part-time job so you could pay for your instrument and equipment, which means you haven’t given up yet, right?”

I seemed to have hit the nail on the head, because Shinohara-kun sank into silence with a sour expression. Back when I had bought a guitar in college, I’d shared the same sentiments as him. I had lacked the courage to reach out to other people and instead wanted someone to invite me to join their band. But I had no friends in the first place, so naturally the future I wished for wouldn’t come when all I did was wait.

I didn’t want him to have regrets like I had. But as someone who had been urged not to have any regrets by Serika, I felt like I didn’t have the right to say anything. So I was at a loss as to what words to offer Shinohara-kun.

“Well, see you later,” I said when we reached the station.

“Y-Yes. Until next time.” He bowed and then ran through the gates.

I was very familiar with the likes of his unfashionable appearance, timid demeanor, and negative attitude. It was as if I was looking at myself from when I’d failed my first high school debut.

While I waited on the platform for my train, it began to rain. Autumn weather was fickle—the forecast had predicted clear skies all day. Raindrops trickled down onto the ground with a gentle pitter-patter.

Three days later on a Saturday at midday, Namika was in the living room watching a Bump of Chicken concert DVD, so I joined her on the sofa. Suddenly, my smartphone chimed from in my pocket. I pulled it out. There was a notification on my lock screen: it was a RINE message from Uta.

“Hey, are you free right now?” it said.

Sorry, but I’m very much not free right now. I’m in the middle of watching a Bump of Chicken concert DVD, I’ve got manga I want to read, and then I’m gonna delve into a new action movie from the West. And, uh... Oh, I’m gonna go for a walk. I’m very busy!

“I’m extremely busy,” I sent.

She immediately replied, “So you’re super free!”

She’s incomprehensible.

“Just finished practice. Miorin, Seri, and I are gonna go karaoke. Wanna come?” came a follow-up message.

Karaoke, you say? I do like karaoke, but why is that mix of people inviting me?

“Seri wants to hear you sing!” she sent.

I see. I don’t think I’m good enough for someone to get excited over hearing me, though. I typed out a reply. “Please don’t raise the bar too high for me~”

“Don’t worry! You’re actually that good!”

Hmm... I don’t have a good reason to say no, so I guess why not? Plus, Serika and I have the same taste in music, and she wants to hear me sing. Though, who knows if Miori will like what we pick. After a moment of contemplation, I sent her a sticker that conveyed, “Okay!” and changed into outside clothes.

“Onii-chan, going somewhere?” Namika asked, crunching on a senbei.

“Yeah, my friends invited me out. I’ll let you know when I’ll be back later,” I

replied.

She returned her attention to the television and half-heartedly said, “Okaaay.”

I left the house and headed for the station. I couldn’t tell how the weather would turn out today; all I could do was pray that it wouldn’t rain.

I’d better eat lunch somewhere first. I haven’t eaten out in a while... Which means I’ve gotta get ramen! And so, I stopped by a ramen shop before taking the train. About an hour later, just as I was passing through the ticket gates, a group of girls waiting in front of the entrance spotted me.

“Oh, Natsu! Over here!” Uta called me over, hopping up and down as she waved at me.

Are you a kid? Your skirt looks like it’s about to flip up, so please stop. I’m gonna look down by accident! If Uta’s skirt were as short as Serika’s, then there was no doubt I would’ve already easily caught a glimpse of a certain triangular piece of cloth. Uta was standing in between Serika and Miori, who were also wearing the Ryomei uniform.

“Sorry, did you guys wait long?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm, pretty long. I was bored,” Serika answered, a little too honestly.

Uta hurriedly cut in, “Hey, Seri! Natsu came because we asked him to, remember?!”

“I know. Let’s go do some karaoke. I’m excited.” Serika sauntered off as she hummed a tune.

Off in her own world, as always. Miori was already walking next to her, likely used to her carefree pace. Uta and I looked at each other and then laughed. We followed after them, walking side by side.

The karaoke place was about three minutes away from the station. Serika spoke to the clerk, clearly an experienced patron, and then led us to a large room that was way too big for just the four of us.

“Do they not have a lot of customers today?” Uta asked, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

“There’s that, but I told them I preferred a bigger room. It feels nice singing in a spacious place.” Serika answered while using the DENMOKU’s touch screen.

“True, a big room is definitely better than a cramped one,” Miori said in agreement.

Personally, if I had to choose, I liked cramped rooms more, so I couldn’t relate. I felt more relaxed the smaller the space. It made me feel like I belonged. We took our seats, Serika and Miori on one side of the table, and Uta and me on the other.

Now that I think about it, this situation is pretty nerve-racking—I’m the only guy here. I used to yearn for the chance to go to karaoke with girls, but now that it’s a reality, I feel kinda uncomfortable. Not gonna lie...I wish Tatsuya and Reita were here too. I watched the girls choose their songs as they chattered excitedly.

“All righty! I’ll go first!” Miori entered her song, and the title appeared on the big screen. It was a song from an idol group that had gained popularity recently. The song had a fast tempo and an upbeat melody, perfect for livening up the mood. She picked up two mics. “I wanted to sing this. Uta, wanna join?”

Excited, Uta exclaimed, “Okay!” and the two began to sing together.

Phew... I don’t have to talk when someone is singing, which puts me at ease... And man, Miori is really good. She’s always been good at everything she tries. Serika peered at the DENMOKU with a serious expression, groaning inaudibly. *Yeah, let’s leave her be.*

Right when the song ended, a light bulb went off in Miori’s head, and she quickly turned on the scoring system. “I know! Let’s compete with the points system. Loser treats the winner to ice cream!” she said with a bold smile.

Uta theatrically crossed her arms to form an X. “No way. I’m definitely going to lose! Count me out!”

“Awww, c’mon, it’ll be fine! You’re really good, Uta.”

“Natsu and Seri are on a whole nother level. Miorin, you won’t be able to win either, you know?”

“Now you’ve said it! Telling me that fires me up instead,” Miori said, displaying her competitive spirit.

Serika piped up. “I’m good. I’ll just win a free ice cream, no effort.”

“N-Now *that* rubs me the wrong way. Don’t look down on me, you jerk!” Miori angrily leaped at Serika and began tickling her armpits.

“Wait, stop that. I’m ticklish... Hngh...!” Serika wriggled around in a rare moment of panic, which was a cute sight.

I stared at them playing around, but then I felt Uta’s gaze on me, so I took out my phone and pretended to look at my music app, feigning innocence. *I didn’t see anything, okay?*

“And you? Are you gonna compete?” Miori asked me.

“Well... Sure, I guess,” I replied. In times like this, if I didn’t accept her invitation, she would sulk.

I’m definitely not gonna lose, though. After hearing her sing just now, I bet she’ll average in the upper eighties. I used to train alone at karaoke places, so she’s no match for me. Heh heh heh! I had a repertoire of songs that I could score over ninety-five points on. Except, over half of them didn’t exist yet, so I couldn’t use them. Another one of the demerits of leaping back in time.

“Then can I start?” Serika asked, but entered a song before anyone could answer.

My First Story’s “Missing You” appeared on the screen. The band’s intense instrumentals reverberated throughout the room. *She’s singing a hard rock song for a karaoke competition?! Rock songs are difficult in general, and they’re hard to score points on. Did she just choose a song she likes because she doesn’t care about winning? Or...is she just that confident?*

I knew the answer immediately after she’d begun. Serika’s voice was lower than the average girl’s, and it was the perfect match for a song known for its male vocalist with a high range. The pitch bar on the upper half of the screen scrolled by without her going out of tune even once.

Um, excuse me... What the heck? She’s way too good! Blown away, I let my

mouth gape open.

“Seri does the vocals often too,” Uta whispered in my ear.

That’s awesome! She’s a guitarist and a vocalist! She’s the star of a rock band!

To match the climax of the song’s hook, Serika raised her volume one notch higher—I felt goose bumps crawl up my skin. Miori energetically clapped to the beat, and Uta swayed her body to the rhythm of the song. I sat there petrified, too overwhelmed to move.

Eventually, her score appeared on the screen, signaling the end of the song: ninety-four points. It was a great result, but I’d honestly thought that she would score higher. Then again, the karaoke point system had no direct correlation to how good of a singer someone actually was.

“Well, thought it’d be something like that,” Serika remarked matter-of-factly, wearing her characteristic unruffled expression. I unwittingly began clapping, but she shook her head. “It wasn’t that good.”

“Okay, you’re up next, Natsu!” Uta said.

Oh shoot, I haven’t put in a song yet! I’d been so absorbed in listening to Serika that I’d completely forgotten that my turn was next.

“Crap, I haven’t thought of anything. What should I sing?” I wondered aloud.

“If you’re lost, then I’ve got a song I like that I want you to sing!” Uta suggested.

“Okay, sure.”

“Yay!” she cheered, smiling happily.

She punched a song into the DENMOKU, and it immediately beeped, sending the selection to the system. Alexandros’s “city” appeared on the screen. It was a song I’d also liked a lot since way back.

It began with a mellow intro riff, but once the drums joined in, the tune transformed into something sharper. The moment you thought the song had stabilized, the lead guitarist began thrumming out the melody. I liked how it had many deep, vibrant sounds that embodied the song’s title.

“Nice choice. And it’s got the actual music video too. That’s awesome.” Serika whistled.

“Right!” Uta agreed.

“Ah, ahhh,” I quietly said into the mic, fine-tuning my volume and distance from it.

I’d loved music since way back, so I naturally came to love singing too. I hadn’t had a single friend who would listen to me, but I continued to karaoke alone. As a result, I became skilled at getting high scores on the machine. There were many tricks to consistently scoring high. For example, don’t try to change the song’s arrangement, match the key no matter what, deliberately emphasize your inflection during calculated portions of the song, and lay on the vibrato to get the extra points.

However, the hours I’d spent on practice were in vain. What I wanted wasn’t to earn a high score from a machine. I simply wanted to sing the songs I liked, in the way I imagined. Remembering that fact, I decided to let loose right now, even if it meant I would lose points. And I didn’t regret it.

I felt that I was singing even better than normal. I had gained some self-confidence after the first time I went karaokeing with everyone. If I’d sung in a way tailored to earn points, I had a feeling they wouldn’t have complimented me so much. I hadn’t spent that time practicing to receive compliments, but I’d been alone for so long that it did make singing in front of them all feel good. And so, today I sang as I normally did.

When I began, Miori’s eyes bulged, and she uttered, “Huh? He’s actually that good?”

Uta’s shoulders shook blissfully next to me. And Serika’s gaze bored a hole into me while she wore a very serious expression. *It’s kinda hard to sing if you stare at me that hard...* Though I thought that, I managed to finish the whole song.

The room was still for a brief moment when the song ended as we waited for the score to load, until finally the numbers appeared: ninety-three points.

“Darn, I lost to Serika,” I said.

“I don’t feel like I won at all, though,” she said after a beat, twirling her hair. She seemed uncharacteristically restless. She glanced my way, lowered her gaze, and then peeked at me again from a low angle. Then, she dropped a bombshell of a statement on us. “I think I might be in love with you, Natsuki.”

Uta screamed. “Wh-Whaaaaaat?!”

“Misspoke. I might be in love with Natsuki’s voice.”

That was a terrible slipup! Stop that! Though, hearing that does make me happy! But look, Uta was so surprised she fell off the sofa! And Miori, in her own Miori fashion, is tilting an empty cup over. It would’ve been a catastrophe if there had been liquid inside! She returned the cup to its original position as if nothing had happened and cleared her throat.

“O-Oh... Thank god...” Uta let out a relieved sigh. Her blatant reaction made me a bit embarrassed. She gasped, realizing how obvious she was being, and looked at me. Our eyes met, and her face immediately flushed crimson.

“Natsuki, I want to hear you sing more,” Serika said.

“Sure, we *are* karaokeing right now.”

“Did you listen to the ‘Songs for Cheering Up’ playlist I sent you? Sing that.”

“There are like thirty songs on that, though!” Suddenly, I remembered that we were in the middle of a singing competition. “Sorry, it’s Miori’s turn now.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Here, Miori, the mic’s yours. You can sing now,” Serika said, handing her friend the microphone.

Miori glared at us resentfully. “Y-You two... You know I can’t win.”

“Ah ha ha! I told you to quit before you started. Miorin, you were the one who suggested we have a competition in the first place!” Uta crowed.

“I *know*! Jeez! Don’t get all logical with me! I just have to treat someone to ice cream, right?!” Miori began to sing a ballad, half out of desperation.

Why did you choose a heartbreak song?

She scored eighty-seven points, clinching last place for herself. After that, we enjoyed karaoke as normal. I sang rock songs with Serika and Uta, we all sang

golden oldies together in chorus, Serika played the air guitar during the song interludes, and Uta danced energetically—it was a blast.

We had come to the store during marathon time, so we sang until we were all satisfied. By the time we finished, it was completely dark outside. A sulky Miori stood next to Serika, who was contentedly eating ice cream.

“My voice is so hoarse!” Uta said in a gravelly tone. She had been the one to sing with the most fervor.

Of course it would be. You sang with one hundred percent of your energy every time. Well, I’m sure you’ll recover after a day.

“That was fun, right, Natsu?” she said to me.

“Yeah, really fun,” I replied honestly.

“I feel like it’s been a while since we hung out,” she continued, voice husky.

I felt a chill run down my spine. It really *had* been a long time since I’d hung out with Uta. The last time I’d seen her was during summer break on my birthday. The reason for the long gap was obvious: I’d been avoiding spending time with her alone. There was no possible world where Uta hadn’t noticed how I’d been behaving.

The night breeze was chilly, an indication that autumn was beginning. A single shirt was no longer enough. The days were getting shorter, and in the dim lighting, I could see fallen leaves scattered on the ground where we passed.

“If...my feelings are a nuisance to you, tell me, okay?” she whispered, her voice so weak and evanescent that I wouldn’t have thought it belonged to the ever-cheerful Uta.

I had never thought of her that way, even once.

“I told you I’d make you turn my way, but I don’t want to ruin your happiness,” she continued.

I shook my head. “Uta, you always cheer me up. Honest.”

A fleeting smile spread across her face. I couldn’t read what emotions her expression harbored.

“Sorry,” she said after a short pause. “I’ve been a bit down. Ah ha ha. This isn’t like me, huh?” Before I could say anything in return, she walked ahead and hugged Miori from behind. “Miorin! How long are you going to sulk?!”

“Ow!” Miori yelped in surprise. “Hey, Uta! You’re forbidden from hugging me out of nowhere!”

Unfazed by her complaints, Uta had on her usual smile. “Ah ha ha! Your whole body jerked just now!”

I feel like I was supposed to say something there...but I couldn't. I'm delaying my decision, and it's hurting Uta. My read on the situation was naive. The sorrowful, faint smile that she had shown me was a far cry from her usual smile that beamed brightly like the sun—the smile that I had come to love.

However, there was one thing I knew with certainty: the one who had caused Sakura Uta to make that expression was, without a doubt, me. I stood still, watching Uta and Miori goof around.

Serika pushed my back. “C’mon, let’s go,” she said.

“O-Oh, yeah... Sorry.”

“I’m sure Uta is anxious right now. She watched you and Hikari-chan get closer over summer break. She probably thinks she doesn’t stand a chance.” Serika had likely overheard our conversation, even though we’d been speaking fairly quietly. “Being liked by other people is complicated, huh?”

Right now, I wasn’t in the mood to say anything in response to her words.

I took the train home with Miori. We lived in the same town, so after we’d said our farewells to the others, just the two of us were left. The old train rattled as it went, carrying us even farther into the Gunma countryside. The only other people in our train car were a sleepy drunkard and an elderly couple with a genial atmosphere.

The world outside the window was pitch-black, and if I strained my eyes, I could make out rice paddies and forest passing by. The only sign of civilization was the occasional flash of light from a house. I was absentmindedly gazing out

the window when I got smacked on the head.

“What’re you down in the dumps about?” Miori asked.

When we’d parted ways with Uta and Serika, I’d tried to act as I usually did, but I didn’t feel like pretending in front of Miori. I was glad that she was the one with me right now. If I were with anyone else, I surely would’ve been stressed. Even if I wanted to discard my mask, the only one I actually felt comfortable exposing my complaints to was Miori.

“What should I do?” *I never think enough, and that’s why I always make mistakes.*

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but all I can provide is advice. You’re the one who has to make the choice.” She kept me at arm’s length in reply to my dependent entreaty.

“Sorry, you’re right,” I said slowly. I didn’t find her response cold; I liked that about Miori.

She disregarded my silence and began talking at me as if nothing was wrong. “Anyway, I never knew you were that good at singing. I’d heard Uta gush about you and all, but that really surprised me! I don’t remember you being like that in the past.”

“I couldn’t make any friends, so my hobby was karaokeing alone.” I wasn’t lying. The only distinction was whether I was referring to middle school or my time in the future.

“You’re full of unknowns now. And here I thought I knew you well,” she murmured, the words spilling out like little drops. She looked lonely and sad.

Miori is the only person who knows the old me. It’s perfectly natural for her to feel this way now. “To be fair, we barely had anything to do with each other in middle school.” I tried to be nonchalant, but I felt somewhat afraid and guarded. *Does Miori sense there’s something off about me? I doubt she’d reach the absurd notion that I leaped through time, though.*

“Yeah. That’s why you gotta tell me more about yourself,” she said, offering me solace. “What’re you struggling with?”

“Knowing you, you probably already figured it out, but right now I...” And so, I began unloading my feelings.

Until now, I had always consulted Miori about everything, but recently I hadn’t been taking the initiative to talk to her. I felt like I was being unfaithful for loving both Hoshimiya and Uta, so I didn’t want to tell other people. After all, it was unforgivable for me to feel that way.

So far, I’d proactively tried to experience the best youth possible. What I needed to do had been clear: there was a group I’d wanted to be friends with and a girl I loved. I’d successfully joined a great friend group that was fun and cozy to be around, and I’d worked hard to date my crush.

My days were fulfilling, and I enjoyed every moment. And of course, I was enjoying my life even now. But I no longer understood my own feelings, and I constantly felt lost.

Hoshimiya and Uta both loved me. It was something to celebrate. There was no greater joy than two girls falling for someone like me. But this was the first time in my life I’d experienced being liked by a girl, and I didn’t know what the correct thing to do was.

What was I searching for? Who on earth did I love? How could I get what I wanted without losing anything?

After I finished letting everything out, Miori nodded lightly and then smirked. “Wow, Natsuki, you’re popular. Are you bragging?”

I sighed. “You’re the only one I can tell because people *will* think I’m bragging.”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, patting my head.

Stop that!

“I think it’s very like you to be sincerely stressing over this kind of thing.” Miori giggled. “My gut tells me...you’re probably scared, right?”

She was exactly right. All this time, I’d been terrified of something, but I didn’t know what.

We got off at our town’s empty station and walked along the night road side

by side. The wind swept the fallen leaves up, rustling them around my feet.

“If you stay indecisive for too long, they might give up on you,” Miori commented.

“Yeah, you’re right...” I said glumly. *It’s a miracle that those two even like me in the first place. It’d be natural if they called it quits. I mean, what is there to even like about me, anyway?*

I had worked hard to change myself. I wanted to become someone others would like. But in the end, I still couldn’t like myself; try as hard as I might, all I could see were my faults. I couldn’t think of a single reason two lovely girls like them would have fallen for me.

“Well, if the time comes, I can soothe your broken heart. After all, we’re childhood friends, even though we didn’t choose to be.”

I felt comforted by Miori’s concern. In a bit of a better state, I suddenly remembered something I’d wanted to ask her about. “Come to think of it, what about you? Weren’t you going to confess to Reita?”

On the last day of summer vacation, unlike how I’d been hesitating over two girls, Miori had steeled herself and made her decision.

“Yep, I still plan to.” She chortled proudly through her nose. “Don’t worry about me; I’ve got a date with Reita-kun tomorrow.”

“Really? Things are going well, then. What’re you guys going to do?”

“We’re going shopping for fall clothes. I’m thinking I’ll get him to choose some outfits for me.”

“Man, girls sure love clothes shopping.”

“That statement doesn’t just apply to girls. *You* just don’t have any interest in fashion!”

Well, that is true. Reita reads fashion magazines, and his casual clothes are very stylish. He talks about the latest trends too. I’m sure he’d happily go with Miori to pick out clothes.

“Plus, Reita-kun has good fashion sense, so I can have peace of mind with him choosing. And I want to wear clothes that’ll make him call me cute,” Miori

continued. “If I let *you* pick me clothes, then I bet it’d be a fashion disaster.”

“It’s you we’re talking about here, so wouldn’t a jersey be fine?” I remarked. She pinched my cheeks. *Excuse me, but that actually hurts!* “Oh yeah, I need to buy some decent clothes for the fall too.”

I’d made it until now by mixing and matching the clothes Miori had picked out and the ones I’d hastily bought after studying some fashion magazines, but it was about time to add to my wardrobe. *I’ve got plenty of tacky clothes at home, though. Like shirts with English sentences on them.*

“I won’t pick out clothes for you anymore, got it? Figure it out yourself,” Miori said after a small pause. Her words sounded strangely heavy.

I was the one who’d told her to keep Reita in mind and avoid excessively hanging out with me alone. I didn’t think my assessment of her situation was wrong. After all, I was in the same boat, and I figured it wouldn’t reflect positively on me if I hung out with Miori alone. That was why our exchange shouldn’t have been anything odd...

...but I felt like a hole had just opened up inside my heart.



And that was all there was to it.

Monday of the following week came. The lessons went in one ear and out the other due to my melancholic mood, until classes finally ended. I wanted to go home immediately, but the homeroom teacher stopped me.

“Haibara. You’ve got time to spare, right? Sorry to ask, but can you lend me a hand?”

“Please don’t assume that I’ve got time to spare just because I’m not in a club,” I replied. “But sure, I’ll help.”

The teacher chuckled and pointed to two fairly heavy-looking cardboard boxes. “Right, sorry. Can you carry one of those to the storage room?”

“What’s in them?”

“Teaching materials. They were for the supplementary lessons over summer break. We don’t need ’em right now, so we’re putting them away.”

Ah, yes. The supplementary lessons for people who failed finals. Uta and Tatsuya had barely scraped by, but several people had failed. I couldn’t say no at this point, so the homeroom teacher and I each picked up a box.

The storage room was on one end of the school building’s second floor, near the music room. It was a bit far from the classroom, but the distance wasn’t enough to tire us out. At least, that’s what I’d thought. My homeroom teacher’s breathing was ragged as we ascended to the second floor.

“H-Haibara, you’re pretty strong,” he said, panting.

“I work out and run as a hobby, after all,” I said.

Right when we were passing the music room, I heard noise coming from the classroom up ahead.

“Sounds like they’re going all out in the second music room. The light music club’s been using it lately,” the tired teacher said.

“Huh? Doesn’t the light music club have their own clubroom?” I asked.

“They said something about how one clubroom was only enough space for

one band to practice.”

I hummed thoughtfully in reply, walking towards the second music room. I could hear the timbre of an electric guitar playing a riff I recognized—it was the intro to Metallica’s “Master of Puppets.” The heavy, low notes rang out in short bursts, forming the song’s melody. The rhythm was accurate, the volume of each note played with precision, and the sound had an overwhelming pressure to it. Listening to that imposing riff made shudders run through my body. A song as difficult as that was being played to perfection.

“I don’t know much about music, but I’m impressed,” marveled my homeroom teacher.

I came to a halt without thinking and turned my gaze towards the source of the sound. *It’s breathtaking. I can’t believe there’s a high schooler who can play guitar this well.*

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Haibara?”

On impulse, I put down the cardboard box and opened the door to the second music room. Inside, holding her guitar, was Serika. She continued downpicking like a demon, oblivious to the fact that the door had been opened. When she looked up and saw me, her eyes widened.

“Huh? Natsuki? What’s up?” she asked.

At that moment, the music stopped, and I finally returned to my senses. “Nothing. I was just so wowed by that performance that I stopped thinking...” *What am I doing? It doesn’t matter how curious I am! I can’t just open the door without asking.*

“Really? Happy to hear that.” She smiled and strummed down on her guitar. In her hands was a Gibson Explorer with a black luster.

My staring was interrupted when my homeroom teacher called out to me. “Hey, Haibara. Do that after we finish putting the materials away!” He shot me a troubled smile.

I lowered my head in his direction. “I’m sorry!”

My mind wasn’t working for some reason. I could hear Serika playing the

guitar all the way from the storage room while I put the box away. How much practice had it taken for her to produce such a powerful timbre?

“Whew, sorry about this. You were a huge help,” my teacher said.

I gave him a typical, half-hearted reply. “Nah, this wasn’t much. I’ve got time since I’m in the go home club.”

“Ha ha. That completely contradicts what you said earlier.” He wiped his sweat with his arm and then, in a curious tone, asked me, “Haibara, is there a reason you didn’t join any clubs?”

“Not particularly. Guess I didn’t have a reason to join one.”

“I see,” he said, nodding a few times. “It just stood out to me. I thought it was a shame that you didn’t join any clubs, since you’re excellent in studies and athletics. I’m sure you would get good results with anything you tried.” With that, my homeroom teacher added, “All right then. Thanks,” and left.

That’s quite the high evaluation. If I could get good results with anything I did, I wouldn’t struggle so much. I’ve got the advantage that this is my second round of high school, so everyone thinks I’m brilliant, but in situations I’m unfamiliar with, I keep making one blunder after another.

On my way out, I passed by the second music room again and opened the door. Serika was still practicing the guitar—all by herself. The room’s layout resembled that of a normal classroom, but currently all the chairs and desks were pushed to the back. The front of the room only had the chair she sat in, her guitar stand, and her amp.

“Why’re you in the second music room?” I asked her.

“The other members are practicing in the clubroom.” Serika put her guitar down on the stand and took out a plastic bottle from her bag. “I’m not in a band, so I can’t mingle.”

Oh yeah, Shinohara-kun mentioned something like that. Serika’s performance skills are on a different level compared to the other light music club members. And when she was in a band, because she was too motivated, her bandmates couldn’t keep up, and she eventually ended up as a leftover.

I can see how that happened after hearing her play. She clearly doesn't belong in your run-of-the-mill high school band. "I love your guitar, Serika," I said with sincerity. She looked at me, her eyes widening in an uncommon instance of surprise. I had been entranced by her music; she was so cool that the words just slipped out of me.

"Do you love Serika?" she teased.

"I didn't garble my words that hard."

"Aw, what? You're no fun. But thanks." She curtly averted her eyes and brought the bottle to her lips. She audibly gulped the water down. I saw sweat trickling down her neck. She must've been practicing with considerable passion—all this time, even though she wasn't in a band, even though she was alone.

"Why did you start playing the guitar?"

"In the beginning, I just started because I thought it was cool."

The same reason as me. I guess that's usually how it goes.

"My dad used to be in a band, so we always had rock music playing at home. I was raised in that sort of environment, and of course we had a few guitars. So I just picked one up and started playing." Serika readjusted her guitar as she spoke. "At first, it was so hard that I quit multiple times, but I slowly got better, and I was thrilled whenever I produced the sound I wanted to make. It was fun. That's why I kept going."

"I quit out of frustration before I ever reached that point."

No matter how much I'd practiced, I was never able to produce the sound I wanted to make. I couldn't move my fingers the same way the guitarists I admired did. I'd become irritated by how far my reality was from my ideal. And above all, there were plenty more hobbies I could take up that were much more entertaining. That's why, before I knew it, the guitar that I'd bought became a mere ornament for my room.

"Wanna try?" Serika offered her guitar to me.

"Isn't this important to you?"

"I'm not worried. You're not one to treat it crudely. Here." She forced the

guitar strap over my neck.

I sat down and crossed my right leg over my left, stabilizing the guitar on me. My left hand touched the strings, and my right held the pick. Though it had been a long time since I'd last touched a guitar, the sensation was more familiar than I'd expected. I strummed at the strings with my right hand, and the guitar sang pleasantly.

That low note sounded different from my old Stratocaster, somehow thicker and heavier, if I had to describe it. She's really good at adjusting the amp settings too. It's not something I can copy.

I played through the chords I knew in order.

"Your F chord is so off. Your pointer finger needs some work," Serika said with a smirk.

"Shut up. I haven't played in a long time. My fingers aren't nimble at all," I countered, frowning. *I'm not gonna mention that my barre chord playing was dubious even at my peak.*

"But you can play."

"If I keep it simple, I can."

I began to play a riff that I remembered, pressing down on the first fret of the sixth string and third fret of the fifth string. It was Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," the first song I ever practiced after I had bought my guitar. It was composed of only simple power chords, but it was strangely cool.

As I strummed through the song, Serika started humming. It kind of felt like I was playing a live concert, and I had a great time.

"That was fun," I said.

"Yeah, I had fun too." Serika broke into a rare smile, cute enough to captivate me. She noticed my stare and cleared her throat with a cough.

"I've never seen you smile like that before."

"I just get excited when I talk about music." A pink flush dusted her cheeks, and she fiddled with her hair.

The sky had become dark, but we didn't notice. We were enjoying ourselves too much.

"People have always told me I'm hard to understand," Serika murmured, packing her guitar in its case as she prepared to go home. "My expression and inflection don't change much. I know I'm a weird kid."

True, Serika is pretty cryptic. It's hard to tell what she's thinking. The only time her face or voice becomes emotive is when she's talking about music. And even then, it's not that big a change. Unsure of how to respond, I listened to her quietly—after all, Serika surely didn't want to hear a perfunctory remark like, "That's not true!"

"I'm not good at expressing my emotions," she said impassively, as if she were stating a simple fact. "But I want others to understand me. My feelings. My emotions. I don't want people to say I'm hard to understand. The timbre of my guitar is the only way I can convey who I am. I feel like I can reach everyone with my music. One day, I want to stand on a big stage and share my music with lots of people. That's why I keep playing."

She gazed up at the sky, chasing some dream I could not see—her side profile was dazzling.

"I'm alone right now, but one day, I'll form an awesome band and play music that I composed myself."

"Like at the Tokyo Dome?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'll send you a ticket."

"That'd be great. Buying a ticket for a popular band's concert requires a lot of praying and luck." After listening to her perform in this room, I'd become her fan. I wanted to hear her play more. I wanted to see her standing on a stage. "Serika, I hope your dream comes true."

"Hey, Natsuki."

Right when she was about to say something, the door opened. A large boy with a fierce look, who gave off the impression of a big boulder, stood there. He was taller than me and had a solid build. He had an intimidating air, and he looked like he could kill me in an instant if we ever fought.

“Oh, Hondo,” he said plainly. His voice was very deep.

“Iwano-senpai. Do you need something?” Serika questioned.

“No... I thought you were practicing, so I opened the door, but it looks like you’re with your boyfriend. Sorry for interrupting.” With that, he turned around and shut the door.

Well, he certainly appeared and disappeared in a jiffy. “You called him your senpai, so I assume he’s older than us. Is he in the light music club?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’s Iwano Kengo-senpai, a second-year. He’s a good drummer. Though, everyone’s scared of him.”

Yeah, I can see why they would be... I almost backed away, there. “Wait... Shouldn’t you have corrected him?”

Serika tilted her head to the side. “About what?”

“Um, he mistakenly thought that you were flirting with your boyfriend.”

After a long pause, she finally said, “Eh, that doesn’t bother me.”

“It’ll bother me, though. I mean, think about my current situation.”

“Iwano-senpai isn’t the type of guy to gossip, so don’t sweat it.”

He doesn’t look the type, so I guess I can accept that. “Come to think of it, weren’t you about to say something just now?”

Serika thought for a moment and then shook her head. “Hmm. I’ll ruminate a bit longer.”

“About what?”

“You don’t need to worry about it. Just serve your time.”

“What am I serving time for?!”

“Oops, wrong saying. Bide your time.”

“Well, okay, but I’m still curious.”

“It’s still a secret.” Serika put a finger to her lips and then changed the topic. “I went to Rock in Japan this year.”

“Seriously? Lucky! I haven’t been to any concerts lately.”

“Festivals are super fun. There are all sorts of people jumbled together—I love the chaos. The staging was especially flashy this year; it was sublime. They had fireworks on the third day, and...” Just like that, we talked about music all the way to the station.

I loved music, especially rock. After all, songs had given me the courage to live for tomorrow, back when my youth was drab and gray.

The next day during lunch break, while I was chatting with Tatsuya and Reita in the hallway, Serika pulled me aside.

“Natsuki, can I borrow you for a sec?”

“Serika? What’s up?” I cocked my head to the side. She was exuding an aura that screamed she wanted to speak to me alone.

Having read the mood, Reita said, “All right then, Natsuki, we’ll go back to the classroom,” and whisked Tatsuya away, leaving me and Serika behind in the hall.

What does she want? This is unusual. Serika typically cuts right to the chase without beating around the bush.

Her expression deadpan as always, she asked with indifference, “Wanna make a band with me?”

I hadn’t known what to expect, but this was so far out of left field. “S-Say what now?”

Me? In a...band? Where’s this coming from? We played guitar together yesterday, but put another way, that’s all we did. I decided I must’ve misheard.

However, Serika looked me straight in the eye and declared, “I’m serious. Let’s change the world with our music.”

I was too baffled for words. *Let’s...change the world...with our music? Sure, I love music, and I wanted to be in a band at some point in my life, but this is way too sudden!* Serika’s erratic speech and conduct always stood out, but this invitation especially lacked any logic behind it. However, she seemed to be speaking with sincerity, and it didn’t feel like she was joking.

“Why me?” I asked.

“I want to do it together with you, Natsuki.”

“Why do you want to do it with me?”

“The reason is... Well, there’s a bunch of reasons.” Serika twirled the ends of her hair and then took a breath. “I already said it during karaoke, but I love your voice. I want you to sing my songs.”

“So you want me to be a vocalist? You scored higher than me, though.”

“Points aren’t everything, and I’m just good at karaoke. I’m different from you.”

It’s the same for me. I went to karaoke alone all the time and improved. I’m not conceited enough to think my own singing is actually good. “I like your singing, you know.”

“I’m no good. My voice can’t reach everyone’s heart. That’s why...Natsuki, you sing.”

I could tell Serika was being serious, and I was happy to be praised. She stuck her hand out for me to take, and I almost grabbed it unwittingly. But I stopped myself and shook my head.

“No, I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Why? Well...”

“Is there a reason that you don’t want to?”

“I’ve got my part-time job and my studies, and joining a club in the second semester is a bit—” I stopped there; a realization had hit me. *I’m searching for a reason to decline. Why? Why am I searching for a reason to say no? Because if I don’t search hard, then I won’t find one.*

In truth, there’s nothing holding me back. I mean, I wanted to be in a band. I wanted to play music with friends I trust. The reason I dropped playing guitar is because, no matter how hard I practiced, I didn’t have any friends to form a band with. This is finally my chance to fulfill that aspiration, so why am I trying

to turn her down?

Seeing that I was shaken, Serika continued to press me. “That’s not the only reason. I think I can trust you. My gut tells me that no matter how hard I practice, you’ll be able to keep up with me. Your taste and love for music—you resemble me. I can tell. Natsuki, you actually want to play music, don’t you?”

It was just as she’d said. And that was why I was getting cold feet. If I joined a band, I’d need to interact with strangers. What if I couldn’t match Serika’s skills? I didn’t have any confidence in my singing either. Those kinds of fears were controlling me.

Rejecting her offer is the easy and comfy path. But am I fine with that? Will refusing her here really lead me to the best youth ever? Didn’t I swear that I’d live a youth I wouldn’t regret?

“Let’s do it. I want to be with you, Natsuki,” Serika said, hand stretched out. I could see traces of her arduous practice on her fingertips.

The scene I’d witnessed yesterday flashed through my mind: Serika playing the guitar in the second music room, how I’d been enthralled by the timbre of her notes, how I’d thought she was cool, the pure admiration I’d felt.

“Do your best to not have any regrets, okay?”

Lately, I didn’t understand my own feelings, but now was the only time I knew what I wanted.

“Thanks for inviting me.” *I want to play music with Serika*, I thought, wishing to be honest with myself. “If you’re okay with it, Serika...can I give it a shot?”

“Of course. Happy to have you. I’m ecstatic. Super ecstatic.”

I took Serika’s hand, and then the beginning-of-class bell rang.

“Cool, we can talk about the specifics later,” she said. Her expression didn’t change much, but she truly seemed to be delighted.

I watched Serika run off to her classroom and then turned back to mine. As I did, I felt gazes prickling me. I looked around—there were a lot of people staring.

“Wh-What?” I wondered, bewildered.

A girl from the class next door approached me. “Um, Haibara-kun! Congratulations!”

“Wh-What?”

“You’d better cherish Serika-chan!”

“Huh? R-Right...”

A group of girls returned to their classroom, giggling and chatting loudly as they passed.

Wh-What on earth? Serika and I are bandmates now, so of course I’m gonna cherish her. Then, I finally grasped how we’d objectively appeared to onlookers. “Don’t tell me... Is this going to become trouble?”

On that day, rumors that Serika had confessed to me and that I’d accepted spread throughout our grade.

“So, Natsuki. Are those rumors real?”

We were still in the classroom after homeroom had ended. Classes were done for the day, and soon everyone would be heading to their clubs. Reita and Tatsuya came up to my seat and grilled me in hushed whispers.

“It’s only been a few hours... How far have the rumors spread?” I groaned. When I was with these two, we always attracted attention, but today I felt more gazes on us than usual. “Also, obviously it’s all just a misunderstanding. Why would you two believe that?”

“Well, apparently Serika said, ‘I want to be with you, Natsuki!’ and gave a passionate speech, so maybe... Y’know,” Tatsuya said.

That’s... Yeah, that’s true! We shouldn’t have talked in the middle of the hallway.

“And we know for a fact that you two were chatting during lunch break,” Reita added.

Nanase, Hoshimiya, and Uta also joined us. This was our usual group of six, but the girls felt like they were exuding enigmatic and intimidating auras today.

On the surface, Uta and Hoshimiya appeared normal, neither smiling nor angry. I couldn't read what they were thinking.

"It's a false rumor, right?" Nanase asked.

"Yeah," I said with a nod. "Of course it can't be true."

"Who knows? Right, Uta-chan?" Hoshimiya remarked.

"Natsu and Seri met recently but clicked really fast," Uta said in agreement. The two girls nodded at each other.

What emotions are they saying that with? I'm scared. But it's fine. They'll understand once I explain what happened.

Right when I was about to spill the beans, the whole classroom kicked up a fuss. Everyone's attention was directed towards the door. There, the source of the rumor was looking around. When Serika spotted me, still surrounded by my friends, she waved.

"Hey, Natsuki. Let's go," she said.

The whole room then fixed their attention onto me.

"Natsu?" said Uta.

"Natsuki-kun?" said Hoshimiya.

"Haibara-kun?" said Nanase.

Why am I breaking out in a cold sweat? I haven't done anything wrong... I stayed at my desk, frozen.

Serika tilted her head to the side, puzzled, and came up to me. "What's up, guys? Why're you huddled up there?"

"That's our line. Seri, why're you here for Natsu?" Uta asked.

"Cause, he's my mate from now on."

"Your mate?" Uta was not the only one blinking at Serika with mystified eyes. Everyone was.

It's gotten pretty chaotic, but this will be easier to explain now that she's here. "Serika and I are going to be in a band together." I then gave everyone a quick

rundown of what had happened yesterday after school and today during lunch.

“So that’s what this is about. Huh, that surprised me,” Reita remarked, not looking particularly surprised.

“Well, this always happens because Serika-chan says misleading things.” Hoshimiya placed her hand on her chest and exhaled lightly.

“That aside, this is awfully sudden. I didn’t hear anything about a band before now,” Nanase said, looking displeased.

“A band! That sounds nice! So that’s what’s going on! Is Natsu going to sing?!” Uta peppered us with questions, eyes sparkling.

“Yep, he’s going to be the vocalist. And he’s going to play the guitar. I’ll be the lead guitarist, and Natsuki will back me up,” Serika answered, determining my role without any input from me.

I had seen that coming, though. In rock bands, the guitar part was often divided into two. The lead guitar played the main melody while a rhythm guitar focused on accompaniment. I couldn’t tell you which role was more difficult, but the lead guitarist was most definitely the star of the song.

“Wait, so you’re gonna join the light music club?” Tatsuya asked, the notion just now hitting him.

Serika glanced at me. “We can think about that later. I want to find the other members of our band first.”

Yeah, she’s right. The light music club already has two bands, and there aren’t many people left. Maybe we’ll have a better chance finding bandmates outside of the club.

“You don’t have all your members yet?” Reita asked.

Serika nodded. “Yeah. I just wanted to do it with Natsuki.”

Tatsuya whistled, and the corner of his lips twisted up slightly. Serika shot him a perplexed head tilt, but he shrugged. “It’s nothin’.”

“Oh, that’s right. Natsuki-kun, you mentioned you could play the guitar on our trip,” Hoshimiya chimed in.

“I’m not good enough to claim I can ‘play,’ but I’m going to practice hard until I can,” I said.

“Nice, man. Sounds fun! Good luck, Natsuki,” Tatsuya said, chuckling to himself, and smacked me on the shoulder.

“If you guys are gonna have a concert, then invite me! I’ll definitely come!” Uta exclaimed, already pumped.

“Don’t get too excited. Nothing’s set in stone yet,” I said, trying to calm her down.

Reita came to the rescue and put the conversation back on track. “At any rate, if this was only about forming a band, then I’ll quell the rumors.”

I can always count on you, Reita. Reliable as ever. Wait, is it that easy to squash a rumor? Doubt washed over me for a moment. *But it’s Reita we’re talking about here, so I’m sure he can do something about it!*

“Club activities are starting soon. Tell us more about the details tomorrow,” Reita said. With that, we dispersed, and everyone scattered to their own clubs.

“So,” I began, “what should we do today?” My usual routine had been thrown into disarray, and a torrent of anxiety and anticipation whirled inside of me. For some reason, the world around me seemed to be glistening brighter than usual.

“Let’s start with a strategy meeting,” Serika replied, appearing a bit cheerful.

We both headed to the second music room. The light music club’s room was occupied by the aforementioned two bands, so Serika basically always practiced in the second music room. Currently, the wind instrument club was using the music room next to us. However, unlike the second music room, which had a similar structure to a regular classroom, the main music room had high ceilings and soundproof walls, so we could barely hear them play. The light music club probably wished they could use that room too.

“There’s an issue we have to overcome first,” Serika said.

“Search for bandmates, right? I guess who we need also depends on what kind of songs we want to play.”

Knowing Serika’s preferences, she probably wanted to perform hard rock. She

would be the lead guitarist, while I would be the vocalist and rhythm guitarist. Which meant we needed...

“A bassist and a drummer, huh?” I remarked.

Those two comprised the core of the band—often called the rhythm section. I liked to imagine that the drums created the rhythm with dots, while the bass maintained the rhythm with a line. The bass was responsible for the low notes of a song, while the drums kept the tempo. Both instruments fulfilled essential roles for any tune; without them, the song’s groove would be off.

“Well, I *could* learn how to play the bass from square one,” I suggested.

Playing the drums while singing seemed too difficult, but I knew there were plenty of bands that had a bassist double up as a vocalist too. Although I wasn’t sure if I was even *capable* of playing an instrument and singing at the same time, that was a later problem.

“We can consider that if we don’t find anyone. Natsuki, you prefer the guitar, right?”

Yeah, because it is the only instrument I’ve ever purchased. It was also true that whenever I watched rock concerts, my eyes were always drawn to the guitarist—I was fond of the electric guitar’s timbre.

“I can play the bass too, but I definitely like guitars more,” Serika stated plainly.

She’s already crazy good at the guitar, but she can play the bass too? They look like similar instruments, but they require completely different techniques! Serika really is built different.

“Okay then, do you have any concrete suggestions?” I asked.

“There’s someone in the light music club I want to play with.”

“Who is it?” I paused. “Well, I guess that even if you told me the name, I wouldn’t know who it was.”

“No, you saw him yesterday. The second-year, Iwano-senpai. His drumming is legit.”

Iwano-senpai? Oh, that guy. He looked really intimidating... Not gonna lie, I’m

kinda reluctant and, well, scared of him. He doesn't look easy to mix with. But I am interested in hearing him play, what with Serika praising him that much.

"The problem is, he already turned me down once."

"Then that's a no go."

"I'll try inviting him again. I've got you with me now, so I feel like it might work out."

"I don't think anything will change just because I'm here..."

"It's fine. Don't knock it till you've tried it. Courage alone is enough to change the world." Serika shot me a thumbs-up. "I'll persuade Iwano-senpai, so you find us a bassist."

"What? You don't have anyone in mind?"

"The people I know are already in bands. We could borrow someone, but I want to practice hard, so I'd rather it be someone dedicated to our band. I want a bassist with drive."

That's a pretty hard request. In the first place, I'm not someone with a lot of friends. I've got substantially more than in my first round of high school, but my circle's way smaller than Serika's. I can't think of anyone. A bassist who is driven, available, and willing to join us...

"Oh, come on. Those are some strict requirements. There's no one conveniently—"

Hmm? Hold on a sec. The new guy at my job... Shinohara-kun. Didn't he say he's in the light music club?

"Light music club? That's cool. What instrument do you play?"

"The bass. I'm not very good, though... Oh, do you know what a bass is?"

Th-There is! There's a bassist who conveniently happens to be a leftover! He said he's driven, but he hasn't joined a band because he has no friends. He's the ideal person for us right now. Shinohara-kun, I'm glad you're alone...

"N-No. Stop. Calm down. There must be some reason Serika didn't invite him," I mumbled.

“What’re you muttering about?”

“Serika. Shinohara-kun’s in the light music club, right?” I questioned. I was about to follow up with, *“He’s a fellow first-year in the same club, he’s a bassist, and he’s not in a band, so why haven’t you considered him as a candidate?”* but Serika’s brows furrowed.

“Who’s that?”

Alas, she wasn’t even aware of Shinohara-kun’s existence in the first place. I told her about him, and surprise colored her face.

“Come to think of it, I sorta recall someone I didn’t recognize hanging out in the clubroom sometimes.”

“You definitely shouldn’t tell him that, okay?” I told her, tone serious. *Even I took some damage from that. Urgh... Memories of my past are resurfacing.* In any case, the next time I shared a shift with him, I would invite him to join our band.

“Okay. I’ll handle Iwano-senpai, and you handle Shinohara-kun.” We settled on what we’d do to fill out our remaining members, and then decided we’d wing it from there. “Cool, let’s end it here. I hope we can assemble everyone quickly.”

Serika and I fist-bumped and then packed up.

“Oh, hold on, Serika,” I said right when we were about to separate. “Can you help me pick out a guitar?”

I hadn’t practiced the guitar since my university days. I’d bought my favorite Stratocaster in the autumn of my first year of university. In other words, I didn’t own a guitar right now, and I also needed the other equipment.

“I come here a lot.”

Serika had brought me to a music store at Takasaki Station, one stop from our high school. I opened the old wooden door and was welcomed by a motley sort of atmosphere. Instruments lined the cramped space, adding to the jumbled mess. Jazz music played in the background.

There was a group of outgoing band-looking people perusing the store. Serika did not hesitate to cut through them, beelining straight for the electric guitar area. I timidly followed her past the crowd. *Music stores are scary...*

“What kind do you want?” she asked.

“The one I used to have was a Fender Strat.”

“A Strat? Nice. It’s important for it to look cool.”

When it came to electric guitars, the standard choices were usually Stratocasters, Telecasters, and Les Pauls. There were others like Jaguars or Jazzmasters, but I wasn’t that knowledgeable about guitars, so I didn’t know much more than that. I mean, I didn’t even know what was different about the sounds the varying types produced. I’d just bought a Strat in the past because of my favorite guitarist.

“Why don’t you try the ones that jump out at you? How about this one?” Serika picked up a red guitar nearby and asked the shopkeeper for permission to test it out. After she checked the feel of the strings and shape of the body, she played a riff with enthusiasm. “Natsuki, do you wanna try too?”

She passed the guitar to me, and I held it in my hands. The proportions felt good, so I gave it a light strum. *Not bad... But the grip on its neck doesn’t feel great, I think? And the sound kinda feels somewhat lacking.*

I racked my brains as to what felt wrong, and then Serika handed me another guitar. But that one also gave me an iffy, indescribable feeling. *I’m not trying to be fussy about this, though...*

“Natsuki, you’ve got the makings of a guitarist,” Serika said, praising me (though I didn’t really see what there was to compliment about our situation), and continued picking out guitars.

“Maybe I’ll stick with a Strat... Now I gotta worry about the price,” I said.

I’d been working part-time, but I’d made quite a dent in my savings since the summer beach trip. *I can’t buy a guitar that’s too expensive. But on the other hand, if I buy one that’s too cheap, it might not last long.* My indecisiveness manifested here as well.

“Hmm,” Serika said. “The price is reasonable, but I don’t think this one suits you well.”

There were a few guitars that I’d thought looked nice and had a decent price, but which hadn’t passed Serika’s screening. I didn’t really get it, but maybe the sound they produced wasn’t good enough.

“Okay, I’ll go with this one.”

At the end of all my vacillations, I wound up choosing the same type of Fender Strat as from my university days. I also bought a guitar case, a pick, an amp, a shielded cable, a tuner, and some other necessities that Serika recommended. I gathered up everything and checked out—the final bill was nothing to laugh at.

“You bought a lot,” Serika remarked.

“Yeah, my savings have disappeared in the blink of an eye,” I said, but I didn’t regret my decision at all. Money could be saved up again, after all.

“Are you sure about this?” she questioned. “Though, it’s a bit late for that since you bought the guitar already.”

“It’s fine. I actually wanted to be in a band. That’s why I’m glad you invited me.” I’d experienced this elation before. It was the same sensation as when I’d first started playing basketball—the thrill of stepping into an unknown world.

Serika lived around Takasaki Station, so we parted ways at the station gates.

“See you tomorrow,” I said.

“Yeah. Let’s do our best,” she responded, her tone impassive as always. However, I could tell that she was happy and excited on the inside, even though I hadn’t spent much time with her. “Natsuki, you’re looking like a real rock star now. You’re cool,” she said, right when I was walking away.

When I turned back, she was already gone.

I slung my guitar case onto my back and returned home. Namika, who was watching a variety TV show while eating cup ramen with disposable chopsticks, looked at me as though I was a ghost.

“Wh-What’s that?” she asked, noodles in her mouth. “Onii-chan?”

“Can’t you tell? It’s a guitar and whatnot.”

“Uh, where’s this coming from? I doubt you can play it, so quit while you’re ahead.”

“Stop snuffing out people’s dreams when they’re just starting!” I scolded.
Your onii-chan doesn’t remember raising you to be like this!

“Are you playing in a band?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan for now.”

“I see... Oh! Wait, are you going to perform during Ryomei’s school festival concert?!”

I didn’t think of that. I see, the school festival... Isn’t it during the latter half of October? The 25th and 26th, maybe?

They were going to hold a live concert for the light music club and any other interested bands on an outdoor stage. It was the ideal place for us to perform, but if we started practicing for it now, we’d only have a month and a half. Participating would be challenging for us, given we hadn’t even found all our members yet.

“I wanna go to Ryomei’s school festival,” Namika said wistfully. “If you’re going to be in a concert, then I’ll do you a favor and come watch.”

“We don’t plan on performing right now, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“Whaaat?” she said, disappointment coloring her tone, and returned her attention to the TV.

I went upstairs to my room and opened the accessories I’d bought. I connected the shielded cord, amp, and my guitar, and then strummed a string. It was lucky that I lived in the middle of nowhere. Our house had a large garden, and we were pretty far from any other houses, so I didn’t need to worry about being a nuisance to the neighbors. Though, if I turned the volume up too much, Namika would probably snap at me.

“Righty then... Hey, this is going better than expected.”

I played through the parts of songs I remembered. Of course, my fingers weren't moving very well, and I would need to practice hard to retrain them. I continued randomly playing things I could recall until my phone's ringtone interrupted. I picked it up to see a RINE call from Hoshimiya Hikari.

"Hello?" I said.

"Oh, Natsuki-kun? Good evening." A little bit of happiness welled up inside of me after hearing Hoshimiya's lively voice. "What're you doing now?"

"I'm practicing the guitar. Since I'm going to be in a band and all." I lightly strummed a string. *Twang*, it sang.

"Wow, you really are. You're amazing! I didn't know you could play the guitar."

"I can't really play it. I need to practice a lot more," I said. *And I think you're way more amazing. You're already writing whole novels.*

"So, Natsuki-kun. I didn't hear about any of this." She sounded somewhat indignant.

I didn't tell anyone else, but in my defense, I was invited out of nowhere and agreed to it on the spot!

"I knew you liked rock, but I was still shocked to hear that you're forming a band," Hoshimiya continued.

After a beat I said, "I was surprised too. But when Serika invited me, I felt like I wanted to give it a shot."

I get why this all feels very abrupt, and honestly I agree that it is too. Seeing Serika play with my own eyes left a deep impression on me. I admired her performance. It made me want to be able to play the guitar like her.

"So you're saying this is an unexpected development?"

"Yeah. But I've always wanted to be in a band."

"I see..." she murmured. "A rock band, huh? I don't know much about that stuff."

"Hoshimiya, do you rarely listen to music?"

“Yeah, I guess so. I basically spend all my time reading and writing.”

She was likely writing a novel even now. Through the phone, I could occasionally hear what sounded like a keyboard clacking.

“If you’re interested, then I can recommend you a few songs,” I offered.

“Really? Okay, I’ll give them a listen.”

I shouldn’t recommend anything too intense for a beginner. Songs I like that have a gentler melody... I typed out a few that I could think of and sent her the list via RINE.

Hoshimiya immediately began to listen to them. “Ohhh. It’s very...booming? I think it’s nice?”

“Don’t force yourself to praise it. Everyone’s got different preferences.”

She wouldn’t necessarily like the same songs that I liked. It was a matter of course since we were different people.

“I know...but I want to learn to like it,” she said.

“Why?” I asked. *She doesn’t seem that interested in rock.*

Such irrelevant thoughts flew through my head as Hoshimiya answered in a calm tone, “Because I also want to like the things you like.”

I stopped breathing. *Hoshimiya thinks that much of someone wimpy like me?*

“Don’t you think we’ll be happier that way? There’ll be more things for us to watch and be excited about together,” she said.

“Yeah. I’d be happy if you came to enjoy rock.”

“Natsuki-kun, I was really happy when you read the books I like and told me they were interesting. I enjoy it when we share our thoughts about stories. So I want to do that for you too.”

“The sentiment makes me happy, but you really don’t need to force yourself.”

“Yeah, I know. There’s no point if I don’t mean it from the bottom of my heart.” She seemed to have continued going down the list of songs I’d recommended even while we’d been chatting because she said, “Oh, I think I like this one. ‘Hoshi ni Negai wo’ by Flumpool.”

“Nice. If you like that one, then I think you’ll like this one too. I’ll send it to you over RINE.”

After a while of chatting about silly things, Hoshimiya said, “Hey, Natsuki-kun. What kind of song are you guys going to play?”

“I’m not sure yet. But knowing Serika, it’ll definitely be something I like,” I replied honestly.

In a blatantly sulky voice, Hoshimiya grumbled, “You seem to trust Serika-chan quite a lot. I’m feeling pretty jealous.”

E-Even if you tell me that straight to my face, how am I supposed to respond? I thought, at a loss as to how to react to her straightforward display of affection.

“But,” she continued, “if that’s what you’ve set your heart on doing, then I’ll cheer you on.”

“Thanks. Good luck to you too. You’ve started writing your next novel, right?”

“Yeah. I submitted the one you looked over to a competition for rookies. I’m waiting for the results now. I figured I’d get started on my next work in the meantime... Once it’s complete, will you read it?”

“Of course. I can’t wait to see your new novel.”

She laughed. “That puts me in a good mood. I also can’t wait to watch you guys perform.”

“We haven’t found all the members yet, so don’t raise the bar too high, okay?”

“Whaaat? Natsuki-kun, you’re sounding pretty spineless. You’ll sound cooler if you say, ‘I got this!’ or something.”

“Urk... You’re right. I’ll reflect on that.”

Hoshimiya seemed to be more up-front about her true feelings these days, and her words stabbed straight through my heart. *Yeah, she’s right... I’m always spineless... I’m indecisive, and I call myself cautious, but really I’m a coward. I don’t have the confidence to just proclaim something like, “I got this!” I’m a hopeless guy.* I sank into silence, negative thoughts running rampant in my mind.

I heard a giggle from my phone. “Feeling down? You’re so cute, Natsuki-kun.”

“That doesn’t really make me happy... As a man, I want to be cool,” I said glumly. *Calling a guy cute? What’s that even supposed to mean? I don’t get what’s going through her head.* “It’s about time for me to get back to practicing the guitar.”

“I’d better take a bath now, anyway. We should stop for the night,” she said in agreement.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

“Mm-hmm. Let’s both do our best—me with my novel, and you with music.”

With that, we nodded and hung up. Though our goals were different, we each understood how the other felt. I tossed my phone on top of my bed and picked up the guitar again.

I want to be cool. At the very least, I’d like to be cool when I play the guitar. I want to become someone strong, someone brimming with confidence, who can say, “I love you,” without hesitation. That was all I thought about.

The next day, when I walked into the classroom with the guitar case slung over my back, everyone in the room concentrated their gazes on me. *I knew I’d attract attention since I’m holding something I’ve never carried around before...but this is still super embarrassing!*

Uta was the first to call out to me. “Looks good on you, Natsu!”

“Really?” I said.

“You look sorta like a bandman!”

“‘Sorta like a bandman’ doesn’t really sound like a compliment.”

“Ah ha ha! You said it, not me!”

I made my way to my seat and set my stuff down as Uta and I chatted. Nanase appeared out of nowhere and pointed at the guitar case. “Can I take a look?” she asked, brimming with curiosity. I nodded and she took out the guitar, examining it with keen interest. “Hmm, it looks cool... Did you pick this out?”

“I got some advice from Serika, though I made the choice in the end.”

“I want to see you play it!” Uta exclaimed.

“Sure, but this isn’t a good time for playing. Later, okay?” I said with a wry smile.

“Grrr.” Uta’s cheeks puffed up with displeasure. “True.”

The door opened, and Hoshimiya entered the classroom. “Good morning, everyone,” she said, and beamed at our classmates with her usual radiant smile, filling the room with her flowery and gorgeous aura. She walked towards me—her seat was next to mine, after all.

After a moment, Uta returned her greeting. “Morning, Hikarin.”

“Mm-hmm. Morning, Uta-chan,” Hoshimiya said after a pause.

Their exchange was oddly meek for some reason. *This feels kinda off. Maybe it’s just my imagination, but something’s definitely different between them.* An awkward veil of silence descended upon us for a moment, but Nanase tore straight through it.

“Come to think of it, we have a math quiz today,” she said.

“Huh?!” Hoshimiya cried. “Really?”

“Murakami-sensei told us we’d have one two days ago. Don’t you remember?”

“No, I don’t,” Hoshimiya groaned. “Maybe I was sleeping.”

“Yeah, ever since we became seat neighbors, I’ve discovered that Hoshimiya falls asleep quite often during class,” I added.

“Natsuki-kun! Don’t leak people’s personal information like that! I just nod off every once in a while!” Hoshimiya shouted defensively. She glanced at Uta.

“Uta-chan, did you know about the quiz?”

“Of course I did! Not that I studied, though!” Uta crowed.

“Then...you’re in the same boat as Hoshimiya,” I said.

“Knowing but choosing to do nothing and not knowing at all are as different as the sky and the earth!” she said smugly, puffing out her chest.

“What’d you say?! Uta-chan, take this!” Hoshimiya threw her arms around Uta and began tickling her.

I guess the weird atmosphere really was just my imagination. They’re messing around the same as always.

Just then, Reita and Tatsuya showed up. “You guys have so much energy in the morning. I’m beat after morning practice,” Reita said as he wiped the sweat from his brow with a towel.

“Wassup! Hey, Natsuki, give me a crash course. I reviewed the stuff that asshat Murakami said was important, but there’s still things I don’t get a hundred percent,” Tatsuya said; his expression was the most serious of us all. He brought his math text over to my desk. “Question three on page forty-three, my calculations don’t match up with the example steps...”

“We should review too,” Uta said gloomily.

“Y-Yeah,” Hoshimiya said. “Let’s study.”

Upon seeing Tatsuya diligently preparing, Uta and Hoshimiya exchanged a look and then returned to their own seats. I explained the question to Tatsuya as Nanase and Reita watched us. Those two would probably ace the quiz without breaking a sweat; they weren’t the type of students to slack off on their studies.

“People do change,” Reita remarked.

“He’s certainly trying to change. I’m fond of that sort of thing,” Nanase said.

I didn’t quite get what they were talking about, but the two of them seemed to be on the same page.

Somehow or other, everyone safely made it through the math quiz. Serika summoned me after school. “Iwano-senpai said he’d listen to what we’ve got to say. Let’s meet up.”

We’d only started searching yesterday, but she’d already made some progress. I immediately headed to the second music room. When I opened the door, Iwano-senpai and Serika were already there. He gazed out of the window

with his hands thrust into his pockets while Serika set up her guitar. Neither one was saying a thing. *I-It's hard to speak up in this atmosphere.*

Thankfully, they noticed the door opening. Iwano-senpai looked over his shoulder and Serika beckoned me in.

"So this guy's gonna be the vocalist? Not you?" Iwano-senpai asked.

"Yeah. He's better than me. You'll see what I mean if you hear him sing," Serika replied.

She spoke to our upperclassman in a casual tone, and for a split second my whole body went cold with fear, but Iwano-senpai didn't seem to mind. Contrary to his stern appearance, perhaps he was actually a nice guy.

He examined me, looking me up and down.

Deciding I should introduce myself first, I said, "I-I'm Haibara Natsuki, a first-year."

"Second-year, Iwano Kengo. I play the drums," he said in return. "Is that a guitar you're carrying? Can you play?"

"A little, yes. I'm not good, though." The pressure from his stare was overwhelming.

Iwano-senpai quietly scrutinized me and then simply said, "I'll be right back," and left.

"Wh-What just happened?" I wondered.

"He's getting a drum set from the clubroom to play with us," Serika said.

"You got all that from four words?!"

"Iwano-senpai is a man of few words. You'll get used to it once you spend more time with him."

From my perspective, you're also a woman of few words. I guess you two understand each other since you're similar? At any rate, it seems the guy's at least kinda interested in joining our band.

"Come on, Natsuki. Set up your guitar. If you're missing any equipment, I'll lend you mine. The distortion from this effector is sweet."

At Serika's urging, I got ready for our session. Iwano-senpai carried up the drum set in parts; it looked pretty tiring. By the end of his trips, a snare drum, bass drum, tom toms, floor tom, hi-hat, crash cymbal, and ride cymbal—an entire drum set that you'd see in a concert—had been assembled in the music room.

Iwano-senpai adjusted the positioning of his drums as Serika and I lightly strummed our guitars to adjust our amp volumes and tune up. While the two of us were raising a cacophony, he began hitting the drums, hashing out an eight beat starting at the third count. Serika ad-libbed a melody on top of that, and I timidly followed along by thrumming out innocuous chords.

A torrent of intense sound swirled inside the once-quiet second music room. No matter how liberally Serika played, Iwano-senpai drummed out a beat of unparalleled accuracy. And on top of that, the sound was powerful—his drumming had an incredible intensity to it.

I'd never played while improvising, so this free-spirited session was way too difficult for me. But even when I made mistakes, they didn't mind and continued jamming away. Honestly, it took everything I had to barely keep up with them.

"Natsuki, sing," Serika abruptly said and then immediately began to play a different melody.

It was a riff I'd heard before. Following her lead, Iwano-senpai altered the rhythm. *Oh, I know this song. It's Road of Major's "Taisetsu na Mono." I like this song! She's asking me to sing it on the fly? That's way too unreasonable! But I've got no choice but to do it!* I began to sing without a microphone. I felt like I was losing to the guitars and drums, so I pushed myself to belt out notes as loud as I could.

A problem immediately made itself clear: playing the guitar while singing was far more difficult than I'd anticipated. I already had trouble recalling the right chords under normal circumstances, so suddenly adding vocals to the mix was too much.

I quickly gave up and let go of my guitar. Serika covered for me, skillfully combining the rhythm and lead parts. *Amazing technique, as always.*

I could focus on singing now, but there was still a huge mound of issues. This was different from karaoke, where the song always played at the same rhythm—a live performance had an element of chaos. *It's hard to sync up...* Right as I thought that, the music began to match my singing. *Oh, that's cool. They're playing in real time, so they can match up with me. Man, that's awesome. This is getting fun!*

After I finished singing “Taisetsu na Mono” as loudly as I could, Iwano-senpai slammed out some final beats, and Serika strummed on her open strings and then muted them, bringing the song to a close. A peaceful lull filled the second music room, only interrupted by my ragged breathing.

“Hondo, he’s as good as you say, but he’s still not there on the guitar,” Iwano-senpai said. He spun his drumsticks and snorted.

“But you can tell there’s room for growth, right? In his guitar skills *and* singing. I like Natsuki’s voice. It’s clear and high but still has that strong punch that guys’ voices typically do, and it carries far,” Serika said.

“His voice certainly suits the songs you write.”

“Yeah... Mine’s too soft for my songs, and I’m simply not good enough.”

“Hondo. I see what you want to say, but are you fine with that?” Iwano-senpai asked, his tone sharp.

I didn’t understand what those two were talking about. Their back-and-forth was likely an accumulation of all the interactions they’d had during their time in the light music club.

Serika nodded. “Yeah, it’s fine. My music doesn’t need me to sing. I finally realized that,” she said, her voice filled with determination.

Suddenly, Uta’s words from when we’d gone to karaoke together flashed through my mind.

“Seri does the vocals often too.”

Serika must’ve been the singer and guitarist in all the bands she’d been in up until now. And that very same person was leaving the role of the vocalist to me after hearing me sing. I was finally starting to feel the weight of her words. The

vocalist was the face of a band. It didn't matter if Serika could perform at a professional level—if my singing sucked, then the value of the song would plummet.

I'm glad she expects so much from me, but can I really do this? C'mon, now. Don't hesitate, me! Didn't I already decide to do this because I wanted to? If I suck now, then I just need to get better. I've gotta practice singing and playing the guitar like mad. I won't be able to keep up with Serika if I don't.

"Let's do it, Iwano-senpai. I really like your drumming," Serika said, her tone impassive as always.

He remained silent, eyes fixed outside the window—the sunset dyed the sky crimson. *Serika said he turned her down once already. Is there a reason he can't join? At the very least, he seemed to be having a blast playing the drums during our jam session.*

Though this was basically our first time meeting, I could tell that Iwano-senpai had enjoyed himself. He and Serika were musicians of few words, and their expressions were hard to read since they hardly reacted, but they conveyed their emotions eloquently through the timbre of their respective instruments.

"Iwano-senpai. I also want to do this with you," I said. Honestly speaking, I hadn't wanted to until we'd played together, because I'd gotten the impression that he was difficult to approach. But things were different now. Now, I knew he was someone who pounded on the drums with passion.

"Even if we play together, it'll only be for this year. I can't continue any longer than that," he finally said.

"That's long enough. Our goal is the school festival," Serika said.

It is? Uh, that's my first time hearing about that, though! We only have a month and a half until the festival; are we gonna be okay?

Serika noticed my mouth hanging open and tilted her head. "Huh? Didn't I tell you? We're going to play during the school festival concert."

"We only have a month and a half, you know?" I said.

"It'll work out as long as we assemble our band in time," she replied. I could

hear, “*We just have to practice until we’re about to drop dead,*” heavily implied in her words. “Natsuki, you wanna play too, right? This is your chance to show the girl you like your cool side.”

“Well, if our music’s hype enough, then yeah, I guess I’ll look cool,” I said. The sight I was envisioning was surely remarkably close to the rainbow-colored youth I’d been aiming for. However, the difficulty level of this challenge was incomparably higher than any hurdle that I’d had to overcome already.

This wasn’t a manga or an anime. A high school band pumping up a crowd at a real-life school festival was a rare occurrence. It could be a problem if the spectators weren’t used to live performances, the stage’s audio equipment might be lacking, and our band itself might not be good enough either.

Serika and I discussed the logistics of achieving such a feat while Iwano-senpai listened in silence.

Eventually, I asked, “Why can you only play until the end of this year?”

“Unlike you two, I’m a second-year. I have to concentrate on my entrance exams starting next year,” he muttered.

Oh yeah, that’s right. A second-year’s third semester is also known as semester zero of their third year. If he’s trying to get into a good university, then remaining in a band after the new year will be rough.

“Iwano-senpai wants to be a doctor,” Serika explained.

I see... Then he definitely can’t afford to study half-heartedly.

“His grades are first in his year, despite his looks. Isn’t that unexpected?” she remarked rudely.

“What do you mean ‘despite my looks’? I’m a diligent student no matter how you look at me,” Iwano-senpai retorted, scowling.

I found it difficult to agree with either statement, so I just put on a polite smile. *Wow, a doctor, huh? Ryomei is up there in terms of standard scores in the prefecture, but we’re not number one. Few students move on from here to a medical school. It’s obviously not going to be easy.*

“My parents are doctors,” Iwano-senpai said—quite the substantial motive.

“So I need to become a doctor too. I can’t afford to fail my exams. But I’m not the brightest bulb, so a half-assed attempt to stick with both won’t go well.”

“But you want to, right? I mean, you’re lookin’ pretty sad about it,” Serika pointed out.

His face looked as stern as always to me, though. *Must’ve been a minute change that only people who’re close to him can tell.*

“It’s too late for that now. After the third-years retired and the band I was in broke up, no one invited me to join them out of consideration for my situation. Isn’t that right?”

“Nope, way off the mark. Everyone was just scared of you. Your rep with the first-years is especially bad. I felt the same at first, though my opinion of you changed after hearing you play the drums.”

Serika held nothing back, and her blunt words caused Iwano-senpai to petrify. I could practically see a “*BAM!*” sound effect weighing down on his head. The drastic change in his expression was obvious even to me, a telling sign of how shocked he was. *Wouldn’t he have been better off not knowing that?*

Iwano-senpai cleared his throat and pulled himself back together. “I like your way with the guitar, and I like the songs you write. I’m curious where you’ll go from here,” he said. “But that’s why I’m scared that if I join your band, I’ll end up getting dragged along forever. I feel like I’ll give up on becoming a doctor and go down the path of a musician instead. I’m afraid of that.”

“Senpai, you’re being unusually talkative,” she said.

“I’m being honest. Normally, I wouldn’t whine like this.”

Silence stretched out between the two.

“All right, you’re in until the school festival,” Serika finally said, steeling herself for the inevitable end. “We have about a month and a half. Let’s give it everything we’ve got. Enough that all your regrets will disappear. Our performance on the school festival stage will be the greatest finale ever.”

“You’re taking this to the extreme,” Iwano-senpai said. “Why me? There are other drummers around. If you don’t limit yourself to this high school, then you

could find any number of people who could match your skill. There are plenty better than me.”

“Your drumming charmed me, so I invited you. I don’t mind if it’s only for a short time. I just wanted us to play together,” Serika replied. “With you and with Natsuki, here.”

She sounded like she was confessing her love—I understood how deep Serika’s passion for music ran.

His mind made up, Iwano-senpai nodded. “Okay. Until the school festival, then.”

A satisfied smile spread across Serika’s face, and she raised her hands to me. I stared at her blankly.

She furrowed her brows in displeasure. “What’re you doing? C’mon, high-five me.”

“H-High-five?” I parroted back. Confused, I raised my hands up too, and she energetically slapped them. A loud *smack* echoed in the room. Then, she spun around in circles in a little dance. She seemed incredibly happy.

“So, we’ve got a vocalist, guitars, and a drummer, but what about a bassist?” Iwano-senpai asked.

“You two were the only ones I wanted to play with, so we don’t have one yet. But Natsuki said he’s got a bassist in mind,” Serika replied. “That’s what we discussed, yeah?”

“I still need to ask him, so don’t get your hopes up,” I said.

“Just to be sure, but if we want to perform in the school festival, then he has to be a Ryomei student,” Iwano-senpai said.

“No worries there. Hold on, Iwano-senpai, don’t you know him? His name’s Shinohara-kun.” I had a feeling I knew what his reply would be, but I asked anyway.

He cocked his head to the side, a harsh frown still plastered on his face. “Who’s that? Is he in the light music club?”

I replied with a lighthearted laugh and dropped the subject.

Three days later, after a long week of school, Saturday finally came. I was working a shift at Café Mares when the door chime rang, announcing a new guest.

“Welcome!” said Nanase, who was in charge of the floor.

I was responsible for the kitchen today, and I looked towards the entrance from behind the counter.

“Heyo, Yuino,” Serika said, dressed in her casual clothes.

Her beautiful long brown hair was gathered to the right in a side ponytail, and she wore a thin knitted top that showed off her shoulders, plus a short miniskirt. I didn’t know where to look.

“Oh? Hello, Serika. Do you have business with Haibara-kun?” Nanase said.

“Hmm. You could say that, but you could also say I don’t.”

Nanase looked confused. “I don’t quite understand, but I’ll take you to your seat.”

Serika followed her while looking around the store. When she spotted me, she gave me a little wave with both hands. *Urgh, that’s so cute! Quit that behavior... This girl is too flirty.*

“Huh? H-Hondo-san? I didn’t know she came here,” Shinohara-kun said. He was washing dishes next to me, and his eyes widened in shock.

I took my eyes off him for a moment to glance at the clock: it was almost noon. Shinohara-kun and I would be getting off work soon. I’d told her to show up around now after revising my initial plan. I figured that Serika’s charisma would be necessary to solicit him into our band.

“H-Haibara-kun. Come to think of it, recently you’ve been coming to school with a guitar, right?” Shinohara-kun said.

“Huh? How’d you know? Isn’t your class far from mine?” I questioned. *Not gonna lie, I’m really embarrassed that I’m lugging a guitar around when I suck at it. If I were good (and I’d have to feel like I’m good) then I could be confident... I want to get better faster.*

"I heard the girls in my class gossiping about it, and I saw you holding it too. Are you joining the light music club?"

"I might join, but I'm not too sure about that right now," I replied. If we assembled our whole band, then it wasn't a big deal if I didn't join the club.

"Can you play the guitar?"

"A bit. But I'm not very good."

"Th-That's still amazing! Your grades are superb, you're good at athletics, and now you can play the guitar too."

It feels like Shinohara-kun's starting to idolize me. It's scary. Is there anything I can do to lower his assessment of me? "I'm not that great a guy. I'm afraid your evaluation of me is exaggerated."

"A-And you're humble too... You really live up to your reputation!"

O-Oh no! No matter what I say, he interprets it as a positive thing! Right as I gave up on reducing his opinion of me, the clock's hand reached the peak.

Mitsuno-san, the shift manager, came out of the break room and tapped our shoulders. "'Sup! Hey, boys, time to change shifts. Great job."

"Yep, good work!" I said.

"G-Good work... I'm sorry..." Shinohara-kun said.

"Uh-huh, good work," Mitsuno-san said. "But why're you apologizing? Shinohara, you're a funny one."

Shinohara-kun continued to bow over and over as we headed to the break room to change.

"Shinohara-kun, do you have some time after this?" I asked.

"H-Huuuh?! I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong?" he said.

I'd been trying to be as nice as possible, but his reaction was still extremely wary. "No, not at all. We wanted to ask if you'd join our band."

"Oh... I see. That's a relief... Hmm? Huh? 'O-Our band'?"

"Yeah. So far there's me, Serika over there, and Iwano-senpai from the light

music club,” I explained.

Shinohara-kun’s eyes grew as wide as saucers and he froze. “H-Huuuuuuuh?!” he screamed wildly, reaching a volume I’d never known was possible for him.

Shinohara-kun and I sat down across from Serika, who was already sitting at a table for four. When she noticed us, she took out her earphones.

“Were you listening to music?” I asked.

“BUMP’s ‘Yggdrasil.’ All of mankind needs to listen to this; it’s an excellent album,” she replied.

“I feel ya. I always return to that no matter what else I listen to.”

Nanase brought us our drinks as we chatted, a black coffee for me and a caffe latte for Shinohara-kun. “Is this a band meeting?” she asked.

“More like we’re trying to recruit Shinohara-kun,” I said.

Shinohara-kun was stiff from nerves, but he flinched when he heard that.

“That’s right. Shinohara-kun mentioned he was in the light music club,” Nanase said.

“Mm-hmm. I’ve seen you in the clubroom a few times before.” Serika paused and then added, “I think?”

“Hey, at least say that with confidence,” I hastily quipped. Serika didn’t have a single considerate bone in her body, as per usual.

“I-It’s okay... I’m sorry; I don’t have much of a presence...” Shinohara-kun laughed deprecatingly at himself.

Th-The light in his eyes is dying!

“We’re looking for a convenient bassist to join us,” Serika casually said.

Hey! You didn’t need to say “convenient”!

“We need someone who’s a Ryomei student, not in another band, and an experienced bassist,” she continued.

“I do fulfill those requirements. I’m a leftover in the light music club, after

all... Ha ha ha..." he said.

Stop belittling yourself at every turn! It's hard to respond to! I recalled the way everyone had forced a smile every time I spouted stuff like that. *So this is how they all felt back then... Disparaging yourself excessively is not a good habit.*

"Shinohara-kun, that's your name, right? Would you like to join our band? We recently formed, so we don't even have a name yet. Our goal is to perform at the school festival concert," Serika said.

"Thank you for inviting me," he began, "but are you sure you want someone like me? I'm not very good. To be honest, I'm not a good match considering your skill level..."

"I understand your concern, but I'm in the same position. Let's practice hard together," I said, trying to be encouraging.

"Haibara-kun, you're a genius... So I'm sure you'll leave me in the dust in no time."

"Hey now, that's not true, and you're being way too negative," I said.

"I-I'm sorry... This is just how I am... Ha ha ha..." A gloomy atmosphere hung over Shinohara-kun's surroundings.

Serika didn't bat an eye and indifferently suggested, "Why don't you try for now? If you're interested, then try and give it more thought from there."

Good idea. I think it'll be beneficial for all of us if he participates in a session first.

Shinohara-kun's eyes roamed the room in a suspicious manner, and then he suddenly chugged his caffe latte in one gulp. "I-I'll try! Is that okay?! If you're okay with me, that is!" His answer was unexpectedly loud, and all the customers in the café turned their attention to us.

"Of course!" I said with a smile.

Serika wordlessly shot him a thumbs-up.

A vocalist, guitarist, bassist, and drummer—somehow, we'd gathered all the people we needed. It was an extremely quirky group, and I had my worries, but I felt excited more than anything.

First Interlude

On August 31st, the last day of summer vacation, I hung out with Yui-Yui and Hikarin.

Thanks to the periodic study sessions that Natsu held during our break, I had actually finished my homework. It was the first time in my life that I'd experienced such a relaxed last day of summer vacation.

I need to thank Natsu. When I thought about him, I automatically began to smile, and I hurriedly tried to hold it back. *People are gonna think I'm a weirdo for smirking all on my own.*

"Ahhh! We did so much!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. I ended up buying a lot of autumn outfits," Nanase said.

"That was fun! Though, I feel down when I think about how school starts tomorrow," Hoshimiya said.

We'd wandered around various clothing stores in the shopping mall, eaten delicious pizza and pasta at a chic Italian restaurant, and watched a new romance movie that was all the rage lately at the movie theater. I was a little tired since our schedule had been stuffed full of fun stuff, but I could end summer vacation on a high note this way. My first high school summer vacation was the funnest one I'd experienced out of all my vacations so far.

There were two reasons for that. The first was that I'd made irreplaceable friends. I'd always had a lot of friends, so I had never belonged to one specific group. But I started sticking to one group in high school because of how comfortable I felt with them.

Tatsu was a good friend of mine whom I cherished from way back. He was a bit rowdy, and his word choices irritated me a lot, but he was kind when it mattered and always by my side when I felt depressed.

Rei always observed everyone from a step away, and sometimes I didn't know what was going through his head, but if we proposed an idea, then he would

organize it into reality for sure. He was super intelligent, though he was too confident in his own abilities, in my opinion.

Yui-Yui was a cool girl, but sometimes she would show us her cute side, which was just so unfair. She acted flirty without realizing it, which was just cowardly! Of course I would like her. If Rei was the one who looked out for the boys, then Yui-Yui was the one who took care of us girls. There were facets of herself she showed to Hikarin that I'd never seen before. I wanted to break through that wall between us.

Hikarin had been my closest female friend since I'd entered high school. The moment I laid eyes on her, I thought it was a miracle how cute she was. How could a girl who was so idol-like exist? And her personality was angelic too. I did suspect her character to be somewhat calculated, but I had no doubt she was a good person by nature. She was lively in conversations, and her occasional clumsy side was funny—I enjoyed spending time with her.

Then there was Natsu, the first boy I ever fell in love with. The other reason I had so much fun over summer vacation was because he was here. Natsu changed my world: I looked forward to tomorrow. I got excited over the smallest things. I cheered up when I saw him smile. But when I saw him talking to other girls...an unpleasant feeling would overcome me.

“Hey, Uta-chan. Can we talk for a bit?” Hikarin asked when we were about to go home. She pointed to a park we happened to be passing by.

I had a vague idea what it was about; *that* would be the topic in question today.

We sat down on a bench shaded by a tree. Children were playing in the sandbox. *I'm impressed they can play under the sun in this heat.* On the other side of the park, a group of older ladies who looked like the children's parents sat under the shade. They fanned themselves with flat paper uchiwa fans as they chatted.

The cicadas' loud chirping was interrupted by Yui-Yui. “Should I step away?”

“No,” Hikarin said. “I want you to stay, Yuino-chan. Is that okay, Uta-chan?”

After a beat I said, “Sure.” I could tell that Hikarin was determined.

She was different from me. On the surface, I'd been acting cheerful, but in truth, I was full of hesitation and unease. I didn't have the courage to put my feelings into words. That's why I'd stayed ambiguous, closing my eyes to the elephant in the room and putting off this talk.

"I love Natsuki-kun," she said, her eyes locked on mine.

I know. I noticed long ago. But I didn't want to put my observation into words. After all, if something is put into words, it becomes clearly defined. I tried hard not to notice, but in the end, I guess I'm being forced to face it. I looked down and said nothing.

"So I need to apologize to you. You were the first one to fall for him, and I knew that...and yet here I am, confessing to you after the fact," she continued in a kind tone. "I'm sorry."

"Hikarin, you don't need to apologize." I managed to wring those words out. "You can't help who you fall for. It was the same for me too." *No. I sound so gloomy; this isn't like me. I need to sound brighter.* "But I won't lose! Stop trying to be considerate to me, okay?" *Am I smiling properly? Is my voice stable?*

Unlike me, who was riddled with unease, Hikarin smiled in relief.



“Right. I won’t lose either,” Hikarin said.

“No hard feelings no matter who wins, okay?” I said.

“Yeah. Whatever happens, I’ll do my best to act the same as normal.”

It was just a verbal promise. In all likelihood, things wouldn’t conclude so neatly. I wasn’t sure I could stand watching Hikarin and Natsu date from up close, and she surely felt the same. So this was our wish. *I hope it’ll truly end that way*, we both prayed for each other.

“No matter what happens, will you still be my friend?” I asked. Even so, I adored Hikarin—I adored Hoshimiya Hikari. Romance aside, I loved her more than Natsu. I hated the thought of losing my friend because of my feelings.

“Yeah, I promise.”

Still, I couldn’t give up on Natsu, which was why we made this promise. Hikarin probably felt the same as me. *I’ve never really believed that you can truly understand another person from the bottom of your heart... But I want to believe that it’s possible, just for now.*

Chapter 2: The Band Is Formed

Serika summoned us to school on Sunday, so I headed over. It was still early in the morning, but we would be starting band practice today. I reread our RINE chat as I sat on the train. After we'd invited Shinohara-kun yesterday, Serika immediately made a RINE group for our band. Its name was "My Band."

So this is your band? Okay, well, I guess it is...but didn't you have anything else, even if this was just a temporary name? Though, this is very Serika behavior.

Hondo Serika: Tomorrow at 9 am, meet in the second music room

Natsuki: Are we practicing?

Hondo Serika: I'll send the sheet music. Let's try to play together. Memorize it by tomorrow

Natsuki: You fiend!

Hondo Serika: It'll work out

Iwano: Did you write this?

Hondo Serika: Yeah. It's the best one I've ever written

Natsuki: Sorry but I can only read guitar tabs

Hondo Serika: 'Kay, I'll send that too

Shinohara@animefan: Did you already obtain permission to use the second music room on a Sunday?

Hondo Serika: Everyone besides Natsuki is in the light music club so isn't it fine?

Shinohara@animefan: I'll check with our adviser just to be safe.

Iwano: Wouldn't it be quicker if Haibara just joined the club?

Hondo Serika: Good point. We can fill his forms out tomorrow too

Natsuki: I'm fine with that but don't I need to ask the club prez or something?

Iwano: I'll get his permission

Hondo Serika: It'd be good if you greeted the other club members later. I'll introduce you to everyone

Iwano: Do you need to? The light music club basically operates as individual bands so we only interact with other members to schedule who gets to use the clubroom

Hondo Serika: Iwano-senpai, you're the only one who thinks that, you know? Everyone's tight besides you

Iwano: I see...

Natsuki: Hey! You need to mince your words more

Shinohara@animefan: It's okay. No one even remembers I exist.

Natsuki: What's okay about that...?

I finished scrolling down our little exchange. *It's great that we're all getting along (I think). It'd suck if the mood were frosty.*

I'd done my best yesterday to memorize the chords Serika sent over, but one day wasn't enough time. I'd more or less nailed down the introduction and the verses, but I was still iffy on the chorus. In all likelihood, she'd intentionally made my part easier. The difficulty level was clearly lower compared to hers. The rhythm part was full of power chords and mostly repeated the same simple riff.

I yawned. I was sleep-deprived because I'd stayed up late last night practicing. This was my first time going to school on a weekend since my do-over—the first time since I'd been in the basketball club during my first round of high school.

I arrived at Maebashi Station and headed down the road. The walk felt unfamiliar and refreshing. Normally the street was filled with students going to school, but it was completely deserted now. The peaceful stillness was pleasant. As I was thinking that, hands suddenly appeared from behind me and covered my eyes, throwing my world into darkness.

"Who is it?" asked a singsong voice.

"The only one who'd do this is you, Serika," I replied. *And I recognized you by your voice.* I grabbed her slender arms and moved her hands off my eyes. I turned around—her beautiful face was much closer than I'd anticipated. The aroma of perfume wafted up my nose.

Serika giggled. "You'd better not fall for me. You already have Hikari-chan and Uta to think about."

“Oh, shut up. I know,” I said. *This is why people who are aware of how attractive they are are so damn—*

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic. Our story’s about to start, you know,” Serika said as she did something that resembled shadowboxing.

What is she doing? “Well, you’re a ball of energy today.”

“Obviously. I slept a solid ten hours yesterday.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit excessive?”

“A well-slept child grows well too—height and chest. That’s what I believe.”

“You shouldn’t talk about that with guys,” I said after a moment. *In the first place, as I recall from our beach trip, Serika’s quite... No, let’s tuck those memories away.*

“Really?” Serika tilted her head to the side.

She’s probably someone who speaks before she thinks. I sighed.

Without any warning, she lobbed a preposterous question at me. “Natsuki, are you a big boobs or small boobs kinda guy?”

“What?!” At that moment, Hoshimiya and Uta flashed through my mind. *S-Stop, me! Don’t think about anything! If I think about anything now, I’ll be in hot water!*

“So, which one?”

“Neither! I’m not into either, okay?!” I frantically shook my head.

“Really?” Serika asked doubtfully.

Yes, really. If I had to say, I like whatever size the girl I love is.

“But don’t you think bigger is better? They’re so soft and squishy.”

Excuse me, but that’s too much information for a virgin boy! It’s so hard to hide how flustered I am whenever I’m talking with Serika. Exhausted, I said, “I dunno about that. Small ones have their own charm.”

For example, it’s cute when girls worry about their small size... It was just supposed to be a made-up example, but a concrete situation came to mind, and

I even had a specific person playing the part too. *Hey, I said stop it, me!*

She hummed dubiously. "Guess that's life for you."

"Anyway, decisions aren't made based on chest size, right?" I remarked. *Generally speaking, though, better too big than too small... What I said earlier just went down the drain, didn't it?*

Serika and I chatted about inane things like that as we headed up to the second music room. Suddenly, a meek voice whispered from right behind us.

"U-Um... Good morning..."

I whipped around in surprise. *When the hell did Shinohara-kun start walking with us?!* "M-Morning... How long have you been here?"

"Maybe ten minutes?"

"You've been with us for ten minutes?!"

"I'm sorry. I was hesitant about whether I should say something..."

"For ten whole minutes?!"

"Normally, when people haven't noticed me and I say something, I surprise them." A self-deprecating chuckle spilled out of his throat.

Is it just me, or does he look really pale?

"Who woulda thought someone could be so invisible," Serika said, pulling back a bit.

Hey! I told you to stop launching fireball comments at the poor guy! Though it is true that there aren't many who could blend into the background as well as Shinohara-kun.

"It's my only strong point... Not that I need it, though. Ha ha ha..." he said.

Background guys like us do tend to be skilled at erasing our presence...but Shinohara-kun is a whole different beast. I can tell the gap between our talent for the shadows is wide.

"Also, the topic you two were discussing...made it difficult to speak up..."

"For the record, Serika is the one who forced that topic on me, okay?"

“Of course, I understand,” Shinohara-kun said, nodding his head, but then whispered so she couldn’t hear, “Wh-When you’re in front of a girl, that’s the only way you can reply. I get it.”

You didn’t have to understand that part! My mental state was starting to feel shoddy by the time we finally reached the second music room.

“What’re you guys muttering about? You two seem close,” Serika said.

“Oh, no. We’re certainly not like that,” Shinohara-kun replied.

Don’t you think you were too quick to deny, there? As an experienced Negative Nancy, I know he’s thinking something like, “Haibara-kun might get annoyed if people thought he was close to someone like me,” so I’m not hurt... I can read him. Wait, I can read him like a book! I completely understand everything going through Shinohara-kun’s head!

Not that it matters if I do. I have no idea how to respond. No one dealt with me when I acted like this in the past, so I have no one to reference. The old me was too powerful...

Suddenly, the door to the second music room opened, interrupting our jabbering.

“Hurry up and come in and set up. We don’t have much time before the school festival,” Iwano-senpai said. His arms were folded, and as always, his expression reminded me of a massive boulder.

“I-I’m sorry.” Shinohara-kun trembled, about to break out into tears.

TUNK, TUNK, TOOM, BAAAM. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. TWANG, JAAAN!

After we’d transformed it into our base, the second music room was filled with the sound of music as we tuned up. It was like having a conversation with our instruments. After I finished, I moved on to adjusting the volume. *How loud should I make it? I’ve never played with other people, so I don’t know what to do.*

“Natsuki, lower your volume. Shinohara-kun, you’re standing a little too far away,” Serika said.

I followed her instructions and adjusted my amp and effector. *This is fairly hard. Serika-sensei is basically doing everything for me. And in my case, I've got a lot more to think about than just the guitar.*

"Ah, ahhh," I said into the microphone that Serika had swiped from the light music clubroom. "Is this good?" I was adjusting the mic stand while also checking how my throat felt.

"Okay, sounds good." Serika made a circle with her thumb and pointer finger. *My throat feels decent. Man, I've never used a mic outside of karaoke, so this is a new experience!*

Once everyone was done prepping, Serika asked, "Natsuki, can you sing?"

"I think I've got the lyrics memorized. Vaguely," I replied.

"Good job doing it in a day when it's full of English."

"If you know it's unreasonable, then can you not ask me to memorize a whole song in a day?" *I struggled to memorize just the guitar chords, you know!*

"It's my song, so I'll sing it the first time. You can put your spin on it, but use me as an example."

"Got it." I stepped back from the mic stand, and Serika took my place. *I got the gist of the melody from the tabs, but I haven't actually listened to the raw song, so I'm not sure I can sing it the way Serika imagined. Having an example will be helpful.*

"Okay, let's take it from the top. We'll start on count four," she said.

Whoops, now isn't the time to relax. I'm the amateur here, so I need to focus.

One, two, three, four, tapped out the drumsticks, and then the intro began with a fleeting, drowsy arpeggio from Serika. As if to support the leisurely opening, Iwano-senpai beat out a simplistic rhythm. Shinohara-kun nonchalantly joined in—his bass reverberating heavy and low as though it were pounding on the ground—forming a carefree and pleasant melody.

After the first bar ended and the second began, Iwano-senpai loudly hit the hi-hat cymbal. The moment the intensity of the drums suddenly shot up, Serika vigorously thrummed her guitar too. The song's vibe did a complete one-eighty

into a fierce tune, and her strumming cut through the air.

Serika's guitar solo ends...here! I joined in on the rhythm guitar, mechanically strumming to match the drum's beat. My part didn't have any difficult chords, so I wouldn't mess up as long as I concentrated—at least that's how it should've been. I dropped my gaze to look at my guitar, and before I realized it, it was time for the vocals to join in. Luckily, I wasn't the singer this time.

Serika's husky voice melded with the song. The verse repeated a simple riff. Iwano-senpai's precise rhythm was reliable, and it felt like Shinohara-kun's deep bass sound was supporting me from the shadows.

No matter how many mistakes I made, the dependable rhythm section never slipped up, which was why Serika could plunge into the chorus with perfect timing. She stepped on the effector pedal and thrummed the guitar; the simple melody was painted gorgeously. She vocalized as though she were screaming, adding excitement to the already flamboyant chorus.

She's awesome! So this is who Serika is. Even a newbie like me can tell how amazing she is. Iwano-senpai and Shinohara-kun are skilled too, and I can't compare to them either. But all the sounds that she spins together sparkle on a completely different level. Wow, it's so easy to understand—I know how to make this song rock.

Serika is this song's light. Her voice and guitar decide its worth. The three of us are shadows. All we need to do is support her so she can shine even brighter.

We didn't need to exchange any more words; the three of us shared the same objective. The change in our instruments' sounds was our answer. Serika's guitar riff rampaged on top of the foundation of music that we built, like violent sparks scattering in the air. The song unfolded dramatically and entered the final chorus.

Serika's husky voice was intense but also sorrowful, and she strummed her guitar with fervor. Iwano-senpai bashed the cymbals in tandem with her, signaling the song's end. When a drop of water trickled down my guitar, I finally realized that I was sweating buckets. That was how deeply I'd been concentrating.

That was a great performance! I made a bunch of mistakes, but that was

plenty good for our first time. Plus, I only practiced with the tabs yesterday, so there was a lot about the song I didn't understand. But I'll be able to play better now that I have a complete grasp of the whole thing.

"We just played 'black witch.' It's the first song I ever wrote," Serika said.

"That was super awesome and cool! I can't believe you wrote this," I said.

"Yeah. It's pretty good, right? I like it too."

It was truly fitting to call her song hard rock. The lead guitar stood out, rivaling the vocals for the star position. The instrumentals were intense and heavy, leaning into the melodic hardcore genre, and the chorus galloped by. If someone told me that a pro had actually written this song, I would've believed them without hesitation.

"I'll be thrilled if everyone else likes this song too." I looked up from my guitar at Shinohara-kun, whose mouth was curved up in a smile.

"Th-That was a good song! It was wonderful," he said, excited.

I nodded. "I want to record this and see how it sounds. It'll definitely sound cool."

"Oh, yes, we forgot to do that. I'll record it with my phone next time," he said.

Iwano-senpai and Serika were calm compared to the two of us.

"I've heard this one before. You played it with the first band you were in," Iwano-senpai said.

"Oh yeah, that did happen," she remarked.

"Hondo. From your perspective, how would you grade this session?"

"Hmm, well..." She thought for a moment. "Considering that this was our first time playing together... Thirty points?"

Her assessment shocked me considerably. "That low?!"

"If a hundred points is my ideal, yeah. You're all holding back too much."

"I... I was trying to hold back, though..." Shinohara-kun timidly said, his gaze swimming around the room. "I thought it would be a better song if I matched up with you, Hondo-san."

“I don’t really like that mindset,” she murmured after a pause. Shinohara-kun’s shoulders jolted and trembled. “Shinohara-kun, you’re good on the bass. I was surprised. So play more seriously.”

“O-Okay... I’ll do my best.”

“Iwano-senpai, that goes for you too. The drums that I fell in love with aren’t that bland.”

“Yeah, I know.” Iwano-senpai nodded solemnly at her sharp words.

She clapped her hands, clearing the dreary mood. “Okay, you guys get the song now, right? Natsuki will sing next. The real performance starts now.”

“Sure...but what about me? Do you have any advice for me?” I asked.

Serika forced a smile in an uncharacteristically pained manner. “Natsuki... Keep it up. Let’s work hard.”

Oh... Does that mean I’m not even at the level where she needs to point anything specific out?! Before I could even sink into depression, Serika moved the mic stand over in front of me.

“The tempo was a little slow in the intro,” she said.

“Got it,” Iwano-senpai responded and then started up another four count.

We should’ve become familiar with the song by now, but the second attempt did not go as smoothly as the first. The problem hit after the vocal part began and I needed to play at the same time as singing. If I focused on singing, then I would miss chords, but if I focused on the guitar, then I couldn’t keep my voice at a steady pitch and volume.

I knew this would be hard...but this is all I can manage? Sweat rolled down my forehead and into my eyes, blurring my vision. I messed up the timing for the chorus, which caused Shinohara-kun to slow down slightly, whereas Iwano-senpai maintained the same perfect rhythm—the bass and drums went out of sync. Because of that, it threw off Serika when she began to play the melody. The clashing rhythms turned a song that should’ve been great into a terrible cacophony.

Suddenly, my fingers couldn’t move.

“Let’s stop for a sec. We’re way too off beat.” Serika raised her arm, and everyone stopped playing.

It’s my fault... I’m holding this band back. Can I really handle being a guitar vocalist—the face of a band—the way I am?

“Shinohara-kun, can you look up more? I want us to communicate through eye contact,” she said.

“Yeah. I want to get our rhythm in sync more,” Iwano-senpai said in agreement.

“Oh,” Shinohara-kun said, bowing repeatedly. “I-I’m sorry.”

Serika turned to me next. *What’s it gonna be? I wouldn’t blame her if she told me she regrets inviting me into the band. I’m obviously the one who’s not on the same level as everyone else.*

“Natsuki, pretty decent. I really do love your voice.” She smiled and thumped my chest with the back of her fist.

“You liked *that*? I was in shambles,” I said.

“Really? That was plenty good. Oh, it’s not your fault we fell out of rhythm there.”

“Yes... That was all my fault.” Shinohara-kun staggered, eyes teary.

I-Is he okay?

“It takes time to get used to playing guitar and singing at the same time. There’s no other way out but to practice,” she said.

I hesitated. “It might be too late now, but don’t you think it’d be better if you sang?”

“Well, maybe right *now*, yeah. But I have high expectations for you.”

Expectations, huh? She’s right. We’ve only just started practicing; it’s way too early for complaining.

“If you don’t sing, then all we’re left with is a mediocre guitarist,” Iwano-senpai said.

“Urk. Yes, you’re very right,” I said.

His words were harsh, but it was merely the truth. If I quit as the vocalist, then there wasn't much point keeping me in the band. It was more realistic for me to quit my role as the rhythm guitarist and devote myself to singing. Serika would have more to shoulder, but it wouldn't be an issue thanks to her skills.

"Y-You didn't have to say that much... He's far better than someone like me," Shinohara-kun said.

I knew he was trying to defend me, but his self-deprecation didn't make me happy. His excessive humility only revealed how abnormally low he evaluated himself. *Shinohara-kun's an excellent bassist. I can tell that after playing with him today. He doesn't need to belittle himself so much.*

"Anyway, let's practice. It's not time to worry yet," Serika said—and she was right.

"Yeah," I said.

"Y-Yes!" stammered Shinohara-kun.

"Right," Iwano-senpai agreed.

We nodded and started up once more.

The sky had turned completely pitch-black. We'd started practicing at nine in the morning, and it was now already seven in the evening. It was so late that I suspected the clock had malfunctioned for a moment. Time had flown by in the blink of an eye, but my hoarse voice was proof of how long we'd been practicing.

"Ah, ahhh. Hmm," I uttered. "It's hard to hit the high notes after all that."

"Make sure you take care of your throat. It's impressive you held out 'til the end," Serika said.

Though I'd learned through self-study, I had done vocal training on my own, so I knew how to effectively utilize my throat. *I sang from my stomach so that my throat wouldn't hurt, but I kept it up for too long. Plus, I went all out every time, so of course my voice would get hoarse. Well, it should heal overnight.*

"Haaah..." A small sigh inadvertently escaped me.

It didn't go unnoticed by Serika, who was walking beside me. "It was just the first day. Did you want to be a prodigy?" She bought a bottle of water from the vending machine in front of the club building and tossed it to me.

I opened the cap and quenched my dry throat. Water always tasted the best when I was exhausted. "No...but I feel down that practice isn't going smoothly."

"This is refreshing for me. I had the impression that you could do anything perfectly on your first try," she said.

"That's..." I paused. "I'm just prepping where people can't see."

"Yeah, I realized you're actually a hard worker after today."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment? Doesn't really feel like it..."

Suddenly, a voice piped up from behind us. "H-Haibara-kun, you're very skilled already. I don't think you need to be so down on yourself."

Th-That surprised me...!

Shinohara-kun appeared out of nowhere, trailing behind us. Even Serika had thrown her hands up in a strange pose due to the shock.

"I almost spat out my tea," she murmured.

I guess even someone who lives in her own laid-back world like Serika can be surprised.

"I-I'm sorry for surprising you... But I was worried that Haibara-kun was depressed."

Shinohara-kun... You're a good guy!

"You might think you're unskilled because you're comparing yourself to Hondo-san," he continued.

"Yeah. Natsuki, you're pretty good on the guitar. You'll get even better when you get used to singing at the same time."

It is true that the timbre of my guitar sounds dull when Serika's playing so radiantly next to me. I've just restarted, so of course I appear that way when compared to someone who's been practicing every day like her... I know that, but I still want to be better at the guitar. On that day, I admired Serika's playing

and wanted to become like her.

“In the first place, it was bizarre that you could even last through all of practice today when you were told to come here out of the blue... Hondo-san and Iwano-senpai aren’t regular high school musicians. There’s no point in comparing yourself to them.”

“Shinohara-kun, you’re really good too. I can’t believe a bassist at your level was a leftover,” I replied.

“Ha ha ha... No one was even aware of my existence in the light music club to begin with,” he said, his eyes looking like those of a dead fish, his smile hollow. “And I’m not even good, anyway... My rhythm was all over the place today... Is there any point for a bass that can’t keep the beat to even exist? And here I was finally invited into a band too...” he muttered. The murky aura that drifted out of him overwhelmed even Serika.

“W-We don’t have much time, but I’m sure we can put together a great act,” she said.

Serika’s right. I can sense the potential in this band. At the very least, the other three are extremely skilled. That’s why...I want to practice as much as I can, even alone, so I can catch up to them!

“By the way, did I pass the tryouts?” Shinohara-kun asked.

“Of course, with flying colors. I like your bass. It’s easy to play with,” she replied.

True that. I also got the impression that he’s easy to play with today. It felt like he was supporting my guitar from the shadows. Performing with him is comforting.

“But from now on, we’re going to practice very seriously, just like we did today. Are you okay with that?” Serika asked him, her tone dead serious. She was probing him to see if he had the determination to continue. We’d practiced all day from morning to night; she was implying that today was not a one-off session, but our everyday until the school festival. Could he withstand that?

“That’s fine,” Shinohara-kun answered with a nod. Those words were the only time today I’d heard him speak with tenacity. “H-Hondo-san, when you invited

me, I decided I would give this band my everything.”

Serika bought a can of coffee from the vending machine and tossed it at him. “Okay. Then this is to celebrate your initiation.”

Flustered, Shinohara-kun waved his hands in the air and somehow managed to catch the can. He sighed in relief, opened it, and brought it to his mouth, but immediately grimaced and stuck his tongue out. Apparently he was not a fan of black coffee. *He sure acts funny.*

“Are we okay becoming official like *this*?” I questioned.

“Ha ha ha... Iwano-senpai promptly left after we finished, though,” Shinohara-kun said.

“That’s normal for him. Our band values individuality by policy,” Serika replied.

“I’m glad we pulled a band together, but what about our name?” I asked.

It was a basic question, but Serika hummed in contemplation. “That’s a hard one... I want a cool name...”

“Should we make it short? Long? Should we use English or Japanese?”

“It’s gotta be in English. I mean, English names sound way cooler,” she said.

“R-Really? There are bands with cool Japanese names too. Like Ling Tosite Sigure, for example,” Shinohara-kun said.

“When it comes to Japanese rock band names, I like The Oral Cigarettes,” she replied.

We enthusiastically discussed band name ideas until an energetic voice called out to us. “Huh? Hey, it’s Natsu and Seri!”

I immediately knew who it was by the way the loud sound reverberated throughout the whole club building.

Uta waved to us as she wiped her sweat off with a towel. It looked like she’d just finished club activities. She was still wearing her practice clothes, which she looked kinda cute in. Basketball clothes were usually loose fitting, but they looked especially baggy on Uta. Also, her practice clothes were black, which

looked very different from what she usually wore.

It's a new overall look—adorable. And not gonna lie, but the way she's wet with sweat is also sorta...nice. No! Stop thinking about creepy things! Calm down, me.

“Were you guys practicing with your band?” she asked, and then nodded at Shinohara-kun. “Nice to meet you.”

I expected no less from her; people with powerful communication skills were built different. On the other hand, Shinohara-kun, being Shinohara-kun, muttered, “She...noticed me?” He was blown away because he'd been too convinced of his weak presence.

“Yeah. We just finished,” Serika said.

“Wow! You guys stayed this late? Sounds like you're working hard!”

“Same goes for you, Uta. I'm guessing you just finished practicing yourself, right?”

“Yep! We're practicing on our own now. The third-years retired, so now's my chance to become a starter. I need to up my game! I can't lose to Miori either!” Uta explained, and then shot a glance at me.

I somehow sensed what she wanted me to say. “You got this, Uta. Drag Miori out of the starting lineup,” I joked.

She beamed at me happily, her white teeth peeking out of her mouth, and saluted. “Roger that!” Her smile was dazzling—the brightest in the world.

“Hey now! What nonsense are you guys spouting?” Miori dribbled a basketball as she walked up to us. She wiped the sweat from her neck with her shirt, putting her ivory skin and belly button in full view. Her beautiful waistline was also exposed.

Nah, I'm not thinking about anything in particular. Miori still acts boyish, so it's very like her. I just think she should consider her age and get rid of those mannerisms!

“It's unusual for you to be participating in individual training,” I remarked.

“Oh... I just thought I'd work a little harder, is all.” Miori sniffed. She seemed

somewhat embarrassed. A lot of time had passed since the feud that had occurred during the rainy season, so her attitude towards the team had likely changed. “Anyway, looks like it’s true that you two started a band.”

“You doubted us?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. You? In a band? I find that hard to believe, but here you two are with guitars on your back.” She giggled quietly. “I’d like to hear you guys play.”

“If you swing by the second music room, we’ll play for you,” Serika said.

“Really? Then I’ll drop by when I’m free.”

“But Iwano-senpai might get angry,” Serika added. “We don’t mind, though.”

“If you’ve got a scary upperclassman, then maybe I won’t...”

The girls’ basketball club’s adviser noticed our lively conversation. “Hey, you kids. It’s dark already, so hurry on home. Your parents will worry.”

“Okaaay,” we all replied.

“Ahhh, look at that youth,” she muttered and then left.

What’s with her? I figured we would all split here, but then someone tugged on the hem of my shirt.

“Natsu, Seri, wanna walk home together? I’ll change real quick, so wait for me!” Uta said and then swiftly ran back to her club. Miori shrugged and followed after her.

Serika poked my armpit. “Well, lucky you,” she teased sarcastically.

“Shut up. You don’t need to comment; I already know,” I snapped back.

“Excuse me... I’ll be leaving now,” Shinohara-kun mumbled, trying to make haste and get away while he could. I firmly grabbed his shoulder. “H-Haibara-kun?”

“Don’t say that! Let’s go home together, ’kay?” I said. *I’m acting like a jock right now, and it feels so wrong. But if I let Shinohara-kun escape here, then the boy-girl ratio will be preposterous! I’m done being the only guy.*

“B-But, I think I’d just be a hindrance if I stayed.”

“Of course not. I enjoy talking to you.”

“Huh? Really? Th-This is the first time in my life anyone’s ever said that to me.” Wrought with emotion, tears welled up in Shinohara-kun’s eyes.

I was consumed by guilt. *I mean, I wasn’t lying. I feel sympathy for him because he resembles the old me, and his behavior is funny...* “Shinohara-kun, what kind of music do you like?” I asked out of curiosity as we waited for Uta and Miori to return.

“If I had to say, I like alt rock and punk rock. You know, songs that are about how youths are discontent with society. They just—how do I put it? It’s like they’re picking a fight with the world. Like they’re trying to leave scars behind... I like music and rock that’s full of passion.”

“Nicely put, Shinohara-kun,” I said, breaking out into an unwitting smile.

“Oh, um, I’m sorry for rambling too long...”

It’s hard to stop talking when someone asks you about a topic you like. I get it ‘cause I’m an otaku too. I’m glad to hear his honest opinions, and maybe this means he feels relaxed around me. I think he views me as someone who’s difficult to interact with, so I worried about whether we could become friends, but look—we’re connecting through music.

“What’s your favorite band?” Serika asked curtly.

With a strange lack of hesitation, Shinohara-kun answered, “Sonic Youth.”

“Hell yeah.” She raised her hand.

He cocked his head to the side, puzzled.

“C’mon,” I said, and then grabbed his wrist and raised it up. Serika slapped his hand, and a crisp *SMACK* resounded through the air.

Shinohara-kun stared at his palm, wearing the face of someone who’d just experienced his first high five. “I... I touched a girl’s hand!”

“Huh? That’s how you react? Creepy...” she remarked.

“I’m sorry! I really am creepy. I didn’t mean to say that out loud, but still, my deepest apologies...” he said rapidly, without taking any breath between words.

Just then, Uta and Miori returned, now changed into their uniforms.

“All righty! Let’s go home! I’m exhausted!” Uta exclaimed.

“You don’t sound very exhausted to me,” Miori whispered. “You’re just happy you bumped into Natsuki.”

“H-Hey! Miorin?! That’s not true at all!”

Not true at all, huh?

Seeing me deflate in sadness, Uta quickly added, “N-No... Um, it’s not that it’s not *not*-true...” In a rare occurrence, she became quieter with each word.

The club building was bustling with students finished with their activities, so her voice didn’t carry well. A group of upperclassmen from the badminton club chattered noisily as they passed by. They shot a perplexed look at our group because of the way we all awkwardly looked like we wanted to fly the coop, pronto.

Uta flushed to a deep shade of scarlet. “Ah ha ha...” She forced a smile.

“Die... I’ve been burned by the flames of youth... I’m going to die...”

Shinohara-kun muttered, lost in his thoughts. Miori shrugged and Serika played the air guitar.

Why?!

“I’m thinking about performing onstage. This is my daily routine.” Her explanation was incomprehensible, but she vigorously rocked out.

I inadvertently looked at Miori, and she smiled wryly. “She’s always like this. Just let her be,” she said and headed towards the entrance.

In her wake followed a strange mix of people as we all walked home together. *This group is too darn quirky.*

On our way home, because of the width of the road, we spontaneously broke into two rows, one consisting of Serika, Shinohara-kun, and Miori, and one with me and Uta. Sandwiched by two gorgeous girls, Shinohara-kun’s eyes darted around. *Do your best, man.*

"I heard from Seri. You guys are gonna play in the school festival concert, right?" Uta asked.

"Hopefully. That's what we're practicing for," I replied.

"I can't wait. I'll wave from the front row!"

"That'd be great. It'll be hard to perform if the audience is lifeless." *That's my greatest fear about the concert. If this goes poorly, it might be another entry in my long and dark history of past shame. Ugh, that's scary... I don't think I could hype anyone up for the life of me.* "Maybe I should practice MCing."

"Ah ha ha! Good point! You are the vocalist, after all."

"Ahhh. Ahhh. Hello, I'm the singer, Haibara," I said, pretending to speak into a microphone. "Please listen to our first song."

"That was boring! You need to sound more cocky!" Uta grinned widely and smacked me on the back, which led me to smile as well. Whenever I was with her, even the mundane was fun. "So? How's the band doing?"

"Today was only our first practice with all the members, but everyone was super good. Shinohara-kun over there is the bassist, Iwano-senpai plays the drums, and as you already know, there's Serika on the guitar—it feels like a miracle that people as skilled as them will play with a newbie like me," I said. *I can't believe they're leftovers in the light music club. Skillwise, surely they stand out compared to the other club members? Though they have extremely distinct quirks in return.*

"Wow!" Uta said in an upbeat tone, but she noticed my low energy and questioned my glum expression. "That's...good, right?"

"Yeah. I'm super pumped, but right now...I'm holding them all back."

"Whaaat? Even though you're such a great singer?"

"It's different from karaoke, and I have to play the guitar at the same time. My brain just can't keep up," I said. "I need to practice more after I get home."

Uta regarded me with curiosity. "Natsu... Why're you working so hard?"

"Why?" I thought for a moment. "Because I really want to put on a great performance?"

“I see,” she said with a nod. She raised a pointer finger and asked, “Hey, you joined the band because Seri invited you, right? I never heard anything about you playing in a band before that.”

“Yeah, if Serika hadn’t invited me, then I probably would’ve never formed a band in my life.”

“Well, y’know... I don’t really see the driving force or, um, what’s motivating you? Of course I can tell you love being in one, though!”

“My driving force, huh?” I murmured. *I’ve got plenty of reasons. I admire the timbre of Serika’s guitar, and I’ve always wanted to be in a band. It’s my second opportunity to live out my youth—I don’t want to regret the past anymore. There’s other stuff...but I can’t talk about it here. I definitely don’t have the guts to say it with pride.*

Why am I this serious about the band? The answer suddenly came from deep inside my heart. “I want to show people my cool side,” I said. *There are people who love me, and I want to become someone worthy of their feelings.*

“Don’t push yourself too hard, okay?” Uta said in a gentle tone.

“Huh? Oh... Yeah, I’ll be careful.”

“If you go too ham, then you’ll tire yourself out. I’m a little worried because all you’ve been thinking about is the band lately.”

After a beat, I said, “You’re right. I always have tunnel vision whenever I get hooked on something.”

“Y’know, I think you’re plenty cool the way you are right now.”

Her compliment made me genuinely happy; it felt like she was affirming my current self. But, somehow, her consideration felt unlike her. I didn’t have time to decipher why it felt off, though; we had reached an intersection.

“Okay, my home’s this way!” Uta exclaimed loudly, catching the attention of the three in front of us.

“Oh, right. Uta doesn’t take the train,” Serika remarked.

“Yep! Bye, guys! See you tomorrow!” Uta ran off while waving her hands wildly in the air. I watched her go, my eyes drawn to the way she used her small

body to seem larger than life.

“She’s a bold one,” Serika said.

Miori nodded. “Yeah.”

“Doesn’t Uta normally ride her bike home?” Serika asked.

Not even I needed it to be spelled out for me why Uta had walked home with us: she’d left her bike at school because she’d wanted to go home with me.

“You really *are* popular, Haibara-kun,” Shinohara-kun said, staring at me with eyes full of respect. “I... I wish I could be like you too...” He let out an eerie chuckle, which caused Serika and Miori to take a step away from him.

“It’s easier to like someone else than be liked,” I blurted out in a hushed tone. The autumn wind swept my words away, and they disappeared along with the fallen leaves.

Second Interlude

I've always paid close attention to others since I was little. Things generally turned out the way I expected. *Why do people do things that they know will result in failure?* I used to wonder when I was young, but through my observations, I realized I was the only one who knew when things would fail. People in this world don't think very hard before acting. Once I noticed that, I saw the world as something simple.

So I took a liking to people I couldn't predict. That held true for Tatsuya, who'd been exceedingly stupid since childhood, and Natsuki, whose self-esteem was much too low for his extraordinary abilities. Those types of people were interesting, and I never got bored of watching them.

Among that group, the most interesting one for me was Motomiya Miori. I shouldn't admit this myself, but I've always been popular with girls. I usually contended for first or second most popular guy in my year. So I was used to girls approaching me, and I'd gone out with several on a trial basis before. But I had never experienced love for them, and we would soon break up. *What if I don't have the capacity to have special feelings for other people?* I worried at times, but those fears were found to be groundless.

My first impression of Miori was that she was the same as all the other girls who had approached me in the past. At best, I found her to be especially cute out of all of them. But that was it. If an attractive appearance was all I needed to love someone, then I wouldn't have struggled so much up until now. I figured I would keep my distance, with typical excuses to reject her advances, but Miori utilized every tactic in her book to pushily invite me out.

She dragged me around, saying she was on a journey to find clothes that looked good on me, fussed over a store she *absolutely* wanted to go to that had some delicious cake, and tagged along to movies that I'd been originally planning to watch—in any case, she was fundamentally assertive. She'd even used Natsuki and Hoshimiya-san to plan a double date.

But Miori was a smart girl who observed people closely. If I had truly hated anything she did, she would've given up immediately. She sensed that I was intrigued by her boldness. I was also fond of her determined personality. But I had no intention of having a girlfriend.

"Hey, don't you think she's cozying up too much to Reita-kun?"

"I know, right! Isn't she so annoying?"

"Boys just eat up her looks. They love the meek girls."

"Y'know, shouldn't we teach her a little lesson? Put her in her place."

In middle school, my nebulous attitude caused tension among the girls, and I'd even seen one get bullied. I noticed immediately and put a stop to it, but since I was the source of the problem, even when I stepped in, it did not lead to a peaceful resolution. In the end, Uta had intervened and settled the conflict, but when I remembered what had happened back then, I couldn't help but think that I should stay out of romance.

"...And that's why, I'm sorry. I can't go out with you," I told Miori after she'd steadily closed the distance between us. In a rare moment, I had spoken to her about my true feelings. I liked her so much that I could be up-front with her.

However, Miori shook her head and said, *"We're fine the way we are now."*

I had withdrawn into my shell, but she drew me out. She showed me a new world. Her unexpected actions charmed me, and my eyes followed her back. *"I'll change your cool and composed expression into a smile,"* she'd said.

It hadn't taken long for me to realize that I was in love.

It's my first love. I want it to bear fruit at all costs. But at the same time, Miori was slowly becoming drawn to Natsuki. I didn't know if she realized it herself, but it was easy to tell as an onlooker. I didn't have time to play the waiting game. I needed to make my decision while Miori's heart still wavered.

I had confidence in myself, but I wasn't conceited enough to think that my charm could win against Haibara Natsuki. The more time passed, the more I would be at a disadvantage. I'd fallen for Miori so hard that I was calculating how to raise my chances of success.

Fortunately, Natsuki was still hesitating. Though, he probably already knew his answer. He was just pretending not to notice. He was a little too kind, after all.

But sometimes kindness can hurt people.

Chapter 3: For the School Festival

One week had passed since we'd begun practicing as a band. We gathered pretty much every day in the second music room. To simplify our activities as "official club practice," I joined the light music club. *I haven't met any of the other members yet. I should probably get on that.*

JAAAN! The song ended with a distorted note from the guitar. Serika looked up. "That was pretty good."

"Th-Thank goodness," Shinohara-kun said along with a sigh of relief. Iwano-senpai let out a small grunt, his face stern as always.

We'd spent the whole week rehearsing the same song, and our performance had stabilized immensely. Well, most of the growth had been on my part—the other three were already good from the beginning. Though, they had small mistakes and issues that I didn't notice. Serika called attention to them in detail, and they fixed them. At one point, she was even receiving some pointers from Iwano-senpai.

"It looks like Natsuki's gotten used to his dual role too. It's time to move on to the next song," she said.

"Finally. We practiced the same song so many times I was about to go crazy," Iwano-senpai said with a sigh.

That's true. I listened to that one song on loop so many times during practice and in our recordings that I couldn't tell what was good or bad anymore. "Is the next one also a Serika original?" I asked.

"I'd like that, but if you guys have a song you'd rather play, then we can consider it," she replied and looked around.

"I'm here because I want to play the songs you write with you," Iwano-senpai said matter-of-factly.

"H-Hondo-san, your songs are cool, and I like them," Shinohara-kun said. He was behaving rather suspiciously, but he nodded his head a few times.

“What about you, Natsuki?” she asked.

“I don’t mind either. But...” I trailed off. Serika was more than a skilled guitarist; she also had a talent for composing music. The song we’d practiced today, “black witch,” was cool, and I liked it a lot. When I first joined the band, I had thought we would cover other bands’ songs, so I was surprised when she’d sent us the sheet music for her own. But I had one concern.

“If our goal is to hype up the crowd at the school festival, it might be hard with an original song,” I said. *It’d be easier for everyone to get excited if we played a famous song that they all know.*

“That’s true... If we sing something unknown, then it’ll be hard for them to get pumped.” Serika frowned and held her forehead.

“We’ll just shut them up with our skill. That’s why we’re practicing so much, right?” Iwano-senpai said.

“B-But if we shut them up, they won’t get excited,” Shinohara-kun pointed out. His needless faultfinding earned him a sharp glare from Iwano-senpai. “Eep! I-I’m sorry.”

“Natsuki’s got a point, though. What should we do?” Serika asked.

“I’ve got an idea. We just have to turn Serika’s original song into one that everyone knows,” I suggested.

“If we could do that, I wouldn’t be struggling so much,” she said, a giant question mark practically floating over top of her head.

“We should upload our performance onto social media sites like Minsta or Twister. If we advertise ourselves there, people who are interested might come too,” I explained.

I was confident in this plan. After all, “black witch” was a great song. I was sure it would reach the hearts of people who loved rock music, and they would become curious about our school festival. Also, Serika and I each had quite a following online—this wouldn’t be a haphazard gamble with low odds of success.

Once I finished laying out my thoughts, Serika said something unexpected.

“Then should I advertise on my YouTube channel too?”

“Your YouTube channel?” I repeated quizzically.

“Yeah. I think it’s got about forty thousand subscribers.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” I shouted in surprise. Iwano-senpai and Shinohara-kun didn’t join in as they seemed to be aware already.

“It’s a well-known fact in the light music club. At the very least, she’s much more famous than a nameless nobody like me... Ha ha ha...”

Hey, I’m getting used to Shinohara-kun turning depressed from his own negative comments.

“Humph,” Iwano-senpai said. “I knew about it when you only had a hundred subs.”

Why does it sound like he’s bragging about being a longtime viewer? Is he a fan?

“You watch ’em? I just upload videos of me singing while playing or doing song covers.” Serika showed me her phone screen. “Cute High School Girl Serika’s Channel ≡” was listed there.



“Uh, what’s with your channel name?” I said.

“Hmm? Is there a problem?” she responded.

“No, I guess you’re not lying...”

“Right? I’m cute and I’m a high school girl.”

I didn’t feel like griping when she declared that with her beautiful face, so I took her phone and scrolled through her channel. As she’d said, it was mainly filled with videos of her playing covers or singing to her own accompaniment. There were also videos of her chatting or makeup tutorials sprinkled here and there. *Why?*

“Wow, you actually put your face in these,” I remarked.

“I’m cute. I’m only losing out if I don’t take advantage of it.” Serika deliberately tilted her head to the side with flirty, upturned eyes.

Dammit. I can’t refute that!

I tapped on her newest cover song and heard her guitar playing, as remarkable as always. *“Super good!” “She’s the best!” “So cute!”* Most of the comments raved about her. *Is she intentionally being careless with her chest? Actually, she’s exposing way too much skin everywhere! She’s got a good grasp on her weapons... It’s a little worrying, though.*

“Are you sure? If you advertise with this, all your subs will know your school name,” I cautioned her.

“I already put my face out there, so it’s a little late for that.”

“No... We shouldn’t. It’ll be dangerous for you, and since our goal is the school festival, there’s not much point in advertising it to outsiders. But uploading to YouTube is a good idea. We can only upload short clips to Minsta or Twister, but we can link to the full-length video there.”

“Okay, then I’ll nix the school festival part and just post the video of our recording.”

“How are you going to make the recording?”

“I’ll ask an experienced coworker at the music club I work at. It’ll probably

cost money, though.”

Serika posts on YouTube and she works at a music club?! That’s wild.

“E-Excuse me.” Shinohara-kun mustered up his courage and raised his hand right when there was a lull in our discussion. “I can handle it if you’re okay with me. The recording, I mean.”

“Huh? You can?” I asked.

“Y-Yes. I’ve done it before—mixing and mastering. I can probably do it if I borrow a studio and the right equipment... Of course, it might not be as good as a pro’s work.”

If we ask a pro to handle the recording, then it’ll cost us a hefty amount, so it’d be awesome if Shinohara-kun could do it. But why does he know how to do that?

“The only thing a lonely music otaku can do is run down that path... Ha ha ha...”

“I get you. When I wasn’t in a band, all I did was make music with a DAW,” Serika said, nodding enthusiastically.

I think you and Shinohara-kun are talking about two different things here. DAW stands for digital audio workstation. She didn’t use it to record music, but used electronic instruments to compose music with a computer. Not that I know much about it, though.

“Then we can leave the recording stuff to you, right?” Serika asked to confirm.

“Y-Yes!” Shinohara-kun nodded multiple times.

“Then I’ll take care of the advertisement online,” I said. I had experience doing missionary work for my favorite anime and light novels, so I was feeling confident.

“Cool. I’ll focus on writing my next song. I have around three other original pieces, but I’m not satisfied with any of them. I want to write the best song possible for the school festival.”

“In the first place, how much time do we get onstage?” I asked.

“I... I believe we have around fifteen minutes. About enough time for three songs,” Shinohara-kun answered.

“I’m happy with our first song, ‘black witch.’ It’s my greatest masterpiece. This is my second candidate... I made it using a DAW, so give it a listen.” Serika tapped the play button on her phone.

It started with the drums, and then a striking guitar riff and the low notes of a bass joined in at the same time. The progression was grand and dramatic. This song had a heavier melody compared to the first one, which felt more like a sprint. It sounded like the world was in cold ruination. I felt a mix of loneliness and heart-wrenching sorrow from the fierce melody. *Wow, she can even make songs like this.*

“The themes are the past and regret. I’m still writing the lyrics, but I think the instrumentals are pretty good,” she said.

“Yeah. I think so too,” I said after a moment. *I sympathize with it. It really resonates with my heart and leaves an electrifying impression on me. I never would’ve thought Serika could express those themes so well.* “We can practice our parts and brainstorm the lyrics as we go.”

“Besides the guitar parts, I kinda randomly put together the rest, so feel free to add to it,” Serika said.

“U-Understood! I’ll do my best!” Shinohara-kun nodded while displaying his bass slapping.

He’s really good and all, but it won’t be good anymore if he gets too gung ho and his part becomes too complicated... Right?

When I checked the clock, it was almost ten. Band rehearsal had ended at seven, but I had continued on my own after that. I was the worst one, so I needed to practice to make up for it.

I could play “black witch” by now, but I still hadn’t memorized the second, nameless song. Its tempo was slower than the first, so it was rhythmically easier to play, but it had more complicated chords than the first song.

Shinohara-kun and Iwano-senpai had left after about thirty minutes of practicing on their own. Serika and I were the only ones who remained, but she'd left her bag and guitar behind and run off somewhere.

Suddenly, the door rattled open. Serika stood there holding a plastic bag from the convenience store.

"I bought ice cream," she said.

"Is that okay?" I asked. "What about the school rules?"

"Of course it's not okay." She cocked her head at me with a perplexed look, as though I was silly to question her, and came in. "Don't worry. I bought enough for you too."

That wasn't what I'd been worried about, but I didn't have the energy to throw in a quip. I was much too exhausted from practicing this late.

"Here, got you Yukimi Daifuku."

"Why'd you choose Yukimi Daifuku?"

"You like them, right? Miori told me. I didn't even ask her to."

"Yeah, I like them, but..." *That girl, blabbing about what other people like... Wait, that's actually fine.*

Serika sat down next to me and popped a bite-size piece of chocolate-coated ice cream called Pino into her mouth. We both quietly ate our ice cream side by side. *What's with this weird silence? Is this also a part of youth? I dunno.*

"Are you stuck on the second song's lyrics?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm. I wrote multiple iterations, but I was dissatisfied, so I rejected them all," she said. "I'm bad at writing lyrics."

"Really? I like the lyrics in 'black witch,' though."

"I made that song straight from my heart and then translated it into English."

"You can't do the same thing for this one? The themes are the past and regret, right?"

"I don't feel like I can put it into words. Even though I made it into a song."

It was easier for Serika to convey her feelings with music rather than words. That's what I'd gleaned after all our band practice together. Her emotions that were normally so hard to see were depicted vividly through the changes in the melody and timbre of her guitar.

When she's enjoying the present, sad about the past, scared of the future... Music connects us. My understanding of Serika is much deeper compared to before we formed the band.

"Hey, Natsuki. Wanna try writing the lyrics?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. I think you can do it. Write the words for this song."

In the same way, her understanding of me is also deepening through my voice and the timbre of my guitar. The past and regrets make up the foundation of what I am right now, after all. That was why I promptly agreed to Serika's suggestion. "Okay. I'll give it a go."

"Hmm..."

Though I said I'd give it a try, lyric writing wasn't going very well. I crumpled a piece of paper with words scrawled on it into a ball and tossed it into the trash.

It was Sunday. Serika and Shinohara-kun had their part-time jobs today, so it was a rare day without rehearsal. I'd asked Café Mares's owner to drastically reduce my shifts until the school festival, but Shinohara-kun couldn't do the same since he was still new. Serika still had work at the music club, and Iwano-senpai had cram school to attend.

Our schedules meshed well the first week, but if we don't carefully plan ahead from here on, we'll have fewer days available to practice as a whole band. I guess it's my job to organize our schedules. Serika doesn't seem like she'd be good at that. We can use the RINE schedule feature...

While I was messing around with our "My Band" group chat, my phone chimed. It was a message from Hoshimiya. "I want to talk to you about my new novel," it said.

That's it! Can't I talk to her about writing lyrics? Novels and lyrics are different, but they're both mediums to express yourself with words. Maybe Hoshimiya will have good advice for me. I don't have much time, so I shouldn't waste it brooding alone.

"Are you free today?" came a second text from Hoshimiya.

I sent her a sticker with a head nod and added, "I have something I want to discuss too."

Quickly after, she replied, "Really?" and then sent me the address of a café. It had a chic name that I hadn't heard of before. "I heard the pancakes here are super tasty! Wanna go?" she said.

I mulled over it for a few seconds and then replied, "Okay!" Afterwards, I changed clothes and left my house.

I met up with Hoshimiya at Takasaki Station. According to the weather report, the temperature had dropped this weekend because of a cold wave. It had certainly reached a point where I felt chilly wearing only one layer. So today I wore a cardigan on top of my T-shirt.

"Oh, Natsuki-kun!" Hoshimiya's expression brightened when she spotted me, and then she ran over. She had on a brown cami dress with a black shirt underneath. A very autumnal outfit.

"Morning, Hoshimiya," I said, and then caught myself. "Wait, it's already noon."

She giggled. "Yep. I want to hurry up and eat some pancakes!"

Pancakes for lunch? Feels very girly to be sated with just that. I wonder if it'll be enough for a healthy high school boy like me.

"Pancakes are more filling than they look. You'd better not let your guard down," she warned.

"Really?" I said dubiously.

Merely chatting with Hoshimiya attracted the gazes of those around us.

“Isn’t she really cute?”

“Whoa. She looks like an idol.”

“Dammit! I wish I had a cute girlfriend too.”

We overheard a passing group of guys who looked to be in university. Hoshimiya and I made eye contact.

“What is it?” she asked playfully.

“You’re really cute today. Though, you’re always cute,” I told her, and then continued walking. I didn’t dare look at her face. After a moment, I heard frantic footsteps as she hurried to catch up to me.

Once she reached my side, she whispered quietly, “I’d rather be called beautiful than cute, you know?”

She’d likely meant it, but she sounded as though she was hiding her embarrassment. I sneaked a glance at her—she was blushing crimson and glaring discontented daggers at me. Our eyes met, and she bumped her shoulder into mine. *Hoshimiya’s been resorting to violence (can I really call it that?) more these days.*

“So, how’s band practice going?” she asked.

“We’re slated to do three songs during the school festival, and the first one is pretty much complete,” I replied. “But the lyrics for the second aren’t done yet. And Serika isn’t sure what to do for the third song.”

“Wow, you’re gonna play three songs? I can’t wait to hear them.”

“We’re not sure about that yet. It depends on the stage schedule.”

“Wait, you’re performing original songs? Did Serika-chan write them?”

“Yep, pretty much,” I said. “And that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m writing the lyrics for the second song, but I’m stuck. I was hoping I could get some advice from you.”

“F-From me? I’ve never written lyrics before.”

“But you write novels, right? I thought something might apply.”

“Hmm... I’ll try to help since you’re asking me for a favor, but I can’t

guarantee it'll be anything useful."

"That's fine. Maybe talking to someone else will help me think of something."

We soon reached the café while lost in conversation. It was crowded, but after waiting five minutes, we were led to window seats. I ordered coffee to start with, and Hoshimiya got milk tea. We then shared a sigh of relief.

"All right, do you mind if I start?" I asked. She nodded so I pulled out my phone and earbuds from my pocket. "This is the second song. Could you listen to it?"

After she put the earbuds in, I pressed the play button. She kept her eyes shut for three minutes, concentrating on the music. She opened her eyes when the song ended.

"Hmm... It was a fierce but sorrowful song," she said.

"The themes are the past and regret. I need to write lyrics for this," I explained.

Next, I handed Hoshimiya a piece of paper. I wasn't satisfied with what I'd jotted down, but it was the best one out of all my drafts. She listened to the song again while looking at the sheet.

"I don't think these lyrics are bad, but..." She stared at the paper with a small frown and took a sip of her milk tea. "It feels like nothing's being conveyed."

"Nothing's conveyed?" I repeated. I'd intended to write how I felt, but something was wrong. I knew that my words lacked a certain something.

"Yeah. I've got an idea of your past and what regrets you have, but I don't know what message you're trying to express," she said. I didn't understand what she was getting at—and she was also searching for the right words to communicate with me. "The lyrics fit this song... But only talking about the darkness, sadness, and loneliness doesn't... How do I put it? It doesn't really seem like you."

"You think so? I'm actually..." I cut myself off. *I'm actually that kind of person. When I try to express my feelings, I just can't escape from that reality.*

Hoshimiya seemed to read what I wanted to say. "I know. I'm the same. But

you're trying to change, right?"

Yeah. I'm trying to change who I am. I don't want to be a pathetic guy anymore; I want to be cool. I don't want to have any regrets this time. I'm doing all this to transform my gray youth.

"Natsuki-kun, what do you want to convey with this song?" she asked. Her eyes were those of a creator in pursuit of the ideal. "Don't your past and your regrets contribute to your future?"

That idea had never occurred to me. I'd returned to the past to redo all the things I regretted. And that was exactly why Hoshimiya's words pierced my heart.

"I think it's fine if all you want to express is how you're a weak human being... But that's not the Natsuki-kun I love," she said, and then added quickly, "Isn't it more you to say that you can change?"

"You didn't have to say that if you were gonna get shy," I muttered.

"Sh-Shush! I'm being very serious right now!"

"Sorry."

My honest apology put a serene smile on her face. "You know, I think it's cool that you're trying to be cool." Her words effortlessly penetrated deep into my heart. "So I want you to continue on like that. It's just my little wish, but I hope you always keep moving forward," she said. "Don't be satisfied with your present—be someone cooler than today's you."

"That's quite the tall ask," I said.

"I want to be someone who pushes you forward, just like how you encouraged me," she explained. "I want our relationship to be like that. We're both working hard towards our individual goals...but we can support each other through the hard times, or when we're stuck in a rut." Hoshimiya's cheeks rapidly dyed scarlet from embarrassment as she spoke.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"I don't need to explain. You already know why." She turned away in a huff, but I only saw her gesture as overwhelmingly adorable.

“Yeah,” I murmured. *I’m cool when I try to be cool. Huh.*

Hoshimiya was the first person to have ever told me that. I’d tried to change more than once or twice in the past, but people had only ever laughed at me. After the time leap, I had accumulated more life experience than my peers, so I was finally starting to feel like things were going well.

After my change, many people had told me that I was cool, and of course that made me happy. It was proof that they were acknowledging my efforts. But Hoshimiya was the only one who focused on the process. And for some reason, it made me so elated that I almost teared up.



“A-Anyway,” she quickly said. “I just want to see that part of you in the lyrics you write.”

I hated songs that were only optimistic. I hated songs that sang about resplendent dreams and hope. I also hated ones about the sparkling days of youth. But that didn’t mean I liked pessimistic songs. I liked songs that were about being cowardly and yet still trying to look ahead to the future. I suddenly remembered that.

“Thanks, Hoshimiya. That was really helpful,” I said. *I see it now. I know what direction I need to take the lyrics.*

“Thank you for waiting!” A server brought pancakes to our table. They were thicker than in the pictures on the menu, and generous helpings of maple syrup dribbled down the sides.

Um, why do girls always go on and on about dieting while only eating fattening stuff like this? The thought crossed my mind, but I knew it would be best to keep it to myself.

“Wow! It looks so good!” As soon as Hoshimiya saw the pancakes, her cheeks melted with joy. The way she put her hands together and said, “Thanks for the food!” before digging in was adorable. “I-It’s hard to eat with you staring at me like that.”

“O-Oh, right. Uh, sorry.”

An awkward mood settled between us as we ate our pancakes. After enduring that silence for a while, Hoshimiya began to consult me about her new work. “I’m writing a sci-fi teen romance, but...”

It seemed that she’d hit writer’s block during the midpoint of the book. I gave her opinions such as, “Couldn’t you just add more characters?” “In the manga I read, the enigmatic glasses-wearing character starts explaining here.” “Why not increase the number of heroines?” I didn’t think they were particularly helpful, but Hoshimiya responded with pleasant laughter each time.

“Thanks, Natsuki-kun,” she said.

Hoshimiya’s advice was super helpful, but my advice for her sucked. I’m so

sorry... She even thanked me out of politeness.

We were deep in conversation when Hoshimiya checked her watch. "Sorry, I've gotta run now."

"Your curfew?"

"I convinced papa to move my curfew later, but I shouldn't worry him too much. I'll head home for today. Thanks for hanging out with me."

"Same here. See you at school."

Her tranquil smile revealed that her family relationship was moving in the right direction. *That's great*, I genuinely thought.

When we were about to part ways at the train platform, she called out to me again. "Natsuki-kun!" Hoshimiya yelled energetically, raising her right fist high in the air. "Do your best! I can't wait for the concert!"

I'd reflected upon our last conversation. This time, I flaunted my cool side and confidently declared, "I got this!"

After school, I headed to the second music room for practice and found Serika at the entrance. She was deep in conversation with another student, a tall and lanky boy. He wore glasses, and coupling that with his smile, he gave off a pleasant vibe.

"Hey, Natsuki," Serika said.

"Oh? Is he the new member?" questioned the boy.

"Yeah. His name's Haibara Natsuki. He's my band's guitarist and vocalist."

"Hello, I'm Shikano Tsubasa, the president of the light music club. Nice to meet you," he said.

"Um, I'm Haibara. I'm sorry for not introducing myself earlier," I said nervously.

"Don't worry about it. You're in a different band, so we wouldn't bump into each other often."

He's so friendly and easy to talk to! But why's he here?

“You know how the school festival is coming up? My band needs to practice more for it, but the only rooms we can use are our clubroom and the second music room, so I came to ask if we could adjust the schedule,” he explained.

“Because we’ve been hogging the room to ourselves lately,” Serika remarked.

“Yep, exactly. The other band and mine only practiced twice a week before now, so just the clubroom was fine, but that’s not gonna cut it for the concert. Right?”

We can’t refuse when our club president’s asking us a favor. And he’s being reasonable; we really shouldn’t be monopolizing the room to ourselves.

“Awesome, we can schedule over RINE starting tomorrow. Thanks a bunch,” he said and then left.

What an easygoing guy! I’m glad he was easy to talk to.

“That’s our prez. He can play everything, but I think he’s the best on the drums. He’s got no drive, though.” Serika shrugged and went inside the second music room. Today would be our last day having the place all to ourselves. “You can tell the school festival’s close if the others are starting to practice.”

“Are they really that unmotivated?” I questioned.

“They usually gather in the clubroom and play mahjong or cards. They’re not bad, though. Prez’s band in particular has potential. It’s such a waste.”

If that’s what practice is like, no wonder Serika felt out of place. But they don’t sound like bad people. Can’t do anything when others don’t have the same drive as you.

“This means we’ll have fewer days to practice starting tomorrow,” Serika said.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“We’re gonna rent a studio I use often. It’ll cost money, though.”

“Of course it does.” *A studio? Well, the second music room has gotten too comfy, so maybe it’ll be a good change of pace.*

“I have revenue from my channel and part-time gig, so I’ll make it work.”

“I don’t want to dump everything on you. I’ve got savings from my job too. I’ll

chip in,” I said.

“You sure? You just bought your guitar and stuff.”

“I’ll manage. Don’t worry about it,” I assured her. Serika likely had more funds compared to the rest of us, but it wasn’t a good idea to depend on her too much. If we didn’t solve our money issues equitably, it would become a problem eventually. I’d learned this rule from past experiences.

“How are the lyrics going?” she asked.

“I finished them, tentatively,” I replied. *I’m sleep deprived thanks to that. After Hoshimiya gave me advice, I spent all night writing them. I’m fairly happy with the lyrics now, but I wonder what Serika will think.*

I handed her a piece of paper, and she read it over. I could hear my heart pounding in my chest. *Waiting for someone to assess my work feels like forever!*

Before long, Serika shot me a thumbs-up. “Hey, this sounds good. I’m glad I believed in you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The lyrics are very you. So this is the message you wanted to convey.” She peered at the sheet and nodded a few times. “Though, I was starting to get worried after a whole week passed.”

“Sorry about that.”

“You wrote some awesome lyrics, so it doesn’t matter. By the way, did you think of a song name?”

“Yeah. How about ‘Monochrome’?” I suggested.

“Hmm... Sounds pretty deep,” she remarked. I had no idea what was deep about it, but she gave me an approving nod.

“Is the second song finally done?” Iwano-senpai asked when he entered the room.

“Sorry,” I said, bowing apologetically.

“Yeah. It’s a good one,” Serika said. “Oh, but I want to tweak the instrumentals a little to match the lyrics better.”

“I see, all right. We’ve got time, so let’s discuss once Shinohara gets here,” Iwano-senpai said.

“Um, I’m sorry... I’m already here.”

Our eyes rounded in surprise when we heard Shinohara-kun’s voice come out of nowhere. *It’s about time we got used to his sudden appearances...*

“So, Serika. What are we doing about the third song?” I asked.

“Right, we finished the second one, so time to think about that... Hmm, I’m not sure,” she answered.

“If you don’t have anything yet, then can I come up with the lyrics for it again?”

Serika’s eyes widened at my suggestion. *I never thought I’d say that either. But after writing the lyrics for “Monochrome,” I realized that there’s actually a lot I want to express. I crammed most of those feelings into “Monochrome”...but there’s still something else I want to convey.*

After a moment she said, “Okay. You already wrote some great stuff, so I’ll believe in you again.”

“I don’t know anything about composing music. I’ll go with whatever Hondo decides,” Iwano-senpai said.

“I... I believe in Haibara-kun too!” Shinohara-kun chimed in.

I felt very grateful that they were putting their faith in me when I was only an amateur.

“All right. Let’s start practice.” Serika clapped her hands and then began setting up.

As the school festival drew near, I could tell everyone was getting more pumped.

We played “black witch” and then “Monochrome.” The wild, intense storm abruptly grew cold and heavy. Iwano-senpai’s drums and Shinohara-kun’s bass made the transition between stillness and motion more distinct than Serika’s DAW recording, and they were more pleasant to listen to. Live music had a different depth, especially with Serika’s skills. The way she stepped on the

effector pedal and distorted her guitar's timbre—it was like she was rampaging atop the foundation the three of us built with our rhythm.

When the song reached its zenith, the hi-hat resounded grandly, and then all noise vanished. The final verse was an a capella solo from me, and then when it was almost time for the final chorus, the drums, bass, and my guitar joined in. After a moment, Serika's guitar coiled around the sound we created, and then I screamed the lyrics I'd written. Music filled the world.

Wow, this is so fun. I feel really comfortable here. Even though sweat was trickling into my eyes, my arms were sore from the continual vigorous strumming, and my voice was getting hoarse, I kept on playing. At this moment, surely all four of us felt the same. We were clearly more in sync right now than at any of our previous rehearsals.

I want this to last forever... But music always has an end. When the song came to a close, no one spoke for a while.

“We'd better play with the same quality at the concert, okay?” Serika eventually said.

We all nodded. *I've gotten a lot better at singing and playing the guitar simultaneously. But it's not good enough. I'm still holding everyone back. I need to improve more. I'm almost there. I feel like I'm so close to my ideal performance.*

After practice, I played the guitar while thinking about the lyrics for our third song. The lyrics of “Monochrome” depicted the past, the regrets that had dyed my youth gray on account of my mistakes, as well as my determination to face forward. They expressed my current feelings: my desire to transform my youth into vibrant, rainbow-colored days.

As a result, it had become a song about grasping that one ray of light in the darkness. It was all thanks to Hoshimiya's advice. *What should I write for the third song?*

“Worried?” Iwano-senpai asked after he returned to the room.

Serika's guitar strings were damaged, so she'd left to drop by the music store

on her way home. Shinohara-kun had a late shift today, so after practice ended, he'd rushed out the door. Only Iwano-senpai and I remained. He held two cans of coffee that he'd bought from the vending machine.

"Sugar-free or low sugar, which one do you want?" he asked.

"Sugar-free," I replied.

"I'm gonna drink that one, so you take low sugar."

Then why did you ask me in the first place? Confused, I accepted the can and pulled the tab open. *I guess he's treating me, so I can't complain. Ahhh! We've reached the season where hot things are tasty. But this is too sweet...*

Iwano-senpai held his canned coffee in one hand and scrutinized me closely. "Haibara, why'd you join the band?"

"Man... People have been asking me that a lot these days. I've got a lot of reasons. But in the end, I realized that my biggest one is that I want to show people my cool side."

"Like to the girl you like?" he questioned after a beat. I nodded silently, and oddly enough, his expression softened. "Nearly everyone joins a band for that reason."

"Are you the same?" I asked hesitantly.

"At first it was to become popular."

"Huh?" My eyes rounded in surprise, but he maintained solemnity, and I unwittingly burst into laughter.

"Why are you laughing? I wanted to be popular with girls. Got something to say about that?"

"N-No. Nothing at all," I said, a few more chuckles leaking out. *That's way unexpected! If that was his goal, then I feel like there was something better he could've done before leaping into a band. I thought his motives would've been more austere.* "Do you still feel the same now?"

"No. It doesn't matter even if I do get popular now. After this is over, my life will be studying for entrance exams." His realistic reply was very like him. Iwano-senpai placed his empty coffee can on top of a nearby desk and picked

up his drum sticks. He began tapping out a beat. “You probably didn’t know this, but before you joined, I was in a band with third-years.”

Serika mentioned this before. Iwano-senpai was the sole second-year in the band, so after the third-years retired, he became a floater. Then, because no one invited him into a new band, he stayed a leftover.

“One of my bandmates was my drum teacher. She could play all the instruments, so she filled the bassist spot in our band. She was always cheerful, and a great leader. She was cute too.” As he spoke, he began to hit the drums. Bass drum, snare, hi-hat, snare—he let the rhythm carry him.

Now that I’m observing him, he really is good. His arms are like logs, so the sound he pounds out is intense. He even makes twirling the drumsticks during rests seem easy. His expression is always scary, though.

“She’s a kind person. She’d talk to me even though I’m hard to approach,” he continued.

“Did... Did you like her?” I asked timidly, since that seemed like where the conversation was heading.

Iwano-senpai fell silent for a brief moment and then said, “She’s been blissfully gushing about how she got a boyfriend recently.”

I almost spat out my coffee. I coughed and somehow forced the liquid back down my throat. “I, um, well...”

“You don’t need to be considerate. I knew she’d liked the guy for a long time, and I supported her too. What’s most important is that she’s happy.” Compared to his indifferent tone, his drumming sounded somber. I had an inkling that he wasn’t being completely honest with me, but he seemed to have reached closure. “I want to wish her the best during the school festival concert.”

“That’s... How do I put it? That’s the ultimate rock spirit.”

“Right? I’m going to deliver the best performance ever. At first I was worried about us, but I think we can do it now. That’s why I’m counting on you to write something good for the third song.”

“Well, that’s a lot of pressure,” I responded weakly.

“Should be enough for you to handle. I’ve got a good grasp on your personality.” Iwano-senpai chuckled softly.

I’d also come to understand him very well. Though he looked intimidating and was blunt with his words, he was actually a very normal, kind high school boy.

“Roger that. I’ll do it,” I said. I felt glad that we’d become a little closer. But at the same time, when I remembered our band would only last until the school festival, I also felt forlorn.

I was fast asleep during class, and before I knew it, the teacher had appeared in front of me.

“I hope you don’t think you can sleep in class just because you ranked first in your grade,” she said, peering down at me with a radiant smile. She was a young woman who had joined Ryomei this year.

“Sorry. Your voice was just too pleasant,” I said.

She chuckled. “Flattery won’t get you out of trouble, mister.”

Thus, I ended up being the only one with extra homework. *This is outrageous! Or I guess it’s not.* I sent our teacher a disgruntled stare, but she ignored me completely, and class ended just like that.

Hoshimiya giggled next to me and tried to cheer me up. “Don’t let it get to you.”

After that, it was time for lunch break.

“Let’s go chow down,” Tatsuya said.

“Yep, coming.” I nodded and stood up with my wallet in hand. The girls were eating with their other friends today.

“Where’s Reita?” I asked.

“He’s eating with Motomiya,” Tatsuya answered.

I looked to where he pointed and saw Reita and Miori walking side by side. She noticed me watching and gave me a small wave, so I raised my hand in response. *It seems things are going well for her. They look like a gorgeous*

couple, truly a match made in heaven.

“So, you got extra homework?” Tatsuya asked.

“Yeah. Though, on second look, it’s not actually much more, so it’s whatever,” I replied.

“Well, you’re the top student in our year, so it doesn’t make much sense to dump a ton of homework on you. But still, it’s rare that an honor student like you would sleep during class. Club activities tiring you out?”

“Is that what you thought? I actually sleep quite often. I just hadn’t been caught until today.” I purchased a food ticket from the vending machine in the cafeteria. Today, I was in the mood for curry, so I bought a large one. “But I guess I am tired. I was working on lyrics late into the night yesterday.”

“Being in a band sounds rough.”

“It’s tough enough, but fulfilling.”

I picked up my large curry and sat across from Tatsuya. He had a karaagedon in front of him. *It’s been a while since Tatsuya and I have been alone. Lately, either the girls have been eating with us, or Reita’s around.*

Tatsuya opened his mouth wide and tossed in a piece of fried chicken. “What are you gonna do about her?” He swallowed and chugged a whole cup of water.

“Are you talking about Uta?”

“Yeah. What’re you hesitating about now?” He didn’t look at me and continued eating his karaagedon. “These days...I just can’t stand by and watch.”

“I can tell she’s pretending to be cheerful,” I said.

“She’s anxious because you’re being indecisive. But she’s trying her best to hide it.”

After agonizing over the subject, I said the only word I could wring out. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be... I know it’s not your responsibility.” Tatsuya struck his forehead with his fist and sighed. “Make her happy,” he murmured.

Though Tatsuya hadn’t been explicit with his intentions, I knew he fully

understood the situation. *"I won't give up."* Although he'd declared that before, he was ready to bend on his own desire. All he prayed for was that the girl he loved would become happy...

...even if he wasn't the one standing by her side.

I didn't say anything. After all, I had no words to offer him.

We had our first practice in the studio after school today. The acoustics and equipment in the room were much better than our usual place. It had cost a hefty amount, but it was well worth it. We were also recording "black witch" and "Monochrome" today, so I was pumping myself up.

"I finished the lyrics for the third song. Though, I'm not completely satisfied with them yet," I said and handed Serika a piece of paper.

She scrutinized the lyrics and then tilted her head to the side. "Not bad...but you're dissatisfied?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "I feel like it lacks something crucial."

She hummed pensively as she stared at the paper and then suddenly looked up. "But this is mostly done, right? I'll write some music based on it. Think about what you want to add. The school festival's almost here, so we need to work fast."

"Sorry, Serika. And thanks."

"Leave it to me. I'll write a great song so you can express your love."

Hearing her say that gave me mixed feelings. I scratched my cheek and asked, "You could tell?"

"This is obviously a love song. You're not even trying to hide it. I mean, my face is feeling hot just reading the words here. Sheesh, Natsuki, you're really living out your youth!"

"Oh, shut it!" That was the best rebuttal I could come up with. I was extremely embarrassed, and my own face was heating up.

"I like naive fledgling lyrics like this."

“Really?”

“Did you think of a song name?” she asked.

I told her what I’d thought of, and she responded with a rare amused smile.
“Love it.”

“Shut up. Let’s start recording.”

I clapped my hands. Shinohara-kun and Iwano-senpai, who were deep in conversation, turned our way. The two of them had become close in the blink of an eye. They made up the rhythm section, after all, so it was important for them to communicate.

“Come to think of it, what about our band name?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Good question,” Serika said.

“I thought of a few options,” Iwano-senpai said out of the blue. “Besides Haibara, our band’s a mixed bag of the light music club’s extras, right?”

“Y-Yes, that’s very true,” Shinohara-kun said. “Especially me... Ha ha ha...”

“So why don’t we just translate that into English? There’s a bunch of synonyms, but I thought ‘mishmash’ and ‘leftover’ sounded the coolest. So if we combine that...” Iwano-senpai flipped over the paper with the lyrics for the third song written on it and spelled it out for us. “There, ‘mishmash leftovers.’ What do you think?”

“Sounds good. Though, that’s literally what we are,” I said.

“That’s enough for us,” he replied.

“What’s our nickname, then?” I asked. “‘Mishle’? It sounds kinda cute.”

“It’s nice that the full name sounds cool, but shortened it’s cute. I like it,” Serika said.

“I... I think it’s great too!” Shinohara-kun added.

And that was how “mishmash leftovers” was born.

I stepped outside during our break and felt someone's presence around.
"Shinohara-kun?"

"You're amazing," he said. "I can't believe you sensed I was behind you."

"Are you trying to become an assassin?"

"I'm considering it for my future profession."

Now that we were on friendlier terms, he was able to make lighthearted jokes with me. *He... He is joking, right?!* I leaned back against the wall, and he came up next to me. He likely had something to say, but I didn't press him since it would only backfire, knowing his personality. I waited quietly until he suddenly bowed at me.

"Um... Thank you very much for inviting a nobody like me into your band," he said.

"Are we on the final episode?" I quipped. "It's not even time for school festival prep to start."

"I-I'm sorry. But I really am grateful. If you hadn't invited me, then I would've stayed alone forever. I wouldn't be having so much fun every day."

"That's great," I said after a pause. I'd actually been uneasy, wondering what Shinohara-kun thought about the band and all the work that came with it. I worried that Serika and I were forcibly dragging Shinohara-kun, who unlike Iwano-senpai had no clear goal, along with us. If he was uncomfortable, then I wanted to do as much as I could to take the sting out.

"It's a miracle that I can be here with you all," he said.

He truly is a good guy.

"That's why I want to repay the favor to you, Hondo-san, and Iwano-senpai. I want to play the best I ever have during the concert and make your wishes come true. That's the most I can do in return."

"That's all we can ask for," I said. Shinohara-kun's bass supported us all. He covertly kept Serika's rampaging and my unstable guitar in check from the shadows. He didn't stand out, but I knew he was skilled. It was a style that fit his disposition. "Hey, don't you think it's time to stop calling me 'Haibara-kun'?"

“Huh? Then what should I call you?”

“Just call me Natsuki. Can I call you Mei too?”

“What?! You remembered my given name?”

“That’s what you’re surprised about? ‘Course I did, Mei,” I said with a laugh.

Shinohara-kun’s expression softened. “Okay, Natsuki it is. Are you sure? It’s the first time I’ve called anyone outside of my family by their given name, and it’s also the first time someone else has called me by mine. It feels kind of strange.”

“But not in a bad way, right?”

“Right. I feel like I’ve made a friend.”

“What’re you saying? We’ve been friends for a long time now.”

“Huh?! We’re friends?!”

“Uh, dude, that kinda hurts,” I remarked. *I’ll have you know my mentality is fragile as glass!*

“Oh, um, I’m sorry... I had it in my head that a guy like me could never be friends with you, Haibara-kun. Ah, erm, I mean, Natsuki... I didn’t mean that I dislike the notion.”

“That’s good. My glass mentality was precariously close to shattering, there.”

Hollow laughter rose up from Shinohara-kun—no, from *Mei*.

“Thanks,” I said.

“For what?”

“We invited you to our band out of nowhere, and we’re practicing like crazy, but you’re still sticking with us. We can play without hesitation because you’re there matching our motivation,” I said. *The gratitude goes both ways.* “And we made an awesome song together.” I pointed at the laptop in his hands that contained our completed recording.

Mei shook his head. “It’s still just a temporary mix. I’ll make it even better.”

“Seriously? It’ll be out of this world, then.”

“The song was already good on its own. Also, Hondo-san’s guitar, your voice, and Iwano-senpai’s drums are all excellent. That’s why it sounds so cool. I’m glad supporting you guys with my bass was meaningful.” Mei gazed up at the sky. “It’s a pity this will end after the school festival.”

An absolute wall stood before us—entrance exams—and there was nothing we could do to tear it down. Even if the three of us chose to continue, it was inevitable that Iwano-senpai would leave our band.

“But maybe that’s why I can channel my everything into the school festival without hesitation,” he said, changing gears.

“Mei, why’d you start playing the bass?” I asked.

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“I won’t laugh, no matter what. My reason isn’t anything special either.”

“I wanted to stand out.” His tranquil voice melted into the autumn night. “Even though I’m so gloomy, I wanted to be somewhere I could shine. That’s what I yearned for. One day, I chanced upon a video of a rock band concert, and I thought maybe I could shine just like them.”

“That’s your reason, but you chose to learn the bass?” I questioned.

Mei chuckled. “I came to like the bass the most. I guess I couldn’t escape my nature, but it’s fine. It’s true that compared to other instruments, the bass is the hardest to hear, and amateurs don’t understand its purpose. But I think when we’re standing on top of the stage, as long as we can create the best music ever, then I’ll be shining plenty bright.”

“Nice, man. Let’s shine out there. You’re going to knock everyone’s socks off when they see how talented you are on the bass.” I raised my fist up to him.



Mei timidly bumped his own fist into mine.

“I feel more comfortable knowing that our band’s got a set life span,” Serika remarked.

She peered upwards, her expression as impassive as always. Dead leaves danced in the autumn night sky. We were on our way home after practicing in the studio, with Mei and Iwano-senpai walking ahead of us.

“In middle school, I formed a band with some close friends. But they all hated practicing, and we gradually practiced less and less,” she said. “I told them that I wanted to practice more so that we could give a better performance, but then they became cold... We broke up pretty quickly after that, and the same thing kept happening over and over.”

I don’t think either side was wrong. Sometimes, a difference in drive gives birth to unhappiness. If a weak basketball club abruptly started to practice like a powerhouse team, then they would only lose members. Half-heartedly joining a band and playing in moderation for fun is another page in the book of youth.

“When I entered high school and joined the light music club...everything was the same as middle school.”

It was easier to claim you were serious about something than to follow through on it. After all, you had to sacrifice many things to accomplish your goal. If only one person was serious, then those around them would drift away. Even those who were well aware of this fact would inevitably be swept away by that sort of environment—if you were normal, that is.

“Still, I wanted to be earnest about music,” she said.

But Serika wasn’t normal, and that was a talent in itself. However, finding bandmates who were equally motivated wasn’t simple.

“That’s why I couldn’t sit quietly. I was selfish. I didn’t just believe that everything would be fine as long as I played well. I wanted *everyone* to perform their best. I always wonder how long the band is going to last... Thoughts like that sit on my mind, and it’s scary.”

It was a convenient fantasy to assume that there would be people nearby who would aim for the same heights and risk the same things. If you wanted friends who could match your sprint, then your only choice was to gather them yourself.

“Hey, Natsuki. Will you dream the same thing I do?” she asked meekly.

That was why Serika had chosen me. She’d felt that I would run together with her. The fact that she liked my voice or that I could play the guitar a little were just bonuses. Serika hadn’t stated that explicitly, but even someone as thickheaded as me had figured that out.

“Why’re you acting timid now? That’s not like you.” I clapped her on the back, and she blinked at me in surprise. “We’re going to change the world with our music, right?”

I knew it was impossible for us to work hard together forever. I didn’t have any talent for music. At the very least, I was a long way off from Serika’s skill. We would unquestionably go our separate ways one day. I’d known this since the day I’d fallen for her performance at first sight. But we’d already decided to disband after the school festival, so I could join her on the grind momentarily. I would share Serika’s dream.

“I’ll practice hard tomorrow too so that our dream will come true,” I said with my whole heart, trying to cheer her up.

Serika giggled. “Natsuki, you’re funny. That was a bit too pretentious.”

“Hey! Don’t get all realistic on me now. We were having a good conversation!” I exclaimed. *Though, not gonna lie, after that came out of my mouth, I thought, “Crap, I sounded too cocky there.”*

“I’ll give you some chocolate to commemorate a new update to your dark history. Here.”

“I don’t need memorabilia for this moment—just forget this happened. I didn’t say a thing. Got it?” I said, trying to erase my gaffe.

Serika shook her head. “No way. I’m never going to forget this.”

Evidently, even when I was redoing my youth, it was in my nature to mass-

produce shameful events for my dark history book.

That autumn night ended in sorrow.

Third Interlude

“Make her happy.”

Tatsuya’s words lingered in my mind. I knew what he meant. I realized that I’d been naive. While brainstorming the lyrics, I’d dug down deep to find out who I was.

What kind of person am I? How do I think? Who do I love?

As I tried to express my individuality through music, there were naturally more opportunities to face myself. I was forced to acknowledge the things I’d pretended not to notice. This whole time, I had just been running away.

I was running away from making a choice. I was running away from giving them my answer.

Why? Because regardless of who I chose, someone would be hurt as a result. I hated that. I wanted them both to smile. I didn’t want two people I cherished to get hurt. And in the first place, I didn’t feel like I had the right to choose either one of them.

But that was just what I thought on the surface. I was not such a good person. The truth was that I was terrified that I would hurt someone else.

I had an indecisive personality. To be more precise, I had become indecisive over the course of the drab, gray days I’d spent in high school the first time around. Because of the immense failure I’d experienced in my youth, I became a coward. Before making a decision, it had become a habit to speculate on what would happen and then carefully analyze whether I was doing something wrong. I liked to call it being cautious, but in truth I was being a wimp.

It all boiled down to my lack of self-confidence—just as everyone had kept telling me.

That was why I couldn’t choose. Choosing one would mean she would become my girlfriend. Would she really be fine with a sham like me who’d never dated before? Was I someone who could make my girlfriend happy? Was

I worthy enough to stand by *your* side? Such questions spun round and round inside my head as it became more and more realistic that I would actually get a girlfriend. This wasn't a world of my delusions. I had the burden of responsibility.

It had been easy when my love was one-sided, because I'd never truly felt like I would actually get to date her. But right now, it was equally painful whether I chose someone or not. It was pointless to pretend to be someone I wasn't either. The answer needed to come from the real me. That was why I continued pretending to be conflicted, and delayed concluding this matter.

But if my actions are hurting people instead... If I'm worrying the two people who mustered up the courage to confess to me... My only choice is to change.

I need to be confident. I need to become someone you think is cool. I need to be someone who can proudly declare that I love you and that I'll make you happy... And at the very least, I want to be someone who you won't regret loving.

That's why I'll show you how cool I am onstage during the school festival. That's why I've been frantically practicing every day—because I refuse to allow myself to compromise!

This is a rite to transform myself. With our music, I will change the world before me. When this song reaches you, I believe that I'll be standing right there with you, as someone who is worthy.

Chapter 4: Our Music

The school festival's preparation period was now underway. It had begun four days before the actual festival, and during this time we were permitted to decorate our classrooms and whatnot. My class, 1-2, was setting up a café. The rules for serving food and drinks were strict, so those who were in charge of food prep had to go through training under the home economics teacher. I was on the service side, so all I was responsible for was helping out with decorations or other basic prep work. Suddenly, the school had come alive.

I volunteered during lunch break since I was busy practicing with the band after school.

"Shame. I was counting on you, Haibara-kun," Fujiwara complained. She was part of our class's executive committee.

I forced a smile. "I'm sorry, really."

"This is all because you joined the light music club out of the blue."

"And that's why I'm working hard to make up for it during lunch."

"That's what everyone who's in a club says, but those who aren't in one or are part of the cultural clubs stay much longer after school to help, you know? It's thanks to *their* efforts that we've got all the bits and pieces done, right?" Fujiwara countered.

"I said I'm sorry! Please, let me off the hook," I pleaded.

She gave me a long, hard look and then sighed. "All right. I'll forgive you if you put on the best performance ever during the concert."

"Does everyone know about that already?"

"You're famous, after all. I bet everyone will come watch, so you'd better not let the pressure get to you, okay?"

"Don't worry. I'll move you to tears, so come watch with Hino."

"What?!" Fujiwara's face flushed red.

“I gotta run to the bathroom real quick,” I said, anticipating she’d fly into a frenzy trying to hide her embarrassment, and quickly left the classroom.

It was quite boisterous in the hallway too. Tons of students were coming and going as they got ready for their class programs. During the preparation days, occasionally we would get the fifth and sixth periods to work on setup, but that still wasn’t enough time to get everything done. Our school festival was the biggest one around this area, after all.

“Natsuki, how’s class two doing?” Miori asked me.

“Not bad. We’re hosting a café, so there isn’t *that* much to do beforehand,” I replied. “Not that I can say anything since I’m not really helping. What about you guys? You’re doing a haunted house, right?”

“Making all the small decor and stuff is such a pain. And we can’t rearrange our classroom’s interior until the afternoon before the festival, so we have to finish planning the layout and craft everything before then. Look at this, a ghost!” Miori put on a white dress and a black wig and tried to menace me. It wasn’t a bad attempt at being spooky.

“That’s high quality for a high school haunted house,” I remarked.

“I know, right? Our executive committee is really fussy about this stuff.”

Our conversation was interrupted when a girl called out to her from the classroom. “Mioriii! Stop messing around and help out.”

“Aw, fiiine,” Miori grumbled. “See you later, Natsuki.”

“Wait, Miori. Are you going to walk around the festival with Reita?” I asked.

She hesitated for a moment. “That’s the plan. Why?”

“You guys should come watch our band.”

“You didn’t have to tell me; I was going to come already. Serika’s playing, after all.” She shrugged her shoulders and walked back to her classroom.

It’s reassuring if she comes. I want her to witness my change.

“Oh, hey, Natsuki.” Serika suddenly appeared as if she’d swapped places with Miori. “They posted the stage schedule. The light music club has the last slot on

the second day. We've got three bands, so each one gets fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes? That's pretty much what we guessed," I said.

"Yep. We should be able to play all three songs, no problem."

"What's the order within the light music club?"

"I discussed it with prez, and he said something like, 'If we go on after you guys, the atmosphere will be like hell,' so we're third. That's better for us, anyway. No complaints here."

I get what he means. Our members are skilled as it is, but we also practiced like crazy, and now the level of our band has ascended to a whole new realm... Well, besides me, sadly. "Doesn't that mean we're the last ones on for the whole festival?"

"Yep. Isn't that the best spot?"

"I'm suddenly feeling super nervous."

"Knowing you, you'll be fine. If anything, I'm more worried about Shinohara-kun."

"True, Mei does seem like he'd get shaky during the actual performance," I murmured. *He's been playing flawlessly during practice, but we should pay attention to him before the show. Though, I don't have the leeway to be fussing over him. I'm already feeling the nerves myself.*

"The more time spent, the more nervous you get," Serika said, noticing my jitters. She put her hand on my shoulder. "But don't worry. I know we can do it."

I appreciated her baseless confidence a lot right now.

"Natsu!"

Someone tapped me lightly on the shoulder from behind. I turned around to see Uta looking up at me with a demon mask on.

"Ah ha ha! Surprised?"

"You said my name first, so doesn't that defeat the purpose?" I asked.

"T-True! I might be an idiot!"

“‘Might’? You mean definitely,” Serika said.

“Serika, you should think a bit more about the vibe of what you’re going to say beforehand,” I scolded.

“Natsuki, you should use a bit more vibrato,” she shot back.

“Did you have to say that?” I asked. *And was that supposed to be clever?*

My silly banter with Serika made Uta grab her stomach. “Ah ha ha ha! You two sure are close now.”

“I’m reluctant to agree with that assessment right now,” I grumbled.

“Really? I always welcome it,” Serika said.

“What are you saying? First of all, this can barely even count as a proper conversation.”

I didn’t know what was so funny, but Uta kept laughing at our back-and-forth. Then, she suddenly lit up when she remembered something. “Oh, that’s right! I heard it yesterday! Your song, that is!” She rummaged through her skirt pocket and pulled out her phone. She opened Twister and clicked on the video I’d posted on my account.

“Kicking off mishmash leftovers with ‘black witch’! We’ll be playing this song at the school festival concert! Please give it a listen. You can hear the full version here →” Since we were entering the festival prep period, yesterday I’d made a post advertising our band. I planned to start a full-blown ad campaign on social media going forward.

Displayed on-screen was a recording of the first song on our set list, ‘black witch.’ Mei had mixed down and mastered it for us. The music was also in sync with a video of us practicing in the studio. We had purposefully dimmed the lighting to make it hard to see, per Mei’s taste. The whole thing had a pretty good vibe going.

“You guys were super cool!” Uta praised us, her eyes sparkling. “Seri’s guitar and Natsu’s singing, both! Honestly, I didn’t give you guys enough credit!”

“You didn’t have to throw in that last part,” I said.

“Ah ha ha! That’s just how touched I was!”

The video had already been played over five hundred times, and my post had been shared thirty times. There were also a lot of people who'd left replies. Most of them were my classmates, but there were also people who I knew only by face or name who had said stuff like, "Can't wait for the concert!" or "This sounds awesome!"

I was thankful it was doing well. Though, I'd already been certain that just dropping the video normally would be enough to make it a hit since it really was that cool. Serika had also made a post on her own account at the same time, and hers was popping off too. It'd only been one day, and it was sure to spread further through word of mouth.

The guitar intro of "black witch" had a striking impact, so I'd figured it would be the best song to advertise first. The lyrics were hard to understand because they contained a lot of English, but the video considerately displayed the Japanese translation in time with the singing. *Mei is too talented. None of us made any suggestions, but he thought this far ahead.*

For the record, the post linked to the video Serika had uploaded to her YouTube channel. That video had already broken ten thousand views. *That's way too fast!*

"Also, this is an original song, right?!" Uta exclaimed.

"Yeah. Came from my brain," Serika said, puffing up with a smug look.

"Wow! Seri, you're amazing! So you're not just an eccentric weirdo!"

"Wasn't that a little rude?" I quipped.

"I never thought Uta had so much bite in her." Serika grabbed Uta's head and shook her around.

Don't do whatever you want to her just because she's short!

"I still question 'Cute High School Girl Serika's Channel ≡' as a name choice, though," Uta continued.

I completely forgot about that. That means the whole student population of our school is going to see her channel name. Oh well, not that I care.

"Maybe I should change the name during the school festival," Serika

murmured.

Evidently she did know how to feel shame, though it was still a mystery where she drew the line.

My announcement on social media had spread much more than I'd expected. Just walking around with my guitar slung over my shoulder elicited comments from others.

"Th-That's the guy!"

"Isn't that the vocalist of the band we were talking about?"

Even students from other years who I didn't know were talking about us. And of course, I was a hot topic in my class too. *"Forget about our café preparations—go practice more!"* they'd told me. I wasn't sure whether to be grateful for their concern or not. I'd advertised the band so we'd stand out, but it was affecting my daily life, which was somewhat cumbersome.

Well, I knew what I was getting into when I did it. Serika's having it just as bad as me too.

"Natsuki, I watched the second song. The dark vibes are sweet."

"I knew you were good at singing, but you look like a different person in the video!"

"Thanks. Though, Mei's the amazing one for mixing it so well."

We dropped our second song, "Monochrome," when we felt the timing was right. It received a fairly positive reception as well. I'd been anxious about it since I wrote the lyrics this time, but I was relieved when I saw comments like, "I totally relate!" or "The lyrics are super good!" The instrumentals were, without a doubt, great, so any unfavorable response would be on me. But so far I hadn't seen any negative reactions.

Things were going pretty well, but the problem was the third song. *"Let's unveil the third song during the concert,"* we'd decided, but it still wasn't complete. We'd just bought ourselves some time on social media. Most of it was done; however, I was still working on the lyrics. *Maybe it's about time to*

call it quits and just declare it done.

It was now two days before the culture festival. Serika had told me, “*Natsuki, your time limit is until today’s practice.*”

I’d been mulling over the lyrics all throughout class, but they still felt like they were missing something. I really wanted to get rid of this sense of disquiet before the school festival. When lunch came, I declined Tatsuya’s invite to eat together and went up to the roof. The chilly breeze blew over my head as I absentmindedly gazed out at the town.

Suddenly, a voice called out from behind me. “Natsuki-kun.”

“Oh, Hoshimiya.”

“What’s wrong? You look gloomy.”

“I’m still thinking about the lyrics for the third song. I’m just not entirely satisfied with it.”

“I see. So you’re writing the lyrics for the third song too? You only have two days left. Are you going to make it?”

“It’s lookin’ dicey. I finished the temporary lyrics a long time ago, so we might just go with those.”

Hoshimiya hummed thoughtfully. “What are you dissatisfied with?”

“Well, I don’t know how to explain,” I replied. As I tried to answer her question, the hazy feelings inside my chest formed into words. “I feel like there’s too much weakness or hesitation reflected in the lyrics...even though those aren’t the things I want to convey with this song.”

“What do you want to convey?”

“I’m not sure. It should, y’know, show people that I’ve changed, that I can still change more. I want others to feel my determination. ‘If it’s for your sake, I can even change the world.’ I want them to sense something like that.” When I put it into words, the answer was unexpectedly simple. But turning those feelings into lyrics was considerably difficult. “Still, I’ll feel bad for the others if I flip-flop this late in the game. The current lyrics aren’t bad. Maybe it’s better to keep them as is instead of forcing a change now.”

That was what I'd come to the roof to zone out and ruminate over. Perhaps I was just giving in, which didn't feel great, but the quality of our performance would probably be higher if I didn't try to change the lyrics now.

Most importantly, Serika had decided today was my deadline. I couldn't delay us any further. *It's fine. The third song's already plenty good as it is.*

"You can't, Natsuki-kun."

Just as I was persuading myself to let it go, I had some surprising words hurled at me. "Hoshimiya?" I questioned.

"If you want to show that you're going to change, then you can't give up." She sounded upset and peered at me with a serious glint in her eye. "The world won't change if you compromise."

There was a heavy truth to her words. Hoshimiya surely thought like that on a daily basis.

"If you still have time, then why don't you brainstorm until the very last minute? You want to improve them, right? You believe they can be something better, right? If so, then I'll help you out."

"Yeah," I said after a beat. I felt heartened—thanks to her, I had the courage to keep trying.

"I hope you can give the best concert ever, with the best song that you'll sing confidently."

Somewhere in the corner of my heart, I'd known that Hoshimiya would tell me that. "This is the newest draft of the lyrics," I said, taking out my phone. I showed her what I'd written, and we put our heads together.

The song's concept and the message I wanted to convey was a bit embarrassing, but I didn't try to conceal it. I wished for the lyrics to become even better, so we worked on them through trial and error. Even after lunch break ended, we took advantage of the fact that we were seatmates to communicate by passing notes during class. My time limit—today's club practice—drew nearer by the hour. In that time, I wrote, erased, and rewrote over and over.

In the end, I finally found the words I'd been searching for.

"I... I finished!" I spontaneously raised the sheet of paper with the lyrics up in the air with a fervent cry. "Yeeees!"

"What's with him?" The students who were chatting in the room after school stared at me. Hoshimiya hastily lowered my hands.

I was so thrilled that I went a little loopy there.

"Yes, that's wonderful. I'm glad you're happy, but you can't let other people see this, right?" Hoshimiya pointed out.

"That's...true. We did say the third song is a secret until the concert," I said.

"I wasn't very helpful in the end, huh?"

"No, that's not true at all! I was able to finish it because you were here! Thanks!"

"Yeah, you're right."

I grabbed her hand and shook it vigorously. *I feel like I can overcome anything right now!* "Welp, I'm off to practice!"

"Yep, have fun."

I want to tell Serika and the others that the third song is done, pronto! I flew out of the classroom and headed up to the second music room.

As I left, Hoshimiya whispered in a hushed tone, "I can't believe he showed me those lyrics... What does he want me to do? Sheesh."

But I pretended like I hadn't heard a thing.

After reading the lyrics for the third song, Serika gave me a thumbs-up. "This is pretty different from what you originally had, though," she said. "We'll have to tweak the backing a bit."

We were practicing in the studio today since the other bands were using the clubroom and second music room.

"Sorry. But this version is much better, right?" I said lightheartedly as I tuned

my guitar.

She sighed. “I wouldn’t want to tweak the music if it weren’t.”

Mei and Iwano-senpai were with us as well, so I addressed them too. “Um, I’m really sorry for all the trouble,” I said.

“Now’s not the time for apologies. Your guitar skills are the shakiest ones here,” Iwano-senpai scolded.

“You’re completely right! I’m sorry; I’ll get to practice!” I exclaimed.

“Sheesh... I was worried for a sec when I heard you were still agonizing over the lyrics.” His expression was as severe as always, but he seemed kinda happy too.

“These are great!” Mei said in admiration as he scanned the paper that Serika had handed him. “Natsuki, I think you have a talent for writing embarrassing lyrics!”

“I knew that already, but couldn’t you have called it naive or something instead?”

Mei shot me a dry smile that said, *“Sure, let’s leave it at that.”*

Remember when he used to be intimidated by me? Look at us interact now! This makes me happy.

“We don’t have much time left. Let’s perfect it by the end of the day,” Iwano-senpai said, wrapping up our chatter.

“Yes, sir!” the three of us responded.

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. The music began with a four-on-the-floor drum beat.

When a day is different from our everyday life, there’s an upsurge of energy in the air. The start of the school festival was finally upon us. I could feel the lively atmosphere just by strolling down the hallway. Each classroom had been decorated grandly, and the building felt like a completely different place.

“Haibara-kun! Get the tableware ready!”

“Okay. Where are the teacups again?” I asked.

“On top of the shelf behind you! Ah, Nagiura-kun! I need you to carry something for me.”

It was a bit before the festival would officially commence. I was busy helping with preparations when Uta called out to me.

“Oh, Natsu! This is yours!” She handed me a yellow T-shirt.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Our class T-shirt, duh!”

Class T-shirt? What’s that? I opened up the bundle of cloth. On it was “1-2” with a pointlessly stylish design. On the back was a list of the names of all the students in our class. *Huh?! I... I remember now! This is our class T-shirt!*

During my first round of high school, my name hadn’t been listed on the back of the shirt, and no one else had realized it. The pain had torn me apart and wiped all memory of the incident from my mind. *Good thing I remembered... Wait, is it a good thing? Maybe I should’ve left it forgotten. Hey, this time I see “Natsu” written here... Wow... Thanks, guys. Thanks for remembering me.*

I suddenly felt worried about Mei. When the need for prep work had settled down, I went to peek into his classroom at the end of the hall on the same floor. I’d heard his class was doing a shooting gallery. Before the school festival began, they were holding trial runs for friends and family.

Mei stood alone in the corner of the room. He noticed me at the door and came outside. Everyone in his class wore their purple class T-shirt, and he had one on too.

“Natsuki, did something happen?” he asked.

“Can you show me the back?”

“Huh? Um, okay, but there’s nothing special there.”

Wh-What? His class T-shirt only had a simple design with “Class 1-4” printed on the chest area. *If my class’s design was like this too, then I wouldn’t have been hurt in the past...*

“Though, they forgot about mine until moments ago,” he muttered. He looked away from me and laughed dryly.

They probably had extras, but it hurts to go unnoticed... I feel you.

“But recently, people talk to me sometimes,” Mei told me cheerfully. “My classmates were chatting about our band’s music video, and when they realized I was the bassist, a few of them spoke with me and complimented me... Some even told me that they’d come watch our concert. I’m truly grateful.”

Mei had never experienced that much attention before, which was why he treasured even the smallest remark.

“I see... Then we’d better give them the best performance ever,” I said. *This isn’t just for myself. All four of us have our own reasons, and that’s why I want to give it my all for their sakes too. Each of our wishes are all over the place, but we’re united in one thing: making the concert the best ever will let them come true.*

“Yes!” Mei nodded with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

After some hoopla, the first day of the school festival kicked off. The class programs were mainly inside the building, while the courtyard was largely set up with food stalls hosted by the various clubs. The light music club also had a booth selling yakisoba. Serika had checked for me, and it turned out I had a shift during the day, even though I’d only recently joined the club. We’d coordinated my schedule so that it wouldn’t overlap with my shift waiting tables at the class café, but I was still very busy. *Man, I had nothing to do during my first time around!*

“Welcome! Please have a seat here!”

“Wow, Haibara-kun is serving us. I’m going, I’m going!”

Our class café was in a tumult. Eighty percent of the seats were already filled. I led a group of girls in my year—who were thrilled to be served by me—to their table.

“Then two hot coffees, please! And a cookie!”

“Ummm, Haibara-kun, I’d like to order your smile!”

I laughed politely. *What’s with her? Good thing I’m a pro at customer service smiles.* I kept the giggling girls in my peripheral vision and glanced at the entrance. More people had just come in. Before I could deal with them, Hoshimiya quickly welcomed them in with a perfect business smile.

“Welcome! Please follow me to your seats!” she said.

The first and foremost reason our ordinary café was so popular was, without a doubt, because Hoshimiya was a waitress. There were an especially large number of boys from different years here staring at her. I didn’t like it, but they weren’t doing anything fishy. Perhaps Tatsuya glaring at everyone from the side of the classroom was effectively keeping them all in check. Though from his perspective, he was just looking around with his usual expression.

“Stop fretting. I’m keeping an eye on her,” Nanase quietly whispered into my ear.

I’d expect nothing less from Hoshimiya’s self-proclaimed guardian. “I’m counting on you, mom,” I said.

“I’m not your mom.” She sent me a reproachful scowl and flicked my forehead.

That hurts!

“There’s only going to be students here today, so I expect no problems to arise,” she said.

No outsiders would be attending the festival today. People unaffiliated with the school were only allowed to come in on Saturday, the second day. It wasn’t like there were many people who’d come in the daytime on a Friday anyway, so that didn’t change the numbers much. When I imagined how much busier it would be tomorrow, I felt kinda despondent.

I continued handling customers with such thoughts floating in my mind until Fujiwara tapped me on the shoulder. “Haibara-kun! Can you go shopping for us?”

“Huh? Shopping? Right now?” I questioned.

“Yes. Sorry, there was a mistake in our order. We don’t have enough of these ingredients.” Wearing an apologetic look, she handed me a piece of paper. She seemed unusually dejected.

Fujiwara supervises the class, so if she leaves, our café will fall apart. Of the current people on deck, I’m the only one who can go. I need to cheer her up!
“Okay! Don’t worry about it. Make sure Hino consoles you when you go home.”

“Y-You’re running that joke into the ground... I’m not going to get embarrassed over it every time!”

“I gotchu!” yelled Hino in a laid-back tone from the kitchen.

Fujiwara blushed furiously. *Yep, she’s cute. I heard from Hino that she acts like a spoiled kid when it’s just the two of them.*

“Cool, then I’ll be back soon!” I hurried out of the room before she could berate me.

“Hey, wait. Natsu, I’m going too!” Uta rushed over. She was wearing a white headband for some reason.

Is there a sports festival going on too? “Hmm? Uta, aren’t you off the clock now?” I asked.

“Yep, and that’s why I want to help you out,” she said. “Can’t I?”

She’d thrown a fastball right in the center, hitting me with an easy strike.
“Yeah... Of course you can.”

“Yay!” she exclaimed and pumped her fist. She ran out of the room with her head turned back towards me and energetically said, “Let’s go! If we don’t move fast, we’ll get scolded!”

We passed through the courtyard, which was mostly crowded with our upperclassmen, and headed towards the school gates.

“Natsu, you and your band are going to be up there tomorrow, right?” Uta pointed at the stage that had been set up outside in the courtyard. Volunteers were currently dancing onstage. They weren’t very good, but they seemed to be having fun.

“Yeah, we’re last on tomorrow,” I replied.

“Some people are performing both days, so why not the light music club too?” she griped.

“That’s just the wind ensemble and rhythmic gymnastics. There were a lot of people interested in performing this year, which is why the light music club is only playing the second day. I wish we could’ve played both days.”

Though I’d said that, playing two days in a row sounded exhausting. It was possible that we’d play once and then be burned-out by the second time, so perhaps one performance was enough.

“But man, it’s cold. I should’ve worn more than just a T-shirt,” I said.

“It’s on the warmer side today, but it’s still pretty chilly outside,” Uta said in agreement.

“It’s already the end of October, after all,” I mused. Unlike me, she’d been smart and put on her red jacket over our class T-shirt.

“Yeah. October is ending. It felt like summer break was just yesterday,” she said after a beat.

“Time really flies. I feel like school started yesterday.”

“Ah ha ha! Now *that’s* too long ago. Should we head back inside?” she suggested.

“Yeah... Ohhh, so cold.”

It was too frigid outside, so we returned to our classroom to pick up my jacket before leaving again. Uta followed me while wearing a giant smile and without uttering a single complaint.

We passed by the light music club’s booth where an apron-clad Serika was stir-frying yakisoba. “Hey, Natsuki, Uta. Wanna buy some?” she asked. Her hair was tied back and she wore a bandana on her head. She looked like a neighborhood granny.

“Do I get a club discount?” I asked.

“All right. Three hundred yen, just for you,” she said.

The grill sizzled loudly. *It looks delicious!*

“You can’t, Natsu. We’re in a hurry right now. There’s no time to eat!” Uta chided.

“Tch... Fair. Sorry, Serika,” I said.

“Whaaat? It’s really tasty! At least, it’s tasty when I’m making it,” Serika said.

“Are you good at cooking?” I asked.

“Oh, you know, I’m wife material.” She grinned smugly and chuckled haughtily.

I ignored her and walked out the school gate. “Serika’s the same as always,” I remarked.

“She’s got guts to brag about cooking in front of you,” Uta said.

We headed for a supermarket one street away. Once we were there, I looked at the paper Fujiwara had given me. “Let’s see—flour, milk, black tea bags, and...”

“Isn’t the flour over there?”

We went through the list and tossed the ingredients into a basket.

“Nice. I think that’s everything,” I said.

We read the list one more time and then checked out.

“Now we just have to head back!” Uta exclaimed.

“Yep. Hey, I’ll carry that.” I plucked the heavy bag out of her hands and reshuffled everything so that I had two of the heavy ones and Uta only had a single lighter bag.

“Isn’t that too much for you, though?” she asked.

“I work out daily. This is nothing.” *Well, I’ve been skipping lately because I’m busy practicing the guitar. I won’t whine about this much weight, though. My muscles haven’t deteriorated yet!*

“You’re so unfair,” Uta murmured. Her voice was so quiet that it almost vanished in the wind, but I heard her.

Silence fell between us. *This mood... I think I can tell her now.* “Hey, Uta. I’ve got something important to tell you,” I said, breaking the silence. I’d been waiting for the right moment this whole time.

“Right. I do too.” She nodded, wearing a meek expression. “But can you wait a little longer? I can’t tell you yet.” She slowly shook her head.

Not yet? Then when will it be the right time?

“Natsu. Just for today, wanna walk around the school festival with me?”

Her suggestion felt like an answer to my question, so I wordlessly nodded.

After we finished shopping, Uta tagged in at the café, and I left for my shift at the light music club’s booth. Our free time didn’t overlap until after 3 p.m. That didn’t give us a lot of time before the festival ended for the day, but we looked around at the various programs and enjoyed ourselves to the fullest. I especially liked class 2-1’s escape room. It was fun solving all the difficult puzzles scattered around their classroom.

There weren’t a lot of players when Iwano-senpai was manning the table. With him at the front, most people would be terrified and run away... Shouldn’t they have switched him out?

“Man, that was fun!” I exclaimed.

Uta and I were eating yakisoba from the light music club and takoyaki from the basketball team while we watched a stand-up comedy performance by volunteers outside in the courtyard. It was pretty hilarious.

“But I think I ate too much,” I said.

“Ah ha ha! Yakisoba and takoyaki are both really filling,” Uta said.

“They’re delicious, though. The comedy act was great too.”

“I liked the play we watched in the gym the most. I was super moved!”

“The one by class 2-3? That seemed popular.”

“I cracked up when I saw that Wakamura-senpai was the star, but she was unexpectedly good.”

“I know, right?”

Uta and I laughed together. Before we’d realized, the sky had now turned the color of dusk. The end of fifth period bell rang, signaling the conclusion of the festival’s first day. We sat on the stone steps in front of the school building, absentmindedly watching other students clean up.

Our class is probably also cleaning up around now. We still have tomorrow, so we’re not dismantling everything, but regardless it’s gonna be a lot of work. We’d better head back soon.

I stood up, but Uta suddenly called out to me. “Natsu, can we talk?”

I glanced at her. She stared up at me from where she sat. Our gazes met. Her eyes normally twinkled brightly, but they seemed dim right now.

“Sure.”

Uta stood up, took a few steps with her back towards me, and turned around again. On her face was a smile as bright as a sunflower. “You know, I like you. I love you the most in the world,” she said. “So please go out with me.”

The wind picked up—a chilly autumn breeze blew between Uta and me.

This was the first confession I had ever received in my life.

Her bangs fluttered in the air. Dead leaves flew in from somewhere and drifted down between us. *Uta steeled herself faster than I could. I have to give her my answer. Sakura Uta fell in love with me, and I must take responsibility as someone who was drawn to her.*

“I’m sorry. I don’t feel the same way about you.”

Uta’s expression remained the same, as though she’d known all along. I’d thought about this long and hard because I liked her. *Before I knew it, I came to love her, so much so that my eyes inadvertently chased after her. But even so...there’s someone else in my heart who supports me more than her.*

“There’s...someone I love,” I said, painfully wringing the words out. When I imagined the future, Uta wasn’t the one by my side. Since long ago, there was only one person who I’d always wished to be with.

“I see,” she said after a beat.

I didn't know what expression I was making anymore. But it was fine; I knew this was the correct choice. If I kept running away, I would only be hurting Uta.

"Aw man. I was so determined to make you turn my way." She gazed up at the evening sky. The cirrocumulus clouds burned crimson.

"I won't give up. Right now, no matter who it is you hold in your heart...I won't lose to them."

"Natsu, I'll definitely make you turn my way."

"So just wait and see, okay?"

The night of the Tanabata festival flashed through my mind. I hung my head wordlessly.

"Sorry, Natsu. You must've been hurting a lot because of me."

I shook my head. *I wasn't hurting. Your feelings made me happy. I was truly happy during Tanabata. I love your bright, sunny smile.* But I had a feeling that those weren't the right words to offer her, and I couldn't find anything to say.

"Don't worry about me. Tomorrow, we'll go back to being friends like always."

The word "friends" felt strangely heavy. *If that's possible... If returning to being friends is possible, then I'll be glad. But I don't have the privilege to wish for that. I know it'd be cruel.*

"I took advantage of your kindness," Uta continued. "When I told you that I'd make you turn my way and asked you to wait, I knew you would do just that. I knew that you already had your answer, but you pretended not to for me. I figured that if I bought myself time, I would manage to make a place for myself in your heart."

If that's true, then Uta's been playing me like a fiddle.

"I thought I just needed a little longer. Just a little longer..." Tears welled up in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. "But I didn't make it in time."

Little beads of water fell onto the stone stairs drop by drop.

"When you look at me so resolutely, the only thing I can do is give up," she

said.

She was right. Just a few days ago, I'd been riddled with hesitation, but not anymore. "Am I that transparent?" I asked.

"I've always watched you closely. Of course I can tell."

"Uta, I'm no match for you."

"I see right through you," she said with a laugh and wiped her tears with her sleeve. She rubbed the cloth against her eyes over and over, somehow keeping a smile on her face. I couldn't bear the sight of her forcing herself to be cheerful, but I couldn't take my eyes off of her. "So, when are you going to confess to Hikarin?"

I didn't know how to respond.



When I answered with silence, Uta continued speaking. “You don’t need to hide it. I’m the one who made you hesitate, so this time I want to give you the push you need. I want the person I love to be happy.”

A moment later, I replied, “After tomorrow’s concert.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said with a nod. She’d likely predicted that as well. Confessing to me even though she knew I wouldn’t respond the way she wished was her way of encouraging me.

How can someone be this kind? She’s not a coward like me. Sakura Uta is a courageous girl.

“Natsu, do your best! I’m rooting for you! So you’d better become happy, okay?” Each word was filled with enthusiasm though her eyes were red and swollen. She’d stopped crying now.

Conversely, my vision blurred.

“Don’t do anything that’d give me any lingering attachment, ’kay?”

“Yeah. I promise,” I said after a moment. *I have no right to cry.* I pressed my eyes and resisted the urge.

We stood there quietly for a while. The world around us gradually grew dark, until I couldn’t even see Uta’s face though she stood right in front of me. Our only illumination was the classroom lights shining out from nearby windows.

“All righty then, I’ll head back first,” she eventually said.

“Yeah... I’ll go back after a little longer.”

Uta turned around and left. “Goodbye.”

Come to think of it, that’s the first time she’s ever said that to me. She usually says, “See you tomorrow,” or “See you at school,” when we part ways—words that promise a next time.

When Uta had completely disappeared from my sight, I heard footsteps marching straight towards me. I knew who it was without needing to look.

“Natsuki,” he said.

“Tatsuya.” I didn’t ask him if he’d been listening.

He grabbed my collar and forced my face up. Our eyes locked. “Why?!” he asked.

“There’s a girl I like,” I answered.

“Why?!” he repeated, his face twisted with pain. “Why couldn’t it be Uta?!”

“There’s no logic to this sorta stuff.”

Tatsuya knew this too. Love couldn’t be controlled with logic—just like the anger that he directed at me right now.

“I thought that if you were the one to make her happy, then...” His voice trailed off.

“I’m sorry.” In the end, those were the only words I could respond with.

“You fucker!” Tatsuya raised his fist with all his strength.

He’s gonna punch me. I couldn’t complain if he hit me. All this time, I’d been wavering, and my indecisive behavior was an injustice to Tatsuya’s feelings. Plus, I’d disrupted our friend group.

But contrary to my expectations, he slowly relaxed his hold on my collar and his clenched fist lost its target. “Dammit,” was all he uttered in the end. He walked past me and headed in the direction Uta had gone.

This was the result of my own choice.

I woke up very early the next day. I hadn’t slept well, but I didn’t feel nervous. I went to school earlier than usual. There were so few people scattered along the road, compared to how it normally teemed with students, that it seemed like a different place.

I went straight for class 1-2. Standing in the hallway was a familiar girl, vacantly staring out the window at the courtyard. She took her earphones out when she noticed me. I followed suit and took out my own earphones, which still had music playing through them.

“It’s finally time.” Serika’s gaze was focused on the stage outside.

Today would be our first and last performance—the one and only day our

band would shine.

This will be the best concert ever. The more steadfastly I swore to make it so, the heavier the burden of not being allowed to fail felt. But I'd practiced every single day so that I wouldn't lose to the immense pressure.

"Natsuki, what're you listening to?" Serika asked.

I showed her the screen of my smartphone. "Ellegarden's 'Supernova.'"

She giggled and then reenacted similar words to that of our first meeting. "Our tastes match, Natsuki."

"What're you listening to, then?"

She hummed softly. "I was listening to 'Lost my way' by 04 Limited Sazabys."

"Our tastes match, Serika," I shot back. We shared a laugh. "Let's do this. We're gonna change the world."

"Yeah. You'd better keep up so you don't get left behind by me, okay?" she said and fist-bumped me. The way her grin goaded me on was very reassuring.

And so commenced the second day of the school festival.

The second day was much busier than the first. The majority of visitors were students from other schools and family members of Ryomei's students. There also seemed to be a lot of guests here to catch a glimpse of Hoshimiya in real life after seeing her on Minsta.

"Hey, girl. Wanna tell me your RINE ID?"

"Oh, sorry. I don't use RINE!"

"What? For real?"

Though she was hit on frequently, she told blatant lies to dodge her admirers each time.

"Ha ha ha! Shot down, man!"

"Bro, she's obviously lying. What a riot!"

She even laughed together with the boys who tried to flirt with her. *Still,*

aren't there too many people? I guess she does look like a real idol. However, because Hoshimiya was tied up with those customers, the rest of us were more swamped than usual. We took order after order, and the kitchen was overflowing.

"Haibara-kun, go seat the customers," Nanase instructed, alerting me to another new group waiting by the entrance.

Working the hall is hectic. I finally realize how hard Nanase's job is... She was in the kitchen today. There was a novelty to having our part-time job positions flipped.

"Wel...come." My voice trailed off when I saw a familiar face.

"Hey, onii-chan."

"Oh, Namika. Go home already."

"What the heck?! I'm a customer too, you know?!" she said in a huff. She was sandwiched by two middle school students who appeared to be her friends. For some reason, they stared at me with sparkling eyes.

"Wow! So you're Namika's brother. You really *are* handsome!"

"Riiight? Is it true you have good grades, you're ranked number one in your grade, *and* you're the vocalist in a band?"

Why do her friends know all this?

Namika frowned. "Just hurry up and seat us already!" she ordered as she pushed my back.

"Okay, okay. Please come this way!" I said.

"Namika-chan, is this how you act in front of your brother?"

"But you're always gushing about how cool he is when you're with us!"

"Th-That's not true! Don't say weird things!" Namika exclaimed, her face bright red from her friends' teasing.

Everyone's watching us with weirdly warm looks, so please behave like that in moderation.

"Oh! Hoshimiya-senpai! Hello!" Namika waved at her energetically.

“Hello, Namika-chan.”

“It’s been a while! Thanks for hanging out with my brother all the time!”

I felt the whole classroom’s gaze gather on Namika’s table. *I have a very bad feeling about this.*

“How do you know Hoshimiya-senpai?” asked one of Namika’s friends, cocking her head with puzzlement.

Apparently, everyone knows who Hoshimiya is. I heard she was famous on Minsta because she’s so cute, but these kids are acting like she’s a star. Amazing.

“Huh? Well, Hoshimiya-senpai came over before,” Namika replied.

Hoshimiya’s smile hardened. Namika’s friends instantly badgered her.

“What?! Really?!”

“A-Are they dating?!”

Namika finally realized she’d slipped up. “Oops.” She covered her mouth with her hand and timidly shifted her gaze towards me—my expression was an ineffable horror. She shrank in her seat apologetically.

Sorry, Hoshimiya... My little sister is an expert when it comes to blabbing too much.

Hoshimiya lifted a finger to her lips to quiet the girls, but her gesture added credibility to their assumption instead. The people in our class exchanged looks and whispered among themselves. *Great... This is going to spread like wildfire.* Hoshimiya and I glanced at each other and smiled dryly. Uta, who was working in the kitchen, didn’t react and continued making drinks.

“Well, that’s unfortunate.”

“Dammit... She’s got a boyfriend!”

“He’s good-looking too. She’s way out of your league.”

The boys from a different school who’d been hitting on Hoshimiya became despondent. Other groups who were hopefully waiting for their chance also appeared crestfallen.

“I’m glad it’s peaceful now. Though, I have mixed feelings about this,” remarked Nanase.

“Isn’t it fine as long as the result is all right?” I asked.

“Hmm.” Nanase looked slightly disgruntled. “Yes, seeing as there are no more pesky insects swarming around Hikari.”

In the end, she prioritizes Hoshimiya first—a mom through and through. Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Natsuki. You can clock out now. Don’t you need to prep for the concert?” Reita suggested considerately.

“You sure? That would be super helpful,” I said. *It’d be good if I could get some practice in before the real deal.* “Cool, then I’m off!”

“Leave it to us. Good luck.”

“Roger that. I’m gonna come watch! You’re on last, right?”

After Reita and I finished talking, I left the classroom with the support of everyone behind me. *I really appreciate it. It’s all thanks to the song Serika composed and the others’ skill that so many people want to come listen to a complete amateur like me. And that’s why I’d better live up to their expectations!*

“Natsuki-kun!” a voice called out from behind me when I began to walk down the hallway. I turned around to see Hoshimiya peeking her head out the door. “I’ll definitely come watch! Break a leg!” She made a fist in front of her chest and cheered me on enthusiastically.

I’m insanely happy! I really am, but there is one issue... Because of the conversation from earlier, I feel a lot of eyes on us. If she cheers me on like this now, of course the mood around us is going to turn... Y’know... I can only assume she did that knowingly, but oh well.

I strummed my guitar in the second music room. In the unusual world of the school festival, this was the only place that was the same as its regular, everyday incarnation. It put me at ease a bit. The guitar felt familiar in my hands

and sang its usual tune. As I practiced the chords for today's performance over and over, the door opened.

"It looks like we had the same idea."

"Today's our last day, after all. Let's get to practice."

We still had time until the concert, but Mei and Iwano-senpai had appeared, and Serika also showed up moments later. When she saw that we'd all assembled, her eyes widened.

"You're all early," she remarked.

"What're you doing? I want to run through the whole thing at least once. Hurry and get set up," Iwano-senpai urged.

"P-Please wait a minute. I'm still tuning," Mei said.

"I still miss the chords during the chorus in 'Monochrome.' I need to go over it again," I said.

We all griped about different things, and a faint smile crept across Serika's face. "Yeah. Let's do a playthrough."

The four of us joined together, producing loud sounds that transformed into the first song. *I wish this moment would last a little longer.* The reason I wanted that wasn't because I was scared of performing in front of an audience, but because I didn't want the end to come. I didn't want to lose the time we all spent connected through music.

Despite my prayers, time ticked forward. Next thing I realized, the sun had already begun its slow descent. Serika's smartphone rang. It was a call from someone on the school festival executive committee. The festival's end was drawing near, as was our actual performance.

"It's time for the light music club to go on. We should head outside now," Serika said.

We packed up the necessary instruments and equipment and went to the courtyard. There, the outdoor stage was already being set up for the light music club under our president's direction. His band was on second, but he was talking the opening act, a group of five first-years called the Clock Ups. I only

knew them by name and face. They stood on top of the stage with nervous expressions.

“I see the Clock Ups have a keyboard too,” Serika pointed out.

“Apparently they’re covering popular songs,” Iwano-senpai said.

After the others finished setting up the stage, spectators gradually began to congregate. The club president stood in the very front to show his support. Around him were students I presumed to be the third-years who’d retired. Some friends of the performers gathered there too.

The other students were scattered around the courtyard near the tents or in the shade. Many of them seemed to be here to listen only because they had free time, but there weren’t a lot of students who wanted to cheer up close with spirit.

“This size of crowd is to be expected for a high school festival,” Iwano-senpai remarked pragmatically.

“Not everyone is here because they’re interested in the light music club,” Serika said in agreement.

Well, this is still a lot more people than your average school festival. The friends and family in front of the stage were considerably pumped up. The MC rushed through a brief spiel, and then the Clock Ups began their first song.

To be honest, they weren’t very good. Their rhythm was all over the place, and the guitar wasn’t carrying well. The volume of the different instruments was not balanced at all, so I could barely hear the singer. It was plain as day that they were nervous.

We were listening to them play from the tent behind the stage as we prepared for our turn to go on when a female student ran up to us.

“Hey, Kengo! Long time no see!” she exclaimed. Her black hair was permed, and there was a distinctive mole under her eye.

I’ve never seen her before. She’s addressing Iwano-senpai casually, so she’s probably an upperclassman. Maybe one of the retired third-years?

“Hi, Teach,” Iwano-senpai said.

“Ah ha ha! I told you already, that nickname is embarrassing, so cut it out already.” She nudged him gently in the belly with her elbow.

I instantly understood that they were close friends. After all, she had dared to poke Iwano-senpai in the stomach. *Is she his drum teacher?*

“Asano-senpai, hello,” Serika said, casually dropping her name for me.

Got it, Asano-senpai.

“I heard about you guys. Seems like things are going well,” Asano-senpai said.

“Yes, all thanks to you,” Iwano-senpai responded, his expression as rigid as always.

She sighed in relief. “Y’know, I was really worried about you. You’ve got a scary face, so I thought the first-years might get intimidated and avoid forming a band with you. Welp, I’m glad my worries were unfounded!”

Her worries were, in fact, not unfounded, but the rest of us read the room and kept our mouths shut.

“You’re Serika-chan, right? Thanks for inviting a scary guy like him!” she said as she loudly slapped Iwano-senpai on the back a few times.

“I invited him because I like the way he plays the drums,” Serika said.

“Oho, very nice. It kinda feels like you’re complimenting me too.” Asano-senpai then directed her attention at me and Mei. “Thanks to the both of you too. I’m sure you went through a lot with how brusque he is.”

Mei vigorously shook his head back and forth. “N-Not at all! Iwano-senpai has taken really good care of me!”

Finding his reaction amusing, she chuckled. “And you’re Haibara-kun?” she asked me. “I’m looking forward to hearing you play.” She tapped my chest with the back of her fist. Oddly enough, her gesture encouraged me. “All right then, I’ll leave you guys to it.”

She was about to leave after spurring us on, but Iwano-senpai stopped her. “Teach. I heard the news. You finally got your long-awaited boyfriend.”

Asano-senpai abruptly stopped in her tracks. She then approached him, her

movements stiff like a creaky, broken robot. “Wh-Who’d you hear that from?! I was trying to hide that!”

“Shikano told me.”

“Th-That jackass! I knew I shouldn’t have told him!” Her face flushed with rage.

Shikano? So the current president?

“Congratulations.” Iwano-senpai’s tone was impassive until the bitter end.

Asano-senpai awkwardly scratched her cheek. “You don’t think I’m a moron for being on cloud nine right before exams?”

“You’re being unusually pessimistic. Be as happy as you want.”

“Sh-Shut up! I’m already plenty happy!” She smacked him again, but it didn’t have much effect on Iwano-senpai’s steellike body.

He’s strangely talkative right now.

“Watch us with your boyfriend. I’ll congratulate you onstage,” he said.

“I was already planning on it, but all right. Okay, I’ll come.”

“Please watch. I’ll show you a performance that’ll satisfy you.” Iwano-senpai’s declaration resounded intensely, unlike his usual indifferent tone.

Finding his demeanor to be unexpected, Asano-senpai’s eyes widened in surprise. “Can’t wait,” she said and then left to join the audience.

On her way back, she joined up with a male student. He had short black hair and wore glasses—he seemed like a kind young man. From the way they walked close together, I gathered that he must’ve been the aforementioned boyfriend. Iwano-senpai gazed at them as they walked away.

“Looks like there are more people now.”

I turned my eyes to where Serika pointed, and just as she’d said, more spectators were gathering in the courtyard.

“Hey, the light music club’s on.”

“They’re not very good, though. When’s Mishle on?”

“They’re on last. There’s two bands before them.”

A few boys from another school walked by as they chatted.

“Is Mishle on soon?”

“There’s probably another thirty minutes. I guess we’ll be bored until then.”

“I love ‘black witch.’ I can’t wait to hear it live!”

There was also a group of female students talking about us inside the school building. We were in the tent behind the outdoor stage, but I could sense a lot of attention on us.

“Th-Thank you for listening!” said the vocalist onstage.

Ultimately, the Clock Ups finished without having really hyped up the crowd. The band members all seemed to have indescribably mixed feelings. They left the stage one by one, with applause in the background.

“Dammit.”

“That didn’t go well at all.”

“Man, I’m sorry. If I hadn’t rushed the rhythm, then it would’ve been better...”

“Yeah... Oh well. Not gonna lie, this is the best we’ve got, anyway.”

“We didn’t practice much, after all. We should’ve worked just a little harder.”

The five of them smiled weakly together, their laughter hollow.

“Good work,” Serika told them.

“Y-Yeah, thanks,” they replied awkwardly.

Well, we are the leftovers of the light music club. It must be hard to interact with us. They’re probably terrified of Iwano-senpai, nor do they likely even remember Mei exists. And I simply don’t know any of them. They’re even avoiding Serika.

The Clock Ups exited the tent, leaving behind a stifling atmosphere. During that time, the club president’s band of second-years went onstage.

“Ahhh. Ahhh,” Prez said, testing the microphone. He bowed to the audience.

“Hey there, we’re Armadillo Tank.”

The front row cheered raucously—they were likely friends of the band members.

“I’m sure most of you came here excited to see Mishle, but just think of us as their opener and enjoy. Thanks for coming! All right then, let’s start from song number one!”

As the time for us to go on drew near, all the background noise gradually faded away. *I’m getting in the zone. My throat feels good, and my fingers are moving fine too. We can do it.* As I psyched myself up, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to the side—Mei was pale and trembling.

“Th-The nerves have hit... Oh goodness gracious gosh...”

“Wh-What’s wrong? You looked pretty calm a few seconds ago,” I said.

“When I thought about how everything depends on this one performance... Suddenly... M-My hands... My hands are shaking.”

I was quite nervous too, but I calmed down after seeing him even more nervous than me. *Watching the Clock Ups play probably influenced us. Not gonna lie; I wouldn’t exactly call their performance a success. It feels bad to say this, but I don’t want to be like them.*

“A-Also... There’s clearly so many spectators here specifically to see us,” he continued.

The club president’s band entered the second half of their performance. The number of guests had increased exponentially, and the crowd no longer looked the appropriate size for a high school festival.

The audience was actually quite pumped up because Armadillo Tank was covering a Bump song and Prez was a great singer. There was also a huge disparity between their playing and the Clock Ups’.

They can play this well even though they don’t practice much? I get why Serika said their talent is wasted. Prez in particular has got a very charismatic aura. The fact that we’re the finale and not this band is a lot of pressure, which gives me all the more butterflies. But even so...

“Don’t worry. We can do it!” I gave Mei’s trembling back a strong smack.

“Ow!”

Sorry, that was a bit too hard. See? I’m so nervous I can’t even control my strength! “Sorry, sorry. C’mon, let’s take a deep breath.”

Mei followed my advice and inhaled and exhaled over and over. “I-I’m sorry... I think I’ve calmed down a little.”

“I like ‘Deep Breath’ by Super Beaver,” Serika remarked. She watched Armadillo Tank perform with the same cool expression as usual.

“I get how you feel about the song, but that’s kinda random of you,” I said. “Aren’t you nervous?”

“I am. It just doesn’t show,” she replied, not a single muscle twitching on her face.

True. She seems more taciturn than normal.

“Don’t worry if you go off beat. I’ll support you, so go ham,” Iwano-senpai said.

That’s reassuring to hear. I can trust those words because he’s the one saying them.

Mei nodded. He had a lot of faith in Iwano-senpai after all the time they’d spent together.

It’s times like this when upperclassmen really feel like they’re older and wiser. Though I’m also technically Mei’s upperclassman by seven years, I didn’t do diddly-squat for him.

“You want to shine, right? Well, we’re going to show them how awesome we are now,” I said. I held Mei by the shoulders, and we stood up together.

“Y-Yes!” he exclaimed.

Armadillo Tank finished their last song with perfect timing. The audience was going wild, and they cheered feverishly as the band came down from the stage.

“Hey, we did pretty well for an opener, yeah?” the president said, wiping his sweaty hair with a towel.

Serika nodded. "Not too shabby. You get my seal of approval."

He chuckled. "What an honor."

"H-Hondo-san... That's no way to speak to an upperclassman," Mei timidly pointed out.

Iwano-senpai shrugged. "Too late for that. I've never seen her speak politely before."

"Wh-What?"

She must look like a creature from a different dimension in Mei's eyes, seeing how he's polite twenty-four seven.

The club president plopped his hand down on my shoulder and smiled. "It's time for the main act," he said with a grin. His palm was burning after playing three songs. "Even if you make a mistake or two, you can cover it up with the crowd this hyped. Loosen up, okay?"

He's a good guy. He's helping us relax when we're nervous. He encouraged the Clock Ups before they went on too. I can tell he cares about his underclassmen. "I'll do my best."

We climbed up to the stage. The curtains had come down in between bands. The area was smaller than I'd expected, perhaps because I couldn't see the audience past the closed curtains. I took my spot in front of the mic stand placed front and center.

We began setting up where the upperclassmen had left their equipment behind. Serika handled adjusting the amps and whatnot. Her lips were curved down ever so slightly today. *Well, there are a ton of people in the audience. If the volume is too low, they won't hear a thing, but it'll be pointless if the instrumentals are too loud and drown out my singing. She needs to have the optimal sound settings to make it as loud as possible while still balancing with the vocals.*

I checked that my guitar was in tune once more. Serika meticulously tinkered with her effector. Iwano-senpai adjusted the position of his drum set over and over. Mei caressed his bass strings as he took deep breaths.

“Thanks, guys, for going along with my selfishness,” Serika suddenly said.

“I’m just doing this for my own sake, not for you,” Iwano-senpai bluntly stated.

“M-Me too,” Mei stuttered. “Hondo-san, I’m sorry, but I’m not a nice guy who could work this hard for someone else. I play the bass for myself.”

Serika’s gaze fixed onto me.

I shrugged. “Same here. I just want to show the girl I love my cool side.” *I’m not really doing this for Serika... But it’d be nice if me working hard helped them achieve their goals too.*

“We’re all over the place,” she said with a smile.

We were a group of leftovers mashed together, and our goals really were all over the place. The time we’d spent together amounted to a mere month and a half. This group was like a miracle. We were four people who would normally have had no reason to assemble.

“The only thing we’re on the same page with is that we all want to make this the best concert ever. This is a band of people I gathered,” she continued.

Yeah, you’re right. This is a place that you created. This is a group of people who were inspired by your music. That’s why we’ll prove it: the time the four of us spent together was, without a doubt, worth it.

“Let’s give this our all so we don’t have any regrets.”

Serika turned towards the executive committee member who was waiting nearby and made a circle with her arms. The girl nodded and rushed noisily behind the stage.

“And now, our final band for today: give it up for mishmash leftovers, everybody!” announced the host through the speakers. I could hear the crowd ooh.

The curtains opened, slowly revealing the world before us. The first thing I saw was the huge audience sprawled before the stage. Students and outsiders alike were mingled together. I’d thought there were a lot of people when Armadillo Tank had been performing, but now there were even more. To be

fair, we were the final performance of the school festival, and a large part of the draw was all the advertising we'd done on social media.

Once the curtains were raised completely, the sunset-dyed sky was exposed. The dazzling stage illuminations set the ambience of the courtyard. Besides the spectators flocked in front of the stage, there were also people looking at us from around the food booths, as well as peeking out of the school windows. There were surely a good number of people who'd had no interest in us in the beginning, but with all the uproar, their curiosity was piqued. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been this many people.

Around the middle of the crowd, I spotted students from class 1-2. It looked like they must have closed the café, since almost all my classmates were there. Nanase, Hino, and Fujiwara were in attendance. Hoshimiya was right in the center of all our classmates. She stared at me with her hands clasped in front of her chest. I could see her perfectly clearly even though she was a bit far away. I nodded at her, and she responded with a nod of her own.

Namika and her friends were in the front row. My sister waved a penlight as she screamed, "Onii-chan! Good luck!"

My dear sister... Where did you get those penlights?

The other members of the light music club whom I had practically never interacted with were also getting pumped up, with the club president at their center. Meanwhile, Reita and Miori were under a tree in the very back.

Even in such a large crowd, I could still find all of my friends with little effort—all except for Uta and Tatsuya. I didn't see them anywhere. Suddenly, I recalled what Uta had said. *"I can't wait. I'll wave from the front row!"*

I shook my head. *This is the path I chose.*

The four of us made eye contact and nodded.

The first noise to fill the air was the sharp crash of the hi-hat cymbal. Drumsticks banged on the snare drum, carving out the rhythm. As the rowdy crowd gradually fell into complete silence, Iwano-senpai's drum solo continued to boom loudly.

We'd decided beforehand to charm the audience with our performance

rather than start with a clumsy attempt at MCing.

Iwano-senpai used his whole body to slam on his drums, stunning the audience as they billowed forward. His passionate timbre reverberated from their ears to the pits of their stomachs. When his overwhelming and arduous solo reached its finale, the rhythm steadily grew faster.

The beat reached its peak, and on cue, Serika cut through the air with her striking guitar solo. She stepped up to the front of the stage, and her guitar howled—the crowd went wild. Her riff was sharp like a blade, and as it resounded, Iwano-senpai joined back in on the drums. Mei and I synchronized our breathing and jumped in seconds later, transforming the solitary tune into a full-fledged song.

First up on our set list was “black witch.” More cheering erupted from the audience when they recognized that the introduction we’d played was shifting into it. The floor beneath me shook from their bellowing roars. They were so loud I thought they would drown us out.

Whoa. Why’re they so enthusiastic? Is... Is this what concerts are like? Though I felt invigorated from their heat, my hands were calm and cold like ice as they strummed the chords. While the fierce wind blew, we created a bird named melody that flew high in the vast, open sky. A flood of notes raging out from the stage at over two hundred beats per minute engulfed the audience.

“Come on!” Serika yelled into the microphone as she shredded through the song on her guitar. We could hear the crowd ooh and aah in reply. Their zeal fueled our drive.

I inhaled deeply and then began to sing, pushing out my voice from the bottom of my stomach.

All this time, music had been the only thing to keep me going. Music had saved me. Music was my everything. And from now on, I would live to play music. The guitar was my lover. Such were Serika’s feelings that she’d expressed in these lyrics, and I sang them as though I were screaming, wishing that they would reach someone.

The hi-hat burst with frenetic ardor. Using alternate picking, Serika raised the melody towards the chorus. Mei’s unflappable bass supported us. I fervently

stroked out power chords and turned up my voice's volume. Serika sang in chorus, bolstering my singing. Our eyes met.

Serika, how is it? Are you having fun? Has the way you see the world changed? I didn't need to ask. She'd told me in the past that she struggled to express her feelings, but I understood how she felt right now perfectly. The way her guitar romped about showed me everything I needed to know.

The second chorus ended, and we plunged into the final verse. Serika and I shouted. She stepped forward, swapping places with me. She unleashed an overpowering guitar solo, her whole body swaying, and swallowed everything up.

Goose bumps instantly broke out all over me. *This is what it means to be bowled over.* I'd heard her play many times now and been shocked an equal number of times. This was the timbre—the guitar—that had changed our worlds.

Who knows why, but I unwittingly smiled. The nervous tension left my body. *Cry or laugh, this is our first and final performance. Serika will find bandmates on her level eventually and change an even bigger world next time. I can't wait to see that future come to pass.*

That was exactly why I relished the joy of being able to play together with her. We crashed through the final chorus, and the end of the song finally arrived. The moment Serika muted her guitar, tying up the song, the ground quaked from thunderous cheering.

Fatigue suddenly surged through me, and I realized I was dripping with sweat. Though I felt like staggering, I wrung out my voice into the microphone.

"Ahhh... Ahhh..." I said, testing its volume. "Hello, we're mishmash leftovers."

I heard people yelling, "Natsukiii!" and "Haibara-kuuun!" My mouth slackened.

"We're a group of four, here to put on the best school festival concert ever."

There were so many people watching my every move; I felt a belated sort of wonderment. Before my opportunity to redo my youth, no one had known who I was. *A lot of things have happened, but I've definitely come a long way.*

“On the drums—Iwano Kengo!”

In sync with my introduction, Iwano-senpai jammed out on his drum set with loud rumbling bangs, and he even twirled his drumsticks. *This guy’s not nervous at all.*

“On the bass—Shinohara Mei!”

Mei flexed his wrists; his adept bass slapping boomed boldly. After he thumped out a measure, he summoned up all his courage and thrust his fist up towards the sky. A ton of people oohed and raised their hands up along with him.

“Our lead guitarist—Hondo Serika!”

She suddenly played an off-the-cuff arrangement of Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven.” She did a three-string guitar bend, the pitch descending from the first string. When Serika was in the spotlight, the cheering was noticeably louder. She took her hand off the guitar and grandly waved at the masses.

“And... Well, I’m the vocalist, Haibara Natsuki. Um, sorry, I guess.” *Why the hell am I apologizing?! Several spectators loudly retorted at me, asking a similar question. They thought it was funny, so I guess it’s okay? Looks like they think it was a joke. Oh man, that was close! I’m not supposed to be acting like this. I decided I’d show my cool side to the girl I love today.*

“Honestly, our band doesn’t have a special backstory or anything. As our name says, we’re just a mash-up of leftovers. Still, the four of us are going to make this concert the most epic concert ever!” I said clumsily.

Serika picked up my slack and exclaimed, “So can you guys help us out?!”

The front of the crowd eagerly whooped, “Yeah!”

“You’re too quiet! I said, can you guys help us out?!” she yelled again.

“Yeaah!” the crowd replied, this time so loudly that the ground shook.

She shot me a smile. *Damn, she’s really used to concerts! I can’t win.* I flicked my gaze over to Iwano-senpai. He nodded and kicked off our next song with a four-on-the-floor. Serika strummed the intro riff, and the audience began clapping to the beat. They were a bit faster than the actual rhythm, but that

wasn't enough to throw Iwano-senpai off.

"Let's jump into our second song! 'Monochrome'!" I announced.

The chords were more complex than the first song, but my fingers moved on their own. Practicing until I bled had been worth it—now I could hold my head high and play the guitar. The first verse, turbulent like the raging sea, ended, and Serika inserted a rubato arpeggio. After a beat, a chorus that was fierce and solemn but also dark and cold like night began.

"I don't want any more regrets. I'll change that monochrome world and those faded days," I yelled. These were the lyrics I'd written myself.

I worked hard every day. This time, I would definitely seize the rainbow-colored youth that I desired. There were times when I was lost and unsure of what I wanted. There were times when the more I wished for that rainbow color, the more I suffered because I couldn't find it. But I had made my choice, continued onwards, and now stood where the path had taken me.

Everything would be fine as long as I was a little cooler than I was yesterday.

I raised my voice so that I wouldn't lose to the audience's cheering. Though it felt like my throat was about to go hoarse, I didn't hold back and screamed with all my might. The sound I produced felt good. I was truly comfortable. Everyone encouraged me as though I was today's star. *Thanks, guys. I wish I could immerse myself in this music forever.* However, my wish went unanswered because time passed in the blink of an eye, and we entered the final chorus of the song.

"I wanted to thank you guys. My world changed because you were all here with me," I sang.

I'd worked hard, but that wasn't the only reason my world had been dyed with vibrant colors. I'd been blessed—blessed with people I wanted to work hard to be with. That was why I hoped to convey my gratitude to them; that was what this song was about.

The music echoed for a moment, and then deathly stillness fell upon us shortly after. So many spectators waited for me to talk as I panted heavily. Once my pounding heart had calmed and my breathing had settled, I began to speak.

“The next song will be our last. It’s one we haven’t unveiled yet. Serika composed it, and I wrote the lyrics.”

“We’ve been waiting!” multiple people roared. The energy of the crowd had reached its zenith.

I paused until they fell silent and then took a deep breath. I needed courage for what I was about to say. My pulse raced, and my chest felt like it was about to burst. But I puffed up with confidence and put on a cool front so no one could tell I was nervous. “This song is dedicated to the girl I love. Please listen —‘To the Star.’”

Shrill screams exploded from the crowd. This time, I didn’t wait for them to quiet down and dove straight into the third song. It had a slower tempo and a calmer vibe than our first two songs.

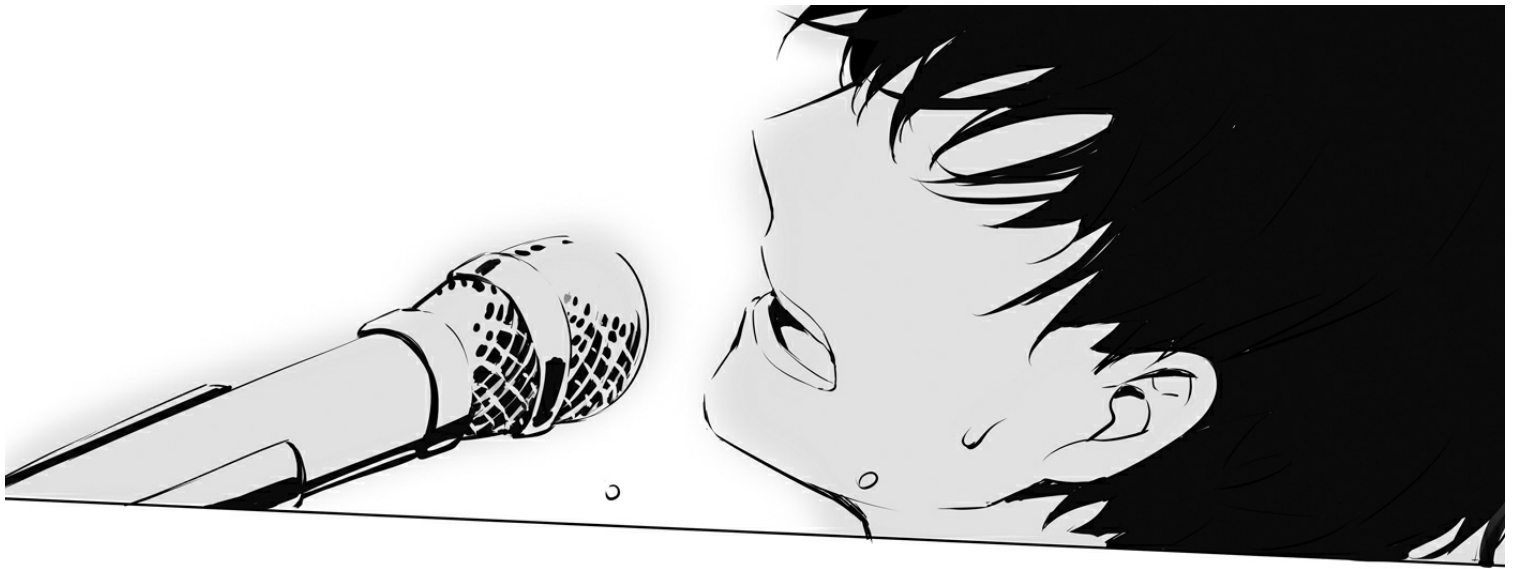
Understanding that it wasn’t a tune to liven things up but one to listen to closely, the audience began swaying with the rhythm. The people in the front row were easily swept up in the mood; they had their arms slung around each other’s shoulders as they let the music take them away.

When I looked at the middle of the crowd, I noticed that there was an unusually large amount of space around Hoshimiya. My classmates were likely being thoughtful by trying to make it easy for me to see her. I’d already noticed where she was from the very beginning, though.

Hoshimiya Hikari wore a peaceful smile as she kept her eyes fixed on me.

“Under the sakura trees, I remember our ordinary conversation. You saved me when you told me people can like things even if they’re bad at them. You showed me that my facade wasn’t a mistake.”

Thinking back rationally, I must’ve been out of my mind to ask Hoshimiya to review these lyrics. But I had no regrets; after all, I’d been able to improve them.



“I ran away on that moonlit night. I couldn’t decide—didn’t believe in myself. The confidence that I could make you happy was a pretense. A bluff. Every day, I just ran away. But now, with this song...”

All I’d thought about while writing these lyrics was Hoshimiya. I wanted to be someone worthy of the person I loved. But those pretentious thoughts could be expressed more simply: all I wanted was for her to think I was cool. That was all.

“Even if I’m reaching out for the moon reflected in the water, I’ll change the world you see with this song. Just as I was changed by you. I can’t wait for a full moon night. My feelings are about to overflow.”

I like music. I like rock. I like the sound of Serika’s guitar. I like singing. I like making music with this band of four...and I love Hoshimiya Hikari. That’s why I’m standing up here right now, screaming out this cheesy song.

“I may be clumsy, but I’ll face forward. Even if I fall, I’ll stand up again. All to one day turn my ideal into reality. To be worthy of you.”

I’d spent hours upon hours practicing, but the performance lasted for a mere moment. We were already approaching the final verse of the song—the rhythm raced forward like the wind. I sang with desperation. I strummed my guitar with desperation.

The next thing I knew, the courtyard was filled with cheering and applause. When I looked up, everyone was beaming at us with elated smiles. In the very middle of them all, I saw Hoshimiya moving her mouth. Her voice was drowned out by the shouting, but I could read her lips.

“Thank you,” she said.

I reached her. My feelings... This song... They made it to Hoshimiya’s heart. I did it! My breathing was ragged. My vision was shaky. I could barely stand.

Noticing that I was too tired to speak, Serika leaned towards her mic. “That’s all, folks! We’re Mishle! Thanks for listening!”

A remarkably loud cheer erupted from the crowd. The curtains slowly descended, but I could still hear the applause. Reluctant to part from them, I glanced one last time at the mass of people. *It’s unbelievable every time I see it.*

Look at how many people came to watch us perform! I'll treasure this memory for the rest of my life.

"Hey. Do you think we made this the best concert ever?" I asked Mei in a hoarse voice.

"Natsuki, what're you talking about?" He smacked my back; he seemed to be high on adrenaline. "If this wasn't the best ever, then I don't know what is!"

Yeah, I agree. That was a dumb question. I staggered, but Iwano-senpai caught me before I could fall and held me by the shoulders.

"You did good. With this, I won't have any regrets," he said.

Serika, who'd been in a daze since the song had ended, looked back at us. "Natsuki!" She jumped into my chest.



She almost knocked me over from the momentum, but Iwano-senpai held me up.

“We won!” she yelled, though I had no idea what metric she’d based our victory on.

I was drenched with sweat, and Serika was too. This was the first time I’d ever seen her express her emotions so candidly. I watched as she hugged me tightly, and a grin unwittingly spread across my face.

“Serika,” I said after a moment. “Hate to break it to you, but I just dedicated a love song to my crush.” *If you squeeze me like this right after I did that, the situation’s gonna get kiiinda ugly.* I patted her on the back.

She slowly released her grip and smiled faintly. “Prude. Don’t worry; my guitar is the only lover for me.”

“I know. I’m just worried about how this appears to onlookers, y’know?”

Serika bonked me lightly on the head with her fist. “liidiot.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

Contrary to my still-confused self, Serika quickly stood up. We were about to return backstage, but then the crowd started chanting for an encore. We glanced at the committee girl, and she nodded back.

“We still have ten minutes until the festival ends, so go on,” she said.

Ah, I get it. We’re the finale, so we can use the extra time since the concert has been smooth sailing.

“Natsuki, can you still sing?” Serika asked.

“Barely. My voice is raspy now, so why don’t you take up the main vocals?” I suggested.

“Do we even have another song we can play?” Mei pointed out.

“We’ve got a few covers we practiced for fun,” Iwano-senpai said.

The four of us looked at each other and then smiled wryly. We didn’t have to end things yet. Our time together would continue for just a little longer.

I hope this moment shines for even a few seconds more.

Fourth Interlude

His song wasn't for me.

The truth made me unbelievably sad, so I couldn't bear to stay. Though I'd been looking forward to Natsu and Seri's concert more than anyone else, I couldn't even watch. I could hear Natsu's voice—hear their performance—even while crouching on the rooftop. Everyone else was amped up, but here I was feeling like my heart was sinking to the depths of the sea.

All of my classmates had gone to see Natsu play. I'd told them I'd be there later, but I didn't think I could act my usual self, so I'd ended up coming here. *I'm so weak.* Tears wouldn't stop streaming down my cheeks.

I heard the roof door click and swing open. I knew who it was without needing to look up. That somebody sat down next to me without saying a word. We'd always been like this, ever since long ago. When I cried, when I felt depressed, Tatsu was the only one who would always find me and stay by my side.

"Don't you wanna see the concert?" I managed to wring out.

He remained quiet for a while and then opened his mouth. "Forget about me. Just cry when you wanna cry."

Because he said that, the tears that I'd managed to hold back began spilling out again. Sobs leaked from my throat. All the while, we could hear Natsu and the others play, the lyrics Natsu had written for Hikarin—a song that conveyed a cowardly boy's love.

It's a good song. Really. The best in the world. Why can't I stop bawling when I'm listening to such a great song? Would I have been able to genuinely enjoy their concert if I hadn't been in love with him? Well, if I hadn't fallen in love, then I wouldn't be able to resonate so much with this song. If that's true...then I'm glad I experienced these emotions.

My love was unrequited... But even so, I'm glad I fell for you. I'm glad I could empathize with this song and see that it's really good. I'm sorry, Natsu. I

promised I'd watch from the front row. I wish I were a stronger person. I wanted to watch you onstage with a big smile. But I'm weak... You're too dazzling for a weakling like me.

I can't be like you.

I prayed for his happiness, trying to shake off any lingering attachments. I won't be the one by your side, but I don't care. I want to be able to root for you wholeheartedly.

The next time I talk to Natsu, I'll tell him that with a smile on my face... But for now, let me stay like this for just a little longer.

Final Chapter: Withered Leaves Dance on an Autumn Night

The school festival ended in a mere two days. Ultimately, I was so exhausted from the concert that I barely contributed to my class's cleanup. Hino sent a cheerful, "Let's throw a wrap-up party!" to the class RINE chat. Apparently we already had a reservation at a restaurant.

He works fast, though I bet he just wanted to throw a party from the get-go. After I helped the light music club clean up, I parted ways with my bandmates. The four of us promised to have our own wrap-up party on a different day.

I won't have practice with these guys anymore. I'll miss them, but it's not like I'll never see them again.

I first returned home to shower before heading to the store Hino had sent us over RINE. *Come to think of it, Namika's been really fidgety ever since the festival. What happened to her?*

I cocked my head with puzzlement over my little sister's fishy behavior as I reached the monjayaki restaurant. I slipped past the storefront curtains, and a server led me through the large room. My classmates were split into tables of six, chattering cheerfully on top of the tatami mats. On each table were hot plates with tasty-looking monjayaki sizzling away.

"Hey! The star's *finally* here!" Okajima-kun, a member of the soccer team, grinned widely and snaked his arm around my shoulders.

"Sorry, sorry. I got held up," I said.

The whole class's focus was on me. Apparently everyone else had come here directly from school. I'd balked at the idea of going as a sweaty mess, so I'd washed up and arrived late.

"Natsuki, sit over here." Reita patted the floor cushion next to him. Hoshimiya, Nanase, Hino, and Fujiwara sat at his table.

“Good job,” Nanase told me.

Hino poked me in the shoulder. “The concert was awesome! Who woulda thought it’d be that hype!” He continued speaking as he picked at the monja with his mini spatula. “Get this: Kanata was so moved that she cried.”

“I... I did not! Don’t make things up!” Fujiwara slapped my back.

“Um... Could you hit Hino’s shoulder if you’re trying to hide your embarrassment?” I asked.

“Well, it’s an issue of our seating arrangement,” she replied sheepishly.

“Riiight, now that’s a flimsy excuse if I’ve heard one.”

Reita watched Fujiwara with a faint smile as he poured and spread a new bowl of monja batter onto the hot plate. “This year’s school festival was legendary. How many people do you think were there?”

“The majority of the student body was present. I believe there were at least a hundred visitors,” Nanase replied.

“Of course there would be! That’s just how amazing it was!” For some reason, Fujiwara’s eyes sparkled as she spoke. Realizing how enthusiastic she was behaving, she looked away in embarrassment.

She’s probably a Mishle fan. Thanks for rooting for us. I could sense our other classmates paying special attention to our table’s conversation. It wasn’t a bad feeling if I attributed it to our stellar concert, but their stares made it hard to chat. *More importantly... Why hasn’t Hoshimiya said anything yet?*

I glanced across the table to where she sat, and our eyes met. She immediately turned her head away. An awkward mood settled between us. Meanwhile, our whole class watched us with weirdly warm gazes.

Welp... I didn’t explicitly name anyone onstage, but I’m sure everyone in my class has figured out who it is. I acted all cool, saying it was for the girl I loved, and the name of the song outed who it was, what with “hoshi” meaning star and all.

“Um,” Hoshimiya began, “good job.”

“Y-Yeah, thanks.” *What’s with us? Why is talking so hard?*

She appeared nervous from every angle, and her gaze darted around the room.

“Hikari, calm down.” Exasperated, Nanase patted Hoshimiya’s head.

After seeing us bumble around, Reita changed the conversation topic. “Natsuki, what’re you going to do going forward? Continue playing in the band?”

“Nah, I think I mentioned this before, but we always planned to disband after the festival.”

“Whaaat?!” everyone around us exclaimed.

Hey, eavesdropping is rude, you know? Can’t you guys converse among your own tables?

“I thought you’d stay firm about that. Shame, given how great the concert went,” Reita responded.

“Well, Iwano-senpai’s giving the entrance exams his undivided attention, so not much we can do about it,” I said. *It’s finally hitting me that it’s over. People enjoyed our performance enough to talk about it this much—Serika’s influence is huge. She’s fundamentally different from the rest of us. Because I watched how amazing she was from up close, I can walk on in reality without my head in the clouds. Mei and Iwano-senpai probably feel the same.*

“Will you stay in the light music club?” asked Nanase.

“I plan on it for the time being. The guitar’s fun to play, after all,” I answered.

“Really? I hope to hear you sing again,” Reita said.

Suddenly, I asked him something that’d been tickling my curiosity. “Come to think of it, Reita, you watched us with Miori, right?”

“We were all the way in the back; I’m impressed you noticed us,” he said.

Finding Miori has been my forte since way back. I’ve never lost to Miori in a game of hide-and-seek.

“Miori and I explored the festival together,” Reita continued without hesitation as he deftly divided up the monjayaki with a spatula. “We’re dating

now.”

For a second, my mind went blank. But considering how the two of them had been getting along, that was the sensible outcome. *Miori did say over summer break that she'd confess to Reita. I feel like they got together unexpectedly late, but at the same time, it also feels too abrupt. Well, I'm sure they've been getting closer while I wasn't watching.*

“I owe you for helping me out. Thanks, Natsuki.”

“Did I do something?” I asked. “I told you I'd back you up, but I didn't do a thing.”

“Of course you helped. It was reassuring to hear you say that.” Reita smiled gently. Somehow, I could tell he really meant it.

I chuckled. “Anyway, congrats.” I raised my drink for a toast, and everyone else at our table joined in.

“Shiratori-kun, this was quite a slow development on your part,” Nanase commented.

“Nanase-san, don't you think your image of me is a bit off?” Reita questioned.

“Well, if we're talking about your image,” I chimed in, “I think she's got a point.”

“Natsuki, don't agree with her. I'm not a flirt. Right, Hoshimiya-san?”

Hoshimiya hummed. “I guess you're better than Hino-kun?”

“Huh? Don't drag me into this!” Hino said indignantly. “Despite my looks, I'm devoted to Kanata. Got it?”

“Toshiya! You didn't need to add that last part!” Fujiwara exclaimed.

Class 1-2's wrap up party was going amicably. No one mentioned how our usual hype men—Uta and Tatsuya—were missing. It felt somewhat suffocating, so I stepped outside. The night was chilly. The cool evening wind blew against me as I leaned on the restaurant's wall.

I did it—I did the best that I could. And I don't regret what I did. But still... I can't help feeling conflicted. Because those two aren't here. I peered up at the

sky.

“Don’t make that face.” Hoshimiya walked up to me. She’d slipped away from the party just like I had. “I’m really happy. So please don’t look like that.” Her expression was tinged with a hint of sadness. She must’ve also been thinking about our two friends. “You know, Natsuki-kun, you looked super cool during the concert today.”

“If you think so, then that makes all the work I put in worth it.”

She stood next to me, our shoulders touching slightly. She gazed up, and I followed suit. The night sky was perfectly clear. The full moon shone brightly in the midst of the twinkling stars. I hadn’t planned this, but there was no better time than tonight.

“Hey, Natsuki-kun.” Hoshimiya was about to say something, but I didn’t let her.

It was my turn today.

“The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?” I said, picking up from where we’d left off.

Those were the words that Hoshimiya had been unable to say on that summer day. “*Someday, on the night of a full moon,*” she’d said. If I missed my chance now, then the perfect timing would never come again. The line was pompous and embarrassing, but the words left my lips naturally and smoothly.

“It’s because I’m watching it together with you.” Hoshimiya pressed her shoulder against mine with a shy expression. We were nestled up close together; I watched her gaze at the moon from the side. “Can I say something selfish?”

“I’ll listen to anything you want right now,” I replied.

“Really? Then say it properly. I’ll feel insecure if you use vague expressions. I want something more definitive.”

A wry smile inadvertently spread across my face. “You’re the one who started it, though.”

“Sh-Shush! Teenagers want to show off, and I’m no different!” She rubbed her head aggressively into my shoulder.

My hands were tied now that she'd requested it, so I honestly professed the feelings inside my heart. "Hoshimiya, I love you—the most in the world. So please go out with me?"

Her hands flew around my back. I caressed her hair and pulled her into my chest.

"Okay. I love you too," she murmured. Though I'd gone with the flow and hugged her back, my heart was hammering away. Feeling my pulse against her, Hoshimiya looked up at me and giggled. "Natsuki-kun, is your heart racing?"

"As a matter of fact, it is. How could it not be?"

"Oh? Doubling down?"

"You're just as nervous as me," I countered.

She giggled again. "Unfortunately for you, I have thick chest armor, so you'll never find out."

Describing herself that way is very her. And she's right—she's snug in my arms, but all I can feel is a soft sensation.

"So, Natsuki-kun. There's one more selfish thought I've had for a long time now. Can I request one more thing?"

"Go ahead."

"Call me by my given name," she said after a small pause. "I'm already calling you Natsuki-kun."

Good point. I was so fixated on Hoshimiya being Hoshimiya that the idea of calling her anything else never occurred to me... Or maybe it has. I gave up on any attempts because I was too embarrassed. But she's my girlfriend now. I can't avoid it just because I'm embarrassed.

"Okay, um..." I rose to the challenge and said her name. "Hikari."

A lovely smile bloomed across Hoshimiya, no, *Hikari's* face. The sight was more beautiful than the moon.

"That's right. I'm Hikari. I'm Hikari, your girlfriend."

"Honestly, I'm not used to calling you that... And it's a little embarrassing."

“You can put up with that much. Besides, I’ll punish you every time you call me Hoshimiya.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

As we stood there in each other’s tight embrace, we heard voices through the window.



“Now that you mention it, where’re Haibara and Hoshimiya?”

“Yeah, when’d they disappear? They’re probably... Y’know?”

“Ugh, are they for real? Curse them for using our wrap-up party for their youth!”

The voices gradually grew distant—they were probably walking down a corridor that led to the bathroom.

Hikari and I exchanged looks at point-blank range. We calmly processed our current situation and then quietly let go of each other.

“Sh-Shall we head back?” I stammered.

“Y-Yeah!” she stuttered.

Her face was flushed bright red, and I could feel my cheeks heating up too. *I guess we got too excited there. It’s a good thing no one happened to be around. I’d die if anyone saw all that.*

To dispel our classmates’ suspicions, Hikari and I decided to return separately with some delay. Once she’d left and I was alone, I exhaled deeply. I pinched my cheeks—it stung. *This isn’t a dream...which means Hoshimiya Hikari is my first ever girlfriend.*

All sorts of feelings intermingled together into something that I couldn’t put into words. *I’m uncertain about the future... But just for now, I want to bask in this happiness.*

The full moon shone in the clear night sky. The wind blew, and withered leaves danced in the air. It happened one such autumn night.

The first person I would tell was, of course, a given.

After I returned home and showered, I picked up my phone and made a voice call. *It’s late already. Maybe she’s sleeping.* Though I knew that, I couldn’t suppress my desire to tell her this instant. I listened to the phone ring as I waited for her to answer. As soon as it stopped, I could hear her breathing.

“Miori?” I questioned.

“What’s up, Natsuki?” Her tone was oddly tranquil. It was completely different from her usual, slightly aloof tone.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Hmm? Nope, nothing wrong at all. Anyway, do you need something?”

My unease grew even more—Miori was pretending to be calm. *Why? Obviously so I don’t notice over the phone. So maybe I shouldn’t ask anything more.*

As I hesitated over whether to press the subject or not, Miori sighed. “You’re too sensitive about dumb things. You’ve always been like this.”

Of course she thinks I’m sensitive, but when it comes to her, I can tell something’s up just from her voice.

“Reita-kun and I are dating now.”

Miori’s meek tone made my doubts surge. *Why isn’t she ecstatic? Did something else happen? Am I misunderstanding something?* “I...should congratulate you, right?”

“Yep. Thanks. I’m happy. I’ve achieved my goal now.”

“Then why are you crying?”

Miori went quiet. I didn’t have any particular reason to think she would be crying, but her silence was all the confirmation I needed.

Eventually, she said, “It’s because of something else. Don’t worry about it.”

“Miori.”

“Hey, Natsuki,” she said, as though she were burying my voice. “That was a great concert, really.”

“Well, thanks. It’s not every day I hear you praise me.”

“That’s because normally there’s nothing to praise.”

“Hey! Lose that habit of hurting people with the truth!”

“It’s not the truth. You’re such a moron.”

“Really?”

“Should I guess what your call is about?”

“Hmm, not sure you can guess. You’re gonna be surprised when I tell you!”

“You started dating Hikari-chan, right?” She was right on the money.

And here I thought it would blow her away. “How’d you know?”

“How could I *not* know? You’re the only one who didn’t know!”

Miori’s always quick to exaggerate. Just because I’m sensitive. The concert was basically a confession, but she couldn’t have known Hikari and I would date just from that. “Oh, forget it. Yeah, you got it right. I called you because I wanted to tell you.”

A beat passed. “Why?”

I hesitated. “This all happened because you helped me, so I wanted to thank you.” As I answered, questions came to mind: *Do I need a reason to tell Miori? Aren’t we partners in my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan?*

“Well, thanks... And congrats.”

“Yeah,” I replied awkwardly. *Why’s her energy so low? This isn’t how I thought she’d react. I imagined we’d be more excited and tell each other, “That’s awesome!” I mean, both of us accomplished our goals. Isn’t this what we worked hard for?*

“Though, I didn’t really do much midway through. You did it on your own.”

She was right. I’d gradually come to depend on Miori less and less. One reason was because I’d felt bad for Reita if I got too close to her. Another reason was because I’d gained other friends to rely on, like Serika and Nanase. And finally, I’d had a feeling that Miori was avoiding me.

“I couldn’t help your plan either,” I said.

“I succeeded too, so forget it—it’s fine. The results are all that matters.”

True. We got the results we wanted. So there shouldn’t be any problems now.

“Besides,” she continued, “we may be partners, but it’s not good if we get overly dependent on each other.”

That was likely why Miori had been avoiding me. Her reasoning was logical.

And yet, there was something incomprehensible here. I sensed that something was definitely wrong.

“You’re Hikari-chan’s boyfriend, and I’m Reita-kun’s girlfriend. We’ve both hit our marks.”

Strictly speaking, she was slightly wrong there. Miori had fulfilled her goal, but mine was to live a rainbow-colored youth, though dating Hikari was part of that plan. *It’d probably be rude to point that out now.*

“Right,” I said in agreement.

“Then our alliance is over,” Miori said indifferently. “Our partnership is now dissolved.”

I hadn’t expected her to say that. “Miori? Why?”

“Huh? I mean, we’ve both reached our goals, so there’s no reason to keep it up, right?”

Her argument was sound. I’d been wrong to assume our bond would somehow hold strong going forward. Even if I were to tell her that I still hadn’t accomplished my true objective, now that she’d finished hers, she had no reason to help me anymore. Our agreement to help each other was now over.

“You don’t need to stress about this. We’ll still be friends,” she said.

“Yeah... You’re right.”

“Don’t feel down. You’ll be fine even if I’m not around.”

“That’s not true. I still make tons of mistakes, you know?”

“Even if you make more...” Miori paused. Her voice trembled ever so slightly. “From now on, Hikari-chan will be there to help you.”

Next thing I knew, she’d hung up. I put down my phone and threw myself onto my bed.

We’ve accomplished our goals, and our deal is over. That’s extremely reasonable. There’s nothing weird about that. And yet, the feeling that there’s a gaping hole in my chest won’t disappear.

Thus, Motomiya Miori was no longer a conspirator in The Gray Boy’s

Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan. And that was all there was to it.

Afterword

I've always liked rock music. But I wasn't knowledgeable enough to talk about it, and I've only ever lightheartedly plucked the guitar, so depicting the music was quite challenging. I'd be pleased if the passionate youth I wanted to portray was conveyed to everyone.

Long time no see. I'm Kazuki Amamiya.

This time, I wrote a story about autumn, a school festival, and music. The theme was "choice." When love comes into the picture, I believe that no matter what you choose, it's hard to reach the best possible outcome. Even so, I think it's the protagonist's role to make a decision, so I had Haibara Natsuki do his best. Natsuki has no experience in romance, so he'll be entering uncharted waters. Please look forward to the fifth volume!

Now, it's time for acknowledgments. I kept making excuses to my manager, N-san, again. "Deadlines? I left them behind. I can't keep up with the struggles ahead!" I said stuff like that all the time as I made headway. I'm terribly sorry about that... To my illustrator, Gin-san, thank you for the wonderful illustrations. Serika is very cute. Serika!!!

Also, thank you to everyone involved in this novel's publication and to my readers. I'm grateful for your support this time as well.

“I think I might be in
love with you, Natsuki.”

“Wh-Whaaaaaat?!”



Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+

Then, she dropped
a bombshell of a
statement on us.
Uta screamed.



A member of the light music club. Miori's friend who loves music.

Guitar

HONDO SERIKA

The limited-time band **mishmash leftovers** kicks off!

A taciturn but skilled upper-classman in the light music club.

Drums

IWANO KENGO

A member of the light music club who works with Natsuki at Café Mares. Has a weak presence.


Bass guitar

SHINOHARA MEI

Our protagonist who is on his second round of life. He's unaware of his high specs.

Vocals/Guitar

HAIBARA NATSUKI



“You know, I
like you. I love
you the most
in the world.”

On her face
was a smile
as bright as
a sunflower.

Bonus Short Story

That Summer Night (Hoshimiya Hikari)

I'm so full.

I looked around as I rubbed my bloated stomach. We were out on the cottage terrace. Though there were lights in the vicinity, as night fell, the world gradually dimmed. The others surrounded a barbecue grill that was set up in the center of the terrace.

Unlike me, they were all still full of energy, grilling meat and quickly devouring it. I was especially impressed and somewhat taken aback by Tatsuya-kun, who was also scarfing down a large serving of rice along with everything else. Though he had a rather large build, he was still quite slim, so it made me wonder where all that food went. Yuino-chan loaded up his plate with more freshly grilled meat. *She loves taking care of people, as usual.*

Uta-chan, Reita-kun, and Miori-chan had stopped eating and were now chatting away blissfully. Natsuki-kun watched everyone else at a small distance. From the side, his expression appeared to be tinged with sorrow, which made it hard to take my eyes off of him. The next thing I knew, I was walking towards him.

"Done eating already?" I asked.

Natsuki-kun's expression instantly softened. That slight change was all it took to make my heart flutter with glee and my mouth slacken in a funny way. *I'm attracted to him.* I couldn't lie to myself any longer. I stared at his face.

"I'm stuffed. What about you?" he replied.

"Me too. I ate too much." I kept my response natural, but my heart pounded in my chest. *What an aggravating body. Just talking to my crush makes my mind go blank. And my face feels hot.*

I stood next to him and leaned against the fence. My arm brushed his. I

almost distanced myself in surprise, but I found that I couldn't move by my own volition. The reason was too embarrassing, and I didn't want to think about it. He didn't try to shift away either.

We didn't talk, but we could hear the boisterous tumult from the others. A sort of comfortable silence settled between the two of us. *I want to stay like this forever*, I thought as I glanced at him.

Natsuki-kun peered up at the night sky. I copied him and gazed up as well. Stars twinkled brightly in the cloudless night sky. *It's beautiful. I'm really glad it's clear tonight...* But his side profile caught my eyes more. *H-Huh? Was he always this handsome?*

I love him. Those words spontaneously came to mind. *I love this person. Oh, I see. So this is what it feels like to love someone. I finally understand why everyone makes a fuss about romance. No one could remain sane feeling like this.*

On impulse, I grabbed Natsuki-kun's hand. It was larger than I'd expected. *Hmm? We're...holding hands?* I did my best to keep my confusion hidden, but he didn't move a muscle. Here I was, getting flustered on the inside, but he was keeping his cool; I found that unforgivable somehow.

While love consumed me, manipulating me as it pleased, my eyes met Uta-chan's. Though she was deep in conversation with the others, her gaze unmistakably locked onto me. My heart and mind rapidly cooled down.

"I shouldn't do this. I'm pretty sly, aren't I?" I murmured and let go of his hand. His warmth lingered on my palm.

Uta-chan approached us, and as though we were switching places, I returned to the others. I couldn't look her in the eyes. After all, I was in the wrong here. My vision fell to the ground, but then someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around—it was Serika-chan.

"You seem down. Wanna duet?" She put on some music and began to sing; her shoulders swayed rhythmically.

"Sorry. I'm not in the mood," I replied.

"Really? Music'll cheer you up," she said, the corners of her mouth curving up

ever so slightly.

The song playing right now was Ellegarden's "The Autumn Song." They were a band that Natsuki-kun liked, so I'd listened to some of their stuff before.

The end of summer gradually drew near, leaving me forlorn... But she was right: I did cheer up a little bit.



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Haibara's Teenage New Game+ Volume 4

by Kazuki Amamiya

Translated by Esther Sun Edited by Casey Pritt

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