



You

Are

My

Regret

3

[Author]
Shimesaba

[Illustrator]
Ui Shigure

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Summer, sea, swimsuits!



Ai glanced at me,
and I felt myself
blushing again.

“Go
ahead,
sir.”

Bartender at the
school festival



Takoyaki at the
school festival

“Mmph!”

Kaoru skewered
a takoyaki with
a toothpick and
held it out to me.



VOCALS
| KAORU ODAJIMA |

Kaoru's gentle singing
voice joined together
with Ai's keyboard.

KEYBOARD
| AI MIZUNO |

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New York

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Translation by Andria McKnight

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CHARACTERS



YUZURU ASADA

First-year high school student and a member of the literature club. In love with Ai Mizuno. Kaoru Odajima confessed her feelings to him recently.



AI MIZUNO

First-year high school student. Childlike and full of curiosity. In love with Yuzuru Asada.



KAORU ODAJIMA

First-year high school student and a member of the literature club. Blunt, but has a kind heart. In love with Yuzuru Asada.

SOUSUKE ANDOU

First-year high school student and a member of the soccer team. Cheerful and has lots of friends. Something happened in the past between him and Risa Nagoshi.

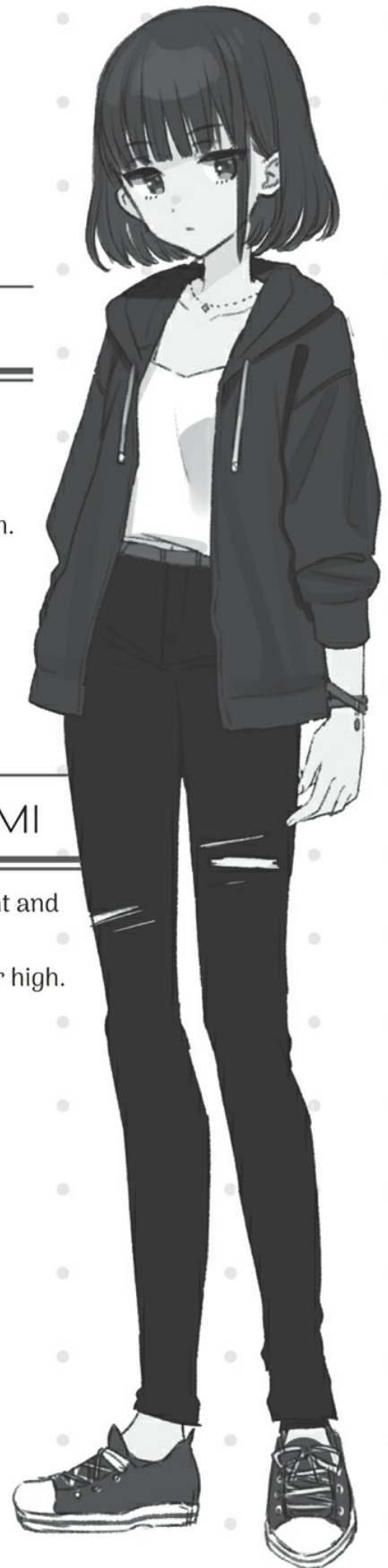


CHARACTERS



RISA NAGOSHI

Second-year high school student.
Often skips class and hangs out on
the roof.
Former manager of the soccer team.
Always has a box cutter on her.



MISUZU ISHIGAMI

Second-year high school student and
drummer in the music club.
Has known Sousuke since junior high.

The background is white with scattered, faint grey geometric shapes (squares, triangles, diamonds) that look like falling confetti. A solid grey vertical line runs down the right side of the page, with thin black horizontal lines intersecting it at the top and bottom.

[PROLOGUE]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

The music he made was everything to me.

I believed without a doubt that his sound would shake the world and gradually make it sparkle.

I loved his music, and as I surrounded myself with it, I fell in love with music itself.

I believed that, in the realm of music, people were free. It was the stuff of my dreams.

Humans couldn't fly, but I believed music could bring them close. With music, you were free to soar off in any direction you pleased on its strong, reliable wings.

I practiced every day to get closer to his sound.

I hoped that one day...I, too, would change the world like he had.

But those feelings...and that beautiful music I'd admired so much...all became nothing but lies.

One day, it just stopped. It felt like the world itself had ended.

There was a hole in my heart, and I didn't know what else to fill it with.

It felt like the pain had possessed me.

I began to hate bright, shining things, because they made me remember the person I used to be.

Instead, I liked gloomy, ugly things because they reminded me that I was living in a world without promises.

I'd lost everything, but I had no reason to die, so I kept living.

I pretended I didn't feel anything... And now and then, I'd hurt myself just to see if I still could.

When I woke up and felt a stinging pain in my arm, I'd feel a bit of relief...and then, I'd head to school just to kill time.

Even now, I could hear his sound in the distance.

But it rang hollow in my ears...because it had nothing to do with me anymore.



[CHAPTER 1]

The sound of pens and pencils scratching on paper filled the classroom.

Everyone stared down at their desks silently as a familiar tension filled the air.

We were all hard at work on our history exam. We were in the middle of finals, and once they were done, we would be that much closer to summer break.

History was my last subject...so this was the final test standing in my way.

A little over forty minutes had passed since we sat down, and I'd already finished the test and checked over my answers. We had sixty minutes to complete it, so there were still around fifteen minutes left.

I had all that time, but nothing to do. If I had the talent, I could've doodled on my answer sheet. But the only thing I could draw was stick figures and passing the time stamping out stick figures didn't sound very fulfilling. In fact, it'd probably feel like an even bigger waste of time.

If I started looking around the room, the teacher might think I was cheating. So, in the end, I just decided to put my head down on my desk and wait.

When I did, a strange feeling came over me. I didn't like staying up late, and I was the kind of person who went to bed early, at the exact same time every night. So I almost never got sleepy at school and almost never put my head down on my desk. In other words, this was a pretty rare move for me.

Since it felt even weirder to keep my eyes open, I decided to close them. My vision went dark, and a red silhouette flickered in the blackness, like the afterimage of the light filling the classroom. As I watched it flicker—though, I

suppose I wasn't really "watching" it since my eyes were closed—my mind began to grow hazy, and I found myself dozing off even though I wasn't sleepy.

"All right, time's up."

A loud voice jolted me awake as all the tension in the classroom dissipated.

Cheers of "It's over!" filled the air as students rejoiced and began to worry about how well they'd done. I focused my blurry eyes on the wall clock and saw it was five minutes before the bell.

"Pass your tests up to the front, please," the teacher said, and then I felt someone poking my back.

I turned around and saw Kaoru staring at me with a sour look. She was holding her test out to my side and shaking it. I took the paper, placed mine on top, and poked the shoulder of the student in front of me.

I couldn't believe I'd fallen asleep so quickly. I sat for a while in a daze, my eyes narrowed against the bright lights of the classroom until my vision finished adjusting...and then, I felt another poke from behind.

"You were fast asleep," Kaoru said when I turned around, her cheek propped up on her hand.

"I didn't mean to doze off."

"I doubt you were up late cramming. Did you lose yourself in a book or something?"

"I wouldn't do that the night before finals. I was just bored, so I put my head down, and for some reason, I conked out." I scratched my nose absently, and Kaoru snorted.

"There were only fifteen minutes left! I figured you had to be exhausted."

"Well, I'd already finished the test and double-checked my answers, and I didn't have anything else to do."

"...You finished so early you had time to double-check *and* fall asleep? That

kinda pisses me off.” Kaoru pouted and muttered, “I worked right up until the last minute.”

I was going to say, “Well, I actually studied,” but I decided against it.

She was pouting because she already knew that. At this point, no matter what I said, it would only piss her off more.

When it came to tests, the biggest factor was how much you studied. Kaoru knew I always studied a lot, so saying that wouldn’t make any difference. This was all banter anyway, so there was no need to respond seriously.

Just as the teacher confirmed all the test papers were accounted for, the bell rang.

The student on duty that day called out for us to bow, and everyone did. And with that, finals were over.

Any tension left in the classroom faded instantly. Everyone was joking with their friends or stretching, as if all their stress was now gone. It was kind of fun watching everyone relax. I’d been pretty nervous about finals myself, and I felt the tension leave my body, too.

I looked around the classroom and saw Sousuke in his seat by the teacher’s desk. He turned toward me, and our eyes met. With a cocky grin on his face, he rose from his chair and walked over to me.

“That’s it for exams, huh,” he said.

“Yep. Over at last.”

“Oh man, you can say that again,” Sousuke said, rolling his shoulders. “Now, I can finally get back to soccer practice.”

Club activities were paused during finals week, and students were supposed to use that time to study instead. What’s more, depending on your club advisor, anyone who did badly might be barred from club activities for another whole week.

Sousuke was grumbling, but it seemed like he’d studied seriously. His entire body was radiating happiness at the thought of going back to soccer practice.

“Plus, it’s almost summer vacation,” he said excitedly.

I felt the same...but we weren't *quite* done yet.

"We still have to figure out what we're doing for the festival," I pointed out.

I thought Sousuke would be disappointed, but he surprised me. His eyes sparkled, and with a theatrical snap of his fingers, he said, "Oh yeah! About that!"

"Um... What?"

He leaned toward me so intensely that I flinched a little. "The school festival is in October, right? And we're deciding what to do for our class's contribution, yeah?"

"Umm... Yes?"

"But that's not all there is to the school festival!"

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

Sousuke's eyes were still twinkling, but I had no idea where he was going with this. *Was* there something else besides our class's contribution?

"The closing party, after the festival!" he shouted. The student who sat in front of me had already left, so Sousuke plopped down in the empty chair. "They're gonna have the usual events, like the beauty pageant for the upperclassmen and the confession contest. But you can also form a group and do whatever you want."

"O-oh yeah?"

It was very like Sousuke to get into the festival spirit, but I wasn't sure why he was *this* excited. At his next words, though, my mind went blank.

"Why don't we start a band?"

Start a band. Why don't we? The words echoed in my mind, reordering themselves for some reason. I took a minute to think them over.

"Huh? You mean...you want me to join you?"

That was my biggest question about all this. Surely that couldn't be what he meant, but Sousuke nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Obviously. I said *we*, didn't I?"

“Hang on a second. I can’t even play an instrument...”

“You can practice over summer vacation. And...I’d like to ask Mizuno to join, too, if possible.”

“Hang on, hang on. I haven’t even said yes!”

“Ask me to join what?”

“Whoa!”

As I was freaking out about Sousuke’s suggestion, I noticed Ai poking her head in through the window into the hallway.

She’d startled me, but Sousuke looked pleased to see her. “Oh, hey!” he said, waving. “Tests are finally over, huh?”

“Yeah! Thank goodness they’re all done.” Ai smiled and looked back and forth between the two of us. Then, she tipped her head as if to say, “Well?”

Sousuke picked up on this and continued.

“At the end of the second day of the school festival, we always have an after-party,” he explained, realizing Ai had just transferred that year and might not be aware. *He can be really considerate sometimes*, I thought to myself.

“Anyway, Yuzuru and I were thinking of getting some other people together and forming a band.”

“No, like I said—” I began, trying to cut in.

“A band?! That sounds so fun!” Ai seemed more excited about the idea than I’d expected, and her words drowned mine out.

“Oh, interested? You wanna join? So far, it’s just me and Yuzuru.”

“I never said I’d do it!” I tried again.

“I can play the keyboard!” said Ai.

“Huh?”

“For real?!” asked Sousuke. “Let’s do it, then!”

I was shocked. I had no idea Ai could play the keyboard. We’d fallen out of contact for a while, but I’d known her since junior high, and this was the first

time I'd ever heard that information.

Sousuke happily invited her to join, and Ai immediately agreed.

"Yeah, it sounds fun! I'd love to!"

"All right! I've got the guitar covered, so now we gotta find someone to play the drums and the bass... Oh, and the vocals!" Sousuke turned his thoughts to the band's composition, excitedly counting the remaining parts on his fingers.

Honestly, I didn't think I could do any of those. I couldn't play an instrument, and I wasn't that great of a singer, either.

Ai briefly glanced at me, then turned her gaze toward the seat behind mine. "Do you wanna join too, Kaoru?"

"Hm?" Kaoru replied listlessly.

I turned around and saw she was on her phone. I figured she either hadn't heard us talking, or she'd assumed it didn't involve her and ignored us.

"What? A band?" she asked, sounding flustered. *So she did hear us.*

Sousuke turned toward Ai. He saw how excited she looked and grinned. "Yeah! We're gonna make a band to play at the school festival's after-party! You wanna join, Odajima? It'll be a lot of fun with you and Mizuno in the mix!"

Kaoru frowned and shook her head. "No way. I'm not gonna add anything... I can't even play an instrument."

"Don't say that! Everyone will be excited to see you on stage! And if you can't play an instrument, you can just sing. Don't you always get compliments in music class?"

"Oh yeah!" I blurted out. I could feel Kaoru glaring at me.

But Sousuke was right. Despite her usually indifferent attitude, whenever we had individual singing tests in music class, Kaoru always took it more seriously than the other students. I distinctly remembered the teacher praising her vocalization and vibrato. I'd always figured she had a fondness for singing.

"That's completely different, though..." she trailed off, blushing slightly.

But Sousuke wasn't going to let her off the hook so easily. "Aw, c'mon. Just do

it! We'll have plenty of time to practice during summer vacation!" he insisted.

Kaoru's gaze wandered hesitantly, then she glanced over at me. *What?* I wondered.

"If Yuzu's doing it...then, I guess I will, too," she said.

"Huh?!" I looked at Kaoru and saw her purse her lips and look away.

Ugh, now there's even more pressure on me...

Sousuke clapped his hands together and said, "It's decided, then!"

I still haven't said yes! I wanted to protest, but at this point I'd completely lost my chance. And besides, I was starting to get swept up in the excitement.

"All right, so we just need someone playing drums and someone on bass. Drums are probably the best choice for a beginner. We just have to pick a song with an easy drum part."

"I really don't think it's that simple!" I protested.

"Don't worry," said Sousuke. "A month is more than enough time to practice."

There was no getting through to him.

I tried to imagine myself playing the drums, but I had a hard time believing I'd be any good. In the first place, I didn't know what kind of sounds any of the drums made. The big drums and the small drums... Was that even what you called them? I had no idea.

There's no way I can do this, I thought. But I couldn't bring myself to say anything and started panicking.

My eyes darted around until I made eye contact with Ai, who was leaning against the window frame. The corners of her mouth perked up into an adorable smile.

"The drums are perfect for Yuzuru! I wonder what he'll sound like?"

"Um, actually..."

In the face of her beautiful smile, the words died in my throat. Once I realized she was looking forward to hearing me, I was shocked by how quickly I began to reconsider. *Hmm, maybe I should try it after all...*

Putting my own thoughts aside, I saw Ai's gaze shift toward Sousuke.

"We just need a bass player now, right? Do you know anyone who can do it?"

Up until now, Sousuke had been in high spirits. But for some reason, his face began to tense up, and he looked nervous. After a second, however, he brightened up again and continued cheerfully.

"Yeah, I have someone in mind! I'm not sure if they'll agree, but I'll ask!"

"...Really?" Ai asked. "Well, okay. We'll let you take care of it, then."

"Yeah! Leave it to me!"

It seemed Ai had also noticed the change in Sousuke's demeanor. But after watching him act cheerful for a few seconds, she chose not to mention it and simply nodded.

"It's a plan, then!" He clapped again and then whacked me on the shoulder. "All right, Yuzuru—I know someone who's amazing at the drums, so I'll talk to them and ask if they can teach you!"

"Uh, okay," I said weakly. "But...do you really think I'll be able to do it?" At this rate, I couldn't refuse, and I knew saying something like this would make no difference, but I couldn't help being hesitant.

Sousuke flashed me a bright smile and nodded. "You can do anything if you put your mind to it!" He was just repeating an old cliché, but he sounded oddly confident. *Now that's a gutsy reply*, I thought. I could only offer a wry chuckle in return.

"All right!" Sousuke said cheerfully. "Once we have all our members together, we'll decide on a song." He then headed off toward his desk with a skip in his step.

I stared absently at his back. To be honest, I thought he was being rather pushy, but I had to admire him for putting everything together in just a few minutes. I wasn't that upset about it—it was just a result of his straightforward personality.

A band, huh?

I'd never really been that into music, so I never dreamed I would suddenly

join a band in high school. But the idea of practicing together over summer break sounded pretty cool when I thought about it. I realized it was probably a naive impression, but I couldn't help thinking it was exactly the kind of thing you were supposed to do in high school. Still, it felt strange to be joining a band when I'd only ever been interested in reading.

Just then, I felt someone poke my shoulder. It was Ai. She stared at me for a moment, then her face brightened into a smile like a flower blooming.

"I'm so excited!" she said. "Let's do our best and practice a lot!"

"Y-yeah. I'll have to work hard, so I don't hold everyone else back..."

She giggled, her shoulders shaking. "Aw, don't be so nervous. Just relax and have fun."

As soon as she finished speaking, the bell rang. Exams were finished, but we still had homeroom.

Ai gasped and looked up at the wall clock, then she moved away from the window. "I gotta go! See ya later!"

She waved at Kaoru and me and then trotted off down the hallway. She'd told me several times that teachers had yelled at her about running in the hall, but apparently she had no intention of stopping.

I watched her until she disappeared from view, then felt another poke on my back. This one felt a bit more subdued than usual.

"Hm?" I turned around and saw Kaoru staring at me, looking gloomy.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "...Now I feel like I dragged you into this." She hunched over guiltily.

If you feel so bad about it, why didn't you just say no? But I had a feeling I knew how she felt. Deep down, she'd probably wanted to give it a try just like I had. In the end, I wasn't all that opposed, and I bet she felt the same. That said, it would be a little embarrassing to shout "I'll do it!" and openly volunteer... But if you dragged along a friend, it felt somehow easier.

There was no reason for Kaoru to feel guilty.

"It's fine," I said. "Sousuke wouldn't have let me say no anyway."

She made a face and muttered, “Yeah... I guess you’re right.”

If I kept dragging out this subject it would only make Kaoru feel guiltier, so I decided to move on.

“Can you imagine me on drums, though? I wonder if I’ll be any good.”

I thought if I could convince her that I’d already made up my mind, she’d feel better about it.

She looked a little relieved. “Hmmm. I dunno...” She thought about it for a while, then smiled. “I’m kinda curious to see it, though,” she said and turned away shyly.

That gave me a funny feeling inside.

“...I’m kinda looking forward to hearing you sing, too,” I said, trying to hide my embarrassment.

Her eyes went wide as she looked at me.

“I’ve only ever heard you sing in music class, after all,” I said teasingly.

I watched as she gradually turned pink and then whacked me on the shoulder.

“Shut up!”

Next, she kicked my chair. She must have been *really* embarrassed.

Ever since Kaoru confessed her feelings to me at the beach, I couldn’t help getting embarrassed around her, even when our interactions were exactly the same as before.

I was pretty sure I still had feelings for Ai. But every time I saw Kaoru blush during a casual conversation, it was as if I was catching a glimpse of her real feelings, and a funny sensation rose up in my gut.

Romantic or not, I loved this adorable side to Kaoru’s personality.

And now, we’re gonna be in a band together.

Talking with Kaoru made the whole thing feel real.

I was going to be in a band with the girl I’d always loved, a fellow club member I cared deeply about, and a new friend. I didn’t know who would play

bass, but I had a feeling I'd get along with them, too. I was growing more and more optimistic about it as time passed.

So despite my initial reluctance...I was pretty happy about the idea of starting a band.



[CHAPTER 2]

“It feels so freeing to walk home after finals are over, doesn’t it?” Ai said.

School had ended, and the two of us were making our way down the street side by side.

I had intended to go to the club room and read, but over the past few days, I’d been so distracted by my studies that I’d completely forgotten to put any novels in my backpack.

Kaoru had already left. She’d been in a good mood, saying she was going to eat at a restaurant with her mother. So, in the end, I decided to just head home. Ai, who had apparently been up all night cramming, had also decided to go home early, so we ended up leaving together.

“So how did your tests go?” she asked, ambling along beside me.

I paused... I wasn’t sure how I should answer. In my opinion, tests were a normal part of school that gauged how you were doing, so it wasn’t like I’d gone all out studying.

As long as I kept my grades above a certain level, my mom never made a fuss over them, and reviewing old lessons and preparing for new ones was simply part of my routine. As long as I studied, my mom never complained. In fact, lately she’d been saying, “Don’t just sit around studying all the time, go out and have fun!”

So for me, finals week wasn’t that big of a deal. But I’d feel bad saying that to someone who lost sleep studying.

“Well... I think I answered most of the questions right,” I said. I didn’t want to

lie, either, so I kept my response vague.

“What?!” Ai exclaimed. “I wasn’t sure about, like, half of them! On every subject!” She grinned sheepishly.

The sunlight hit her face, highlighting the dark circles under her eyes.

“It’s surprisingly hard to remember things when you cram,” I said.

She must’ve realized I was staring at the bags under her eyes, because she covered them with her hands and shrieked, “No! Don’t look!”

“You should really try harder in your classes, so you don’t have to cram at the last minute.”

“I don’t get bad grades if I study hard right before the test.”

“Yeah, but you *do* get bags under your eyes.”

“Don’t look!” She gave me an adorable pout and then relented, taking her hands away from her face. “You’re good at time management, Yuzuru. You read a lot, but you always find time to study.” She sounded a little sulky. For some reason, every girl I knew got like this when it came to the topic of studying.

“I simply have more time on my hands than you do,” I said. “I don’t have anything else to do, so I study.”

“What? That’s not true. Even if I was obsessed with reading, I’d just read a bunch and not study.”

“Ha-ha. Yeah, I can imagine that.”

Ai laughed triumphantly, like she’d somehow proven me wrong. But the truth was, I agreed with her.

I’d incorporated reading into my daily life, but I wasn’t *obsessed* with it. I didn’t get absorbed in books per se, I simply enjoyed the act of reading. That was why I was never tempted to read books instead of studying.

If Ai really enjoyed reading, I got the feeling she’d do exactly as she said, neglecting everything else and losing herself in the world of books.

Honestly, I was a little envious of people who could get that absorbed in something, rather than just getting good marks on tests.

In fact, I didn't think anything of Ai's poor study habits. I figured it wasn't a problem as long as she wasn't failing. She was the kind of person who could always get things done if she put her mind to it, so I wasn't worried about her passing her college entrance exams or anything.

Ai was normally so energetic that seeing her with dark circles under her eyes was kind of charming, and I liked that part of her, too. People really did have soft spots for those they loved.

As those thoughts ran through my head, Ai cheerfully said, "Anyway, enough about tests! It's finally summer vacation! It's been so hectic since I moved back, time has really flown by."

The two of us had been through a lot, but it mostly felt like that because we were still working out things that had begun in junior high. It had only been a few months since Ai moved back to town and transferred to my school.

In truth, she hadn't been back for very long, and it had probably felt like even less time to her, since she'd had to deal with moving and a complete change in her environment.

"I'm really looking forward to the band!" she said with a grin. "I've transferred schools so many times, I've never had the chance to do something like this before."

"Oh, that reminds me," I said, remembering the question that had popped into my head back in the classroom. "I had no idea you could play the keyboard."

She blinked at me several times and then made a slightly awkward expression. I wondered what it meant.

"Mm, well, I took piano lessons," she said at last. "Classical piano, so it's totally different from what you'd play in a band. But I think I can play whatever as long as I have sheet music."

"You took piano lessons?! I didn't know that, either."

"Ah-ha-ha. I guess I never told you."

Ai chuckled, but her expression remained tense—almost like she was hiding

something. I found it hard to ignore, so I kept asking her questions.

“You said ‘took’... Does that mean you quit?” I asked.

She didn’t look upset, but her gaze swam around like she was trying to choose the right words.

“Yeah. I started lessons in kindergarten and then quit in my third year of junior high.”

“Wow, you started at a really young age. Did you just get busy, or...?”

“Yeah, something like that...,” she said, nodding. But her smile seemed strained.

I probably shouldn’t pry any further.

It was rare for her to trail off like that, and it made my heart pound in a bad way. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable by asking more questions. Everyone had things they didn’t want to talk about, after all.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to pry,” I said.

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. “Not at all! You’re totally fine! You can ask me anything, Yuzuru!” She looked around nervously, and then I felt her shoulder press up against mine. “‘*Reflets dans l’eau*’ by Debussy is my favorite song. I always played that one when I got sick of practicing,” she said softly. The tension from before had vanished, and she continued eagerly talking about the piano. “It starts out really calm and beautiful, like a placid stretch of water. But then halfway through, it gradually starts to intensify, like waves forming. Then, the waves subside, and the water grows still again, and it’s like I can feel the light reflecting off its surface... Yeah. I just really...really love that song.”

As she spoke, I could imagine the scene in my mind—a stretch of ocean, at times turbulent, at times calm and still. As I visualized it, I couldn’t help thinking of Ai herself. I’d never heard the piece before, but somehow I could vividly picture her playing it.

“I think I must enjoy songs about water or the sea, because I also like ‘*La vasque aux colombes*’ and ‘*Une barque sur l’océan*’... Oh!” She suddenly raised

her voice a little and looked at me.

Since we were walking shoulder to shoulder, when I turned toward her, her face was much closer than I expected. My heart skipped a beat.

“The ocean!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

“...The ocean?” I repeated, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“I wanna go to the beach together during summer break!”

It felt like this had come completely out of the blue. “Huh?” I said. “Th-the beach?”

“Yeah! We can invite Kaoru and Andou, too. I’m sure it’ll be fun!” She smiled childishly.

“The beach... The beach, huh?”

Come to think of it, I’d never gone to the beach with a group of friends before. I went every year, but only with my family.

Since my father was always busy and worked in another city, he rarely came home. But Mom insisted that we go to the beach as a family once a year, no matter what. Apparently, my parents had met each other at the beach one summer, and my mother always said going back made her remember falling in love.

However, none of us were particularly athletic, so we’d usually just set up a few beach umbrellas and laze around. Mom would play in the waves at the shore while Dad joined her or watched while sipping a beer. It was always fun, but going to the beach with friends sounded like a completely different experience.

I’d recently gone to one with Kaoru, but I didn’t think that counted. That would mean I’d never gone to the ocean with friends—not even once.

“Don’t you want to?” Ai peered at my face as I thought it over.

“Oh, it’s not that!” I said quickly. “It’s just... I’ve never been to the beach with friends before.”

“Hm?” She looked away and thought for a moment. Then, she gasped and

cheerfully declared, "Come to think of it, neither have I!"

"Yeah... I guess that makes sense," I said, my voice a little somber.

Because Ai was such a free spirit, she'd never had many friends. She must've sensed what I was thinking, because she giggled and snuggled closer, rubbing her shoulder up against mine.

"That's right. So I really wanna go!" She looked up at me, pleading.

"Okay, let's do it." I nodded, and Ai raised her hands and cheered.

"Yay! It'll be the first time for both of us!" She sounded like a happy child.

I wasn't sure how to respond, so I just muttered, "Yeah..."

As I watched her giggle and skip down the road, I thought about going to the beach with Ai and the others. It sounded like fun, but at the same time, I was a little anxious. *Won't it be kind of awkward?*

Ai didn't seem to be thinking too hard about it, but for me, it was a little more complicated than a simple trip out with my friends. After all, neither Ai nor Kaoru were just friends to me. I had romantic feelings for one of them, and the other had romantic feelings for me. And to top it all off, Sousuke had a crush on Ai.

I wanted to forget all of that and just have a good time, but I didn't think it would be so easy. Though I was excited, I was anxious, too.

"I need to buy a swimsuit!"

Meanwhile, Ai was completely focused on having fun. As I watched her, I began to feel like I was worrying over nothing.

I decided to set aside my anxieties for the time being. *Looks like I have one more thing to look forward to during summer break,* I thought.



[CHAPTER 3]

“Wow, it’s been ages since I last went to the beach!” Sousuke said excitedly as we rode the train.

Summer break had officially begun, and we’d decided to schedule our beach trip for the very first weekend. Ai asked Sousuke to come along, and he quickly agreed and took over the planning. He had way more energy than I did for such things.

“Mizuno and Odajima said they’d meet us there, but I wish we could’ve gone together,” he muttered as he leaned against the side of the train.

This was very in character for the extroverted Sousuke. I smiled vaguely in response.

To be honest, I was already nervous, and we hadn’t even seen Ai and Kaoru yet. I had no problem speaking to them at school, but just the thought of going on a special outing with them made me hyper-aware that they were both girls, which in turn made me feel kind of pathetic.

“Well, I’m sure they have a lot to do. They’re girls, after all,” I said, trying to brush aside my inner turmoil.

Sousuke turned away from the window and looked at me in surprise. Then he burst out laughing.

“Look at you, acting all mature! That sounded kinda pervy, though.”

“What?! How was that pervy?!”

I’d simply meant that it took longer for girls to get ready, but maybe it came across differently. My face felt hot. The word “pervy” had brought up the very

memories I was trying to suppress.

The previous night, after I was done getting ready for the trip, I got into bed. But I couldn't fall asleep, and I kept tossing and turning. Suddenly, I heard my phone ding, which was unusual when I was at home.

Curious, I picked it up from my desk and saw it was a notification from a messaging app. It was from Ai.

You'll get to see my new swimsuit tomorrow! Let me know what you think!

After the short message, she'd sent a picture of an ugly dog saying, "I can't wait!"

I stared at the message for a while, rolling around in bed. *How am I supposed to respond to that?* As I agonized over it, another notification popped up.

Don't you want to see it?

Since I had the app open, it immediately marked the message as read, sending me into a panic. I deliberated for a few moments and then chose one of the default reaction images. It showed a rabbit making a thumbs-up sign.

After that, I tossed and turned for another hour or so, until fatigue finally got the best of me.

Ai in a swimsuit...

I knew she would look great no matter what she wore. Even though I couldn't picture her in a swimsuit that clearly, my heart raced just thinking about it. I hoped she wouldn't ask what I thought, because there was no way I'd be able to stay calm enough to give her a proper compliment.

I glanced over at Sousuke. *I bet he could give a girl a smooth compliment.*

Suddenly, our eyes met.

"Man, our class sure picked a boring event for the school festival, huh?" he said, switching topics. "I really wanted to do a haunted house." He seemed to be having a blast talking to a friend outside of school, completely oblivious to my inner turmoil.

Now that we were talking about the school festival, I was able to somehow

push the thought of Ai in a swimsuit to the back of my mind.

During our last homeroom session before summer break, our class voted on what we would do for the school festival. Sousuke really wanted to set up a haunted house, but all the girls were opposed, saying it would be too much of a hassle. In the end, we decided on a *takoyaki* stand instead.

This reasoning might sound weak, but there were other factors at play.

Each class had a set budget to put together their project, and every student had to pitch in a certain amount. All the first-year classes were given a maximum budget of 20,000 yen each.

This meant that food stands or projects with high preparation costs would be difficult to pull off while staying within the budget. *Takoyaki* had low-cost ingredients, was relatively easy to make with some practice, and could be sold in large quantities. Compared to other food stands, there was less risk of running out of ingredients and having to close shop in the afternoon, too.

The more practical suggestion won out, and the boys' proposals (including Sousuke's) were easily voted down, since they hadn't thought any of their ideas through and simply chose them because they sounded exciting.

"The important thing is that we're all doing something together. I'm sure the *takoyaki* stand will be fun," I said, trying to make him feel better.

He pouted. "I know, but the haunted house would've been a blast..."

First the after-party, and now this... Sousuke seemed to really like planning fun group activities.

That reminded me about the band. There was still something we hadn't decided.

"By the way, what about our bass player?" I asked. "You said you had someone in mind, right?" At that, his cheerful expression tensed up slightly.

His gaze wavered, and then he said slowly, "I was thinking of asking Nagoshi."

I stared blankly at him. I hadn't been expecting to hear that name. "Nagoshi? Can she even play?" I asked.

He nodded and shot me a sheepish grin. "Not only can she play, if she'd

continued, she might've even gone pro," he said, his expression darkening.

I had a feeling there was a story here.

"So she gave it up?"

"Yeah, in junior high."

Junior high... I tipped my head to one side. "Did you guys go to junior high together?"

"No," he said in a low voice. "But remember how I said I knew someone who can play drums? I went to junior high with her, and she had a band outside of school. Nagoshi was their bassist."

"Oh, okay." I nodded and cast a sidelong glance at him.

I'd thought he only knew Nagoshi through the soccer team. I'd guessed from things he said that they had some kind of history, but I never would've guessed it went all the way back to junior high.

Sousuke smiled faintly, as if reminiscing. "She was an amazing performer. She gave solid support when the focus was on the vocals or guitar, but the moment it was her turn for a solo, she'd go wild, making these incredible sounds. It reminded me of the way Yuugo Ichihara played."

"Yuugo Ichihara?" I'd never heard that name before.

Sousuke nodded. "Yeah, he was considered one of Japan's top bassists. He was really cool."

"Hmm..." I didn't quite follow, but it was clear the guy was really talented.

Up until then, I'd seen Sousuke primarily as a soccer guy, so I was surprised that he knew so much about music.

"Honestly, at first I was only there to see Misuzu play—oh, that's the drummer's name. She invited me, saying they needed to fill a quota at the venue. But then, I fell in love with the sound of Nagoshi's bass. And after that, I went to every one of their gigs."

"She must've been really amazing."

"She was. I didn't know much about music back then. I still don't, really. But

even I could tell she was incredible. I don't know how to explain it, but it was like there was emotion in her sound." His eyes softened, and his voice became gentle. I could tell he was remembering the concerts he'd attended back then in vivid detail.

Emotion in her sound.

I had a hard time imagining someone saying that about the Nagoshi I knew. To me, she seemed evasive and vague—the kind of person who never let her true feelings show.

Maybe playing the bass was the way she expressed herself. If so, I'd like to hear her.

"But when she was in her third year of junior high, she suddenly quit playing and left the band." A shadow crossed Sousuke's face. "When I realized I'd never hear her play again, I felt really sad. After that, I stopped seeing her around, and then it was time to start studying for my high school entrance exams... Then, lo and behold, I find out we're at the same school, and she's the soccer team's manager. I was shocked."

So he thought he'd never hear her play or even see her again, but then their paths unexpectedly crossed. Though, from what I'd heard, that didn't last long.

"And then...she quit, right?"

".....That's right," he said with a sigh.

He fell silent and looked out the window for a while. His gaze flitted around. I couldn't tell if he was just watching the passing scenery or searching for the right words to say.

"Do you know why she quit?" I asked. I figured he might.

He nodded quietly. "Sort of. But...I don't know if what she said back then was the real reason or not." He smiled sadly. "After she quit playing bass, she seemed like a totally different person. During her concerts, it was as if I could hear her 'voice' loud and clear. But now, I don't understand her at all. It's really frustrating."

"Oh..." I didn't know what else to do but nod.

I understood what he meant, though. I found her similarly hard to read. But if she'd been different back when he first met her, the change must have left him much more confused than I could imagine.

"I really want to hear her play the bass again. So I'll try asking her." His voice was quiet, but his gaze was steady, like he was determined to pursue his goal no matter what.

"I hope she'll play for you," I said, and he gave me a big grin and nodded enthusiastically.

"Ah, sorry! I got all depressing there for a bit." He laughed and clapped his right fist against his left palm. "Let's focus on having fun at the beach today!"

It was clear he wanted to change the subject, so I nodded and tried to match his energy.

"Y-yeah!"

"I'm looking forward to seeing Mizuno in a swimsuit! What kind do you think she'll wear?"

This brought back my memories of the night before, and I almost choked.

"I-I have no idea," I stammered, and Sousuke laughed out loud.

"I can see her wearing something super racy and shooting us an innocent smile. That'd really be something, huh?"

"....."

I imagined exactly what he said and blushed.

He pointed at me. "I knew it! You're a closet perv!" he teased.

"Stop being rude! Some things should stay in the closet, okay?!" I said, flustered.

I wasn't used to chatting about girls with male friends. It was a little embarrassing...but kind of fun, too.

As Sousuke and I bantered back and forth, the train rumbled along, carrying us toward the beach. *It's really starting to feel like summer vacation.*



[CHAPTER 4]

We got off the train at the station closest to the ocean.

As we watched other passengers file out the doors, Sousuke said, “Kinda crazy to think all these people are going to the beach, huh?” and I agreed.

As it happened, this was the same station Kaoru and I had gotten off at when we went to the beach together several weeks ago. But we’d arrived at night, and there had hardly been any people around. Today, it was still early, and the station was bustling. It felt like a completely different place.

As we made our way down the platform stairs and walked through the gate, my earlier nervousness began to creep back.

Sousuke scanned our surroundings and made a sound of recognition. I followed his gaze and found Ai and Kaoru standing next to a pillar.

“You’re already here! That was fast!” Sousuke waved and ran toward them. I was feeling a bit too self-conscious to run, so I just walked behind him.

Ai waved back energetically, then turned to me and smiled, waving again. I returned the gesture, then looked over at Kaoru, who abruptly turned away.

“We were so excited we showed up early!” Ai said with her usual bright smile. “I thought I was way ahead of schedule, but Kaoru got here even earlier than—*Mmph!*”

“I-I just caught an earlier train and made good time, that’s all,” Kaoru explained, her hand over Ai’s mouth.

I didn’t think she needed to explain herself, but Kaoru had on a nasty scowl, so it probably mattered to her... Ai continued to struggle against Kaoru’s hand,

saying, “*Mmph! Mmph!*” Kaoru glared at her for a few seconds and then let her go.

“Looks like Odajima’s ready to party!” Sousuke said, and Kaoru glared at him. I pretended not to notice and looked away.

Despite my best efforts, Ai’s outfit caught my attention. She was dressed in a lightweight, white knee-length dress with a round neckline that exposed her collarbone. On her feet, she wore white sandals, and a large straw hat adorned her head. She held the hat down with her left hand to keep it from blowing away in the sea breeze as the hem of her dress fluttered softly in the wind.

I thought she looked adorable.

“Mizuno, that dress looks really good on you!” said Sousuke, making my heart jump in my chest.

“Really? Thanks! The weather’s so nice I thought white would be perfect.” She smiled happily and twirled around while Sousuke cheered and clapped.

His natural ability to compliment others was one of his charms. There was no way I could ever be like him. I felt a mixture of envy and frustration as I clapped weakly, attempting to join in.

“But Kaoru is in all black!” Smiling, Ai hopped over to stand behind Kaoru and playfully peeked over her shoulder. “Isn’t that funny? It’s like we planned it or something!”

After Ai made a fuss behind her, Kaoru mumbled something like, “It’s not anything special,” and crossed her right arm in front of herself to hide her body. Not that she was really covering anything.

Kaoru was wearing a black short-sleeved shirt and capris with a white and dark gray plaid pattern. The pattern was so fine that the pants almost looked black from afar. Black-heeled sandals completed the outfit. She looked sleek and sophisticated, and somehow taller.



Rather than cute, she was...

"You look really stylish," I murmured, and her eyes widened in surprise.

Ai looked puzzled, and Sousuke turned to me, his mouth slightly open.

"What?" I asked.

Kaoru's eyes darted around awkwardly. "It's just a normal outfit ...," she said.

Sousuke suddenly unfroze and turned his attention back to Kaoru. "Come to think of it, you *do* look really stylish. You look all grown-up or something." Naturally, he'd managed to explain it better than I could.

Kaoru blushed. "All right, that's enough!"

I felt someone's eyes on me and turned to see Ai staring at me intensely. *Really* intensely.

Why is she looking at me like that? I wondered, feeling a bit nervous.

"All right, time to head to the beach!" said Sousuke. "Everyone remembered their swimsuits, right?" He sounded upbeat—either he hadn't noticed Ai and me staring at each other, or he was pretending not to.

Ai quickly shifted her gaze away and reverted to her playful self. "I'm already wearing my swimsuit under my dress!" she said, puffing out her chest.

"Maybe you're a little *too* enthusiastic," Sousuke said with a laugh, and then narrowed his eyes wickedly. "I hope you remembered to bring underwear."

I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from saying, "What?!" *I can't believe he had the nerve to say that!* Then again, I'd seen lots of tomboyish anime and manga characters make that very mistake, so I figured Sousuke was only joking around.

He probably just wanted to tease her. And if she really had forgotten, this would give her a chance to figure something out while she still had the chance. If I thought about it like that, he was actually being considerate. However...

"No worries! I have some in my bag!" Ai declared confidently, patting the bag slung over her shoulder.

Sousuke's mouth flapped a few times as he stared at it.

“O-oh. Um, good,” he said awkwardly and nodded.

A lethal counterattack, I thought as I did my best not to stare at Ai’s bag, too.

When I looked away, Kaoru and I made eye contact. She was scowling at me and clicked her tongue loudly, so I could hear.

Sousuke awkwardly turned toward her and said, “C’mon! Let’s hurry up and go!”

Ai was the only one who didn’t seem to understand what was on everyone else’s mind.

Nevertheless, thanks to Sousuke’s encouragement, we all started walking together.

I followed slightly behind the group and stared at Kaoru’s back. She probably knew what I’d been thinking about, but that was no reason to glare at me like that... I mean, the information that Ai was wearing her swimsuit underneath her clothes *and* that she’d brought underwear along in her bag was way too stimulating for a teenage boy! I couldn’t help it!

As I continued to make up excuses, Ai timidly turned around to look at me from her spot beside Kaoru. She casually slowed her pace and fell into step next to me. I could feel her glancing my way, but she didn’t say anything.

I looked at her, confused, and she puffed her cheeks out into a pout, then moved closer to me so that our shoulders nearly touched.

“Wh-what?” I asked, unable to stand the silence any longer. I could smell some kind of sweet fragrance wafting off her.

She puffed out her chest, but stayed quiet. Since her dress was tight around her waist, the gesture wound up emphasizing her breasts. I quickly looked away.

As soon as I did, however, she got even closer.

“I said, *what?!* ” I had no idea what she was doing, so I raised my voice.

“Hmph!” Ai snorted angrily. Then, she looked into my eyes and said, “What about me?”

“Huh?”

“What about *my* clothes?”

Only then did it hit me. “Ohh...” I sighed as she puffed out her cheeks even more.

“You only complimented Kaoru.”

“Well, I mean...”

“Aren’t I stylish, too?” Her questions were way too direct, leaving me flustered.

Of course Ai looked good, but there was a big difference for me between calling a girl “stylish” and calling her “cute.”

The reason I was able to comment on Kaoru’s outfit so quickly was probably because I wasn’t thinking about how cute she looked. The words had come out so naturally I hadn’t even thought of them as a compliment.

Both Ai and Kaoru’s outfits suited them, and they were both attractive. I began to feel frustrated at myself for having such a hard time saying the word “cute.” It felt childish.

“Yuzuru?” Ai peered into my face, her lips drawn tightly together. “Hm. I guess I’m not your type, then.”

“Wh-what?! I never said that!” I saw the gloomy look on her face and panicked. She urged me to continue with her eyes. “About your outfit... Rather than stylish, I thought it was...”

“Yes?”

“Well, I thought it was cu...”

“What?”

“.....C-cute...” I said at last, my face beet red.

Ai stared at me, and then she began to blush, too.

“Oh!” she said, straightening up and then stumbling a bit.

I looked up and realized Sousuke and Kaoru were drifting further ahead. Ai’s

silent attack had thrown me off so badly I'd started slowing down.

"Ohhh! Heh-heh..." She smiled shyly. "That's sweet."

"It...it looks good on you."

"Does it? Yay!"

She seemed to be in a good mood now. Despite having to drag the compliment out of me, she looked genuinely happy. It was proof of how much she trusted what I'd told her.

I took several deep breaths to try to calm my heart, which was currently going at Mach 5. "S-sorry I didn't tell you right away," I said.

Ai stared at me and then broke into a smile. "It's okay. Thanks for telling me." She gently nudged my shoulder with hers. "To be honest, I had a feeling that's what you were thinking, because you were staring at me a lot." She shot me a mischievous grin, showing off her dimples. "Still, I wanted to hear you say it, you know?"

"...Yeah."

"And once I heard you say it, I was, like, a hundred times happier!"

"I'm glad," I said shyly.

She was so direct it always left me flustered, but it seemed she wanted me to be just as direct with her. If that was the case, I needed to get over my shyness and simply tell her how attractive I found her.

"Hey, Yuzuru?"

"Yeah?"

She skipped ahead of me, then turned around and walked backward, a dazzling smile on her face. "I want you to tell me all the things you like about me. And I'll do the same for you!"

My heart contracted in my chest, and my whole body suddenly felt hot. I let out a deep, quiet breath in an attempt to cool myself down.

"Okay," I said, nodding. "I'll do my best."

"Tee-hee. I know you can do it, Yuzuru!" She blushed, as if my shyness were

contagious.

I realized this was a form of communication, too. If I told someone the things I liked about them and vice versa, we would be able to notice subtle gestures and feelings in each other and cherish them. Then, we could grow to know each other even better.

Once we accomplished that, it would become the strong foundation for a space all our own. And wouldn't that mean we truly understood each other?

That was the kind of relationship I wanted with Ai.

I glanced up ahead and saw that Kaoru and Sousuke had stopped and were looking at us.

"Oh, they're waiting for us," I said. Ai quit walking backward and glanced over at them.

"Coming!" she shouted cheerily and waved.

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"We have a reservation under the name Andou!"

When we arrived at the beach, we saw a line of cabanas some distance away from the shore. We went inside one and a cheerful, muscular man came out to greet us.

Wow, Sousuke even made reservations, I thought. Thanks to him, we were able to use the changing rooms with no problem and had a safe place to store our things. Once again, I was impressed by how prepared he was.

"All right. Let's meet outside once we're done changing!" Sousuke said, then he and I went into the men's changing room.

The whole structure wasn't that large, and I could hear Ai's excited voice as she talked to Kaoru on the other side of the wall.

"Damn, I'm so pumped!" Sousuke said as he energetically whipped off his clothes and got into his swimming trunks.

I glanced at his body. Since he was an athlete, he was pretty muscular. Even

as another guy, I was impressed.

He'd taken off his underwear and gotten into his swimming trunks surprisingly quickly. I pointed at his abs.

"Nice muscles. I can tell you work out," I said.

He stared at me blankly for a beat, then burst out laughing.

"You don't have to compliment me, you know!"

"I was just being honest..."

"You should've been honest with Mizuno!" Sousuke grinned. I whacked him on the chest, which only made him laugh more. "I'm joking, I'm joking!" he said, waving a hand back and forth. "That's part of your charm though, Yuzuru."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain... But everyone knows that when you say something, it's because you really mean it." He scratched the tip of his nose, looking slightly bashful.

Then, without warning, he whacked me on the back.

"Ouch!"

"But you're too scrawny, ya know that?"

"Y-yeah, I do, actually..."

"You need to put on a little bit of weight and start building up muscle. Guys built like sticks don't get any girls!" Sousuke said with a smile, then left the changing room.

"Geez..." I muttered, then I scratched my nose, just like Sousuke had a moment before. "First you get all shy, then you go off without me."

I supposed it was embarrassing to receive a compliment from someone you respected as a friend. But it didn't seem fair to just run off like that. As I thought about this, I looked down at myself. Compared to Sousuke, I really did look scrawny.

"Maybe I *should* try to build up some muscle," I murmured as I left the changing room behind.

Back outside, I chatted with Sousuke for a while as we absentmindedly stared at people playing on the beach.

Eventually, I heard a voice from behind say, "Sorry to keep you waiting!"

I turned around and saw Ai and Kaoru, now changed into their swimsuits.

Well, Kaoru was wearing a baggy hoodie zipped up all the way to the top, but since her bare legs were poking out from the bottom, I was pretty sure she had on her swimsuit underneath.

"Whoa! You look really great! Almost *too* good!" Sousuke said immediately.

"Tee-hee!" Ai smiled.

She wore a pure white bikini. The top was divided into two triangle shapes, showing off her chest. There was a bow in the middle and frills along the sides. It was both sexy and cute.

I thought she looked great, but honestly, I wasn't sure where to point my eyes.

"Thanks for the compliment," she said to Sousuke, before turning to me.

She twirled around. My heart skipped a beat when I saw her exposed back and healthy behind. Then, she tipped her head to the side like a bird.

"Well?" she asked.

I felt my cheeks burn as I nodded. "You look good."

"Cute?"

"Yes. Very cute."

"Ah-ha! Yaaay!" Ai's face lit up. She'd left her hat in the dressing room, so the summer sun shone directly on skin. Her smile always looked like it was sparkling, but it seemed especially bright today.

She grinned with satisfaction, then turned toward Kaoru. Kaoru had been making a sour expression the entire time and clearly flinched when she realized Ai was now staring at her.

“Kaoruuu...” Ai approached Kaoru and made grabby hands.

“Wh-what?”

“C’mon, you went to the effort of putting on a swimsuit, so take off your hoodie!”

“No, the sun is too— H-hey, wait!”

Kaoru began to mumble an excuse, but Ai interrupted her and grabbed her zipper, pulling it all the way down. Her hoodie fell to the ground, and Ai snatched it away triumphantly, then put one hand on her hip.

Sousuke stared at Kaoru for a few seconds without saying anything. I did the same. I couldn’t help it.

Kaoru was wearing a black, frilled bikini top. Like Ai’s, it was a two-piece, but the top wasn’t as revealing thanks to its large ruffles. It was a stylish swimsuit, with a plant pattern in shades of black and gray.

I’d begun to realize that black actually suited Kaoru quite well. I’d never noticed it before, because at school she always wore the same pink cardigan.

“W-wow, I had a hard time imagining Odajima in a swimsuit...,” Sousuke stammered. “You look way better than I expected.”

“Wh-what the heck does that mean?” Kaoru asked, shyly covering her chest with both hands.

“Right? Right?!” Ai crowed triumphantly.

Kaoru glanced over at me and fidgeted a bit. “I-I just wore whatever swimsuit I had at home, okay?”

Ai stared at her blankly from behind, then exclaimed, “What?! We bought it together yesterday! Why are you lying?”

“Shut up, Ai!”

“You don’t have to hide it. You agonized over which one to choose for hours, remember?”

Kaoru turned bright red. “You don’t have to tell them everything!”

“Why not?” Ai said with a pout. “Don’t you want them to appreciate it?”

“And gimme back my hoodie.”

“Why? We’re going swimming, so you don’t need it. It’ll be a pain to lug it around everywhere. I’ll just put it in the changing room.” Ai trotted back to the cabana.

“Ugh...” Kaoru groaned, waving her right arm back and forth. “I can’t believe her!” She stamped her foot, kicking sand up into the air.

“I didn’t know you were such a shy person,” Sousuke said.

Kaoru glared at him. “Shut up. I just don’t wanna get a sunburn.”

“Didn’t you put on sunscreen?”

“...I did.”

“Then you’ll be fine.”

I’d heard of people still getting burned despite wearing sunscreen, but I could tell that wasn’t Sousuke’s point. It was obvious to everyone here that Kaoru’s real concern wasn’t getting a sunburn.

I took another look at her swimsuit.

Sousuke was right. From the way Kaoru normally behaved, it was hard for me to imagine her frolicking cheerfully around the beach in a swimsuit. But now that she was wearing one right in front of me, I had to admit she looked great.

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about,” I said. “I think it really suits you.”

Her eyes darted around nervously, and she frowned. “You don’t have to force yourself to flatter me.”

“You look so different from usu—”

“Enough, already!” she said, turning bright red and glaring at me. Then, she stomped off toward the water.

Sousuke quietly watched her go and then turned back to me. “Are you a player or something, Yuzuru?”

“Huh? Why would you think that?”

“Uh, isn’t it obvious?” He let out an exasperated sigh. “You get all awkward when it comes to Mizuno, so why is it so easy for you to compliment Odajima? Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Well, I guess that wouldn’t be much better... You need to be able to compliment them both!”

“I can’t,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow as if to ask why.

“It’s too...nerve-wracking to do that with Ai,” I said.

This time, he raised both eyebrows in surprise. Then, he smiled a little sadly. “...Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Just feeling sorry for myself and Odajima.”

“What’s that supposed to—?”

Sousuke interrupted me by pressing a fist against my chest. “Think about it,” he said with a smile, then looked back at Kaoru, who had already reached the shore. “Hey! Don’t leave us behind!” he shouted cheerfully, running after her.

As I watched him go, I tried to figure out what he’d meant.

Just then, Ai returned from putting away Kaoru’s hoodie.

“Huh? They already left?” she asked.

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Okay!”

The two of us jogged to catch up to them.

“Mizuno!”

“Eek! ...Oof! Ah-ha-ha!”

Sousuke passed the clear beachball over to Ai. She hit it with both hands, sending it flying over to Kaoru. Kaoru quickly clasped her hands together and received it, bumping it back into the air.

It bounced off her hands unsteadily and headed in the wrong direction. I was closest, so I did my best to keep it from hitting the ground, but...

“Oof!” I moved too quickly and tripped on the sand, face-planting right in the water.

Saltwater rushed up my nose, causing a sharp, burning sensation as it irritated my nostrils and the airways leading to my throat. Luckily, we had been playing in water that only reached our knees, so aside from my stinging skin, I was unscathed.

“Hey, you okay?” Sousuke grabbed my hand and helped me up.

“Y-yeah...”

“Sorry...” Kaoru’s shoulders slumped as she apologized for losing control of the ball.

“No worries.”

I waded into the sea up to my chest to retrieve the beachball before it drifted out into the open water.

We quickly re-inflated it and started passing it again, volleyball-style, trying to see how long we could keep it in the air. It wasn’t a competition, and no one got upset if one of us missed a pass. In fact, each mistake only added to the fun.

But despite how it might have looked, moving around in knee-deep water was challenging and required a lot of energy. I wasn’t exhausted or anything, but I could feel myself breathing harder than normal. The two girls seemed to be having fun, but I could tell their shoulders were heaving a bit. Sousuke was the only one who wasn’t fazed at all. He’d kept up his cheerful smile the whole time.

“You sure have a lot of stamina,” I commented.

“The lit club and the ‘going-home club’ don’t stand a chance against me!” he said, flashing me a toothy grin.

“Hey, I’ve got stamina!” Ai protested. “I walk a lot every day!”

“Yeah? Well, I *run* every day,” Sousuke shot back pleasantly.

Once again, I was impressed with his communication skills. He didn't always pander to others; sometimes, he would tease them or show off, while never coming off as arrogant. No matter what he did, he seemed effortlessly cool.

I tossed the ball to him unexpectedly, hoping to catch him off guard.

"Whoa! Gimme a heads-up first!" He panicked for a split-second, but then passed the ball toward Kaoru with perfect form. "Did ya think I'd miss?" he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Man, you piss me off!" I said, and he burst out laughing.

This time, Kaoru's pass went straight to me.

The ball was a little low, but I managed to hit it, sending it over to Ai. "Ai! Heads-up!"

I gave it a little too much oomph, however, and it went higher than I'd intended.

"Eek!"

Ai gave a surprised shriek as she watched the ball soar high into the sky. She quickly splashed through the water, trying to follow its trajectory. Then, she leaped up.

"Here it comes!" she said, hitting it with a graceful jump.

Her form was beautiful, and the ball arced perfectly toward Sousuke.

However, I wasn't watching the ball, and apparently neither was he. It bonked him on the head with a soft *fwump* and then fell into the water with a splash.

"Hey!" Ai exclaimed. "Why were you just standing there spacing out?! I gave you a perfect pass!"

"Ah... Oh! Sorry, sorry!" Sousuke rushed to get the ball as the waves carried it away.

I sympathized with him. *Can you really blame him?*

After all, when Ai jumped up and made that beautiful pass, her breasts bounced as she landed. The way they moved communicated both their volume and their softness, leaving us two boys completely at their mercy.

“Well, now I’m embarrassed! I messed up right after showing off.” Sousuke came back with the ball in hand, scratching the back of his head.

“Serves you right! That’s what you get for mocking the going-home club!” Ai said jokingly, pretending to be upset.

Kaoru, however, shot us a sharp, disapproving glare.

“.....”

“Well, let’s try again.” Sousuke served the ball to Kaoru.

She lifted up her arms and struck it with all her might, sending it flying directly toward my head.

“Oof!”

“Whoa! Are you okay?!” Sousuke shouted.

The ball hit me square in the face and caused me to fall backward and land right on my butt. The impact was softened a bit by the water, but hitting the hard sand still hurt quite a bit.

“Odajima, what are you—” Sousuke started to laugh at her, but then trailed off under the force of her glare.

Her gaze shifted to me. “You pervs!” she shouted.

Even Sousuke seemed a bit uncomfortable at that.

“What are you talking about?” he mumbled, seeming a bit out of character.

I wasn’t sure how to respond either, so I just awkwardly went to pick up the ball.

Only Ai remained oblivious, tilting her head and looking puzzled.

Even though it was simple, playing with the beach ball was a lot of fun and never got boring. We played for over an hour in the shallow water, laughing and shouting the whole time.

“I’m starting to get hungry!” Ai announced at last, bringing our game to an end. We decided to take a break for lunch.

Since we’d met up around eleven, it was the perfect time to eat.

We headed back to the cabana and used the coin-operated showers to rinse the sand off our bodies, then met back up.

The structure had a room with tatami mats, but several families had already claimed all the open spaces. It seemed like everyone was having lunch at the same time. There were some tables in front of the cabana as well, and one just happened to be open. There were exactly four chairs, so we went ahead and sat down.

We decided to order our lunch in shifts, so no one would take our table. The boys would go first, and then the girls would have their turn.

“It’s busy, so it might take a while!” the owner warned, but we chatted while we waited, and the time flew by.

“Your class is doing a *takoyaki* stand for the school festival, right? I’ve been craving *takoyaki* ever since I heard about it!” Ai said, a steaming plate of it now sitting in front of her.

Sousuke ordered the *yakisoba*, Kaoru got soy sauce ramen, and I got fried rice.

“Let’s eat!” Ai said, clasping her hands together. It seemed like she could barely wait to dig in.



She speared a piece of *takoyaki* with a toothpick and popped it into her mouth. “Mm!” Her eyes sparkled with delight as she chewed.

Seeing how much she was enjoying her food only made the rest of us hungrier, and we all followed suit.

I scooped up some fried rice with my spoon and took a bite. I could taste the chicken bouillon—exactly what I’d been hoping for. It was a bit greasier than I’d expected, but I was so hungry from all the exercise that it only enhanced the flavor.

“Mm! Now that hits the spot!” Sousuke said as he slurped up his *yakisoba* with satisfaction.

It seemed like the cabana food was precisely what each of us had been looking for, and that was kind of fun in and of itself. It wasn’t out of this world delicious, but it was exactly what we’d expected, and that made it especially satisfying.

Kaoru slurped down her ramen with an unreadable expression.

“You even eat ramen at the beach, huh, Kaoru?” I said with a laugh.

“...Well, ramen *is* the universe,” she said sulkily.

“Right.”

Our little exchange made me feel nostalgic, and I found myself smiling, which made Kaoru start to smile, too.

Sousuke looked puzzled. “The universe?” he asked, but Kaoru just gave him a look and didn’t answer. He shrugged and didn’t press any further. “Hey, can I have a bite?” he asked me.

“Sure,” I said.

I held the plate closer to him, and he skillfully picked up a bite with his chopsticks. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he placed his plastic container of *yakisoba* in front of me. My fried rice had only come with a spoon, so he handed me his chopsticks. Since we were both guys, it didn’t seem like a big deal. I took them, picked up a bite of *yakisoba* along with a bit of pickled ginger, and slurped it down. My reaction was the same as Sousuke’s—it

really hit the spot.

“That’s really good,” I said.

He nodded and chewed his bite of fried rice. After he was done, he passed my plate back to me. “The fried rice is delicious, too. It’s richer than I thought, though.”

“Yeah, but it’s nice after all that exercise.”

“For sure,” he agreed.

Ai watched our exchange closely, obviously jealous. “Kaoru, can I have a bite?” she asked innocently. Sousuke chuckled.

Kaoru nodded quietly and slid her bowl of ramen over toward Ai, who eagerly picked up the chopsticks and took a bite. “It’s good! But it’s a little soggy. Thanks!”

After the unnecessary comment about the noodles’ texture, she returned the bowl to Kaoru. Kaoru didn’t seem to mind and continued to slurp away at her noodles.

Then, Ai looked at me. I knew what was coming, so I moved my plate toward her. “Go ahead,” I said.

“Tee-hee. Thanks!” She picked up my spoon and took a bite of fried rice. I yelped inwardly. Kaoru and Sousuke also looked at Ai in shock. “It’s greasy, but it’s yummy!” Ai declared, smiling and ignoring all the stares. “Thanks again!” She then pushed the plate and spoon back to me.

I couldn’t bring myself to start eating again with the same spoon right away, so I took a sip of water to distract myself.

“D-do you want a bite of my *yakisoba*...?” Sousuke asked her hesitantly.

Ai stared at his food for a few seconds, pondering. “Hmm...” Then, she smiled sheepishly and said, “I’d like to, but it’d be like an indirect kiss.”

All three of us were speechless.

Kaoru and Sousuke looked over at me as if to say, “She ate your fried rice, though!”

No one commented on the fact that she'd also eaten Kaoru's ramen. Although some people might care about sharing food with the same gender, Ai clearly didn't. And she had even used my spoon to eat the fried rice without a hint of hesitation.

I understood what they were all getting at, but I didn't know what to say.

Ai looked around curiously for a moment and then suddenly exclaimed, "Oh! I don't mind Yuzuru, though."

I felt my stomach twist. I was happy to hear her say that. Really happy, and my heart was racing, but...

"Well, in that case, I guess it's fine...," said Sousuke with a bittersweet smile.

It hurt to see him like that. We might like the same girl, but I didn't enjoy seeing him get rejected. He might be my rival for her affections, but he was also a friend I respected.

"Man, I wish I could have an indirect kiss with a cute girl, too. Hey, Odajima. Can I have a bite?" Sousuke said, brushing off the awkward atmosphere with a joke. He seemed to have recovered already.

"No way, idiot," she said firmly. She sounded exasperated, but she was smiling.

Even now, Sousuke was trying to be considerate toward me.

I grabbed my spoon and shoved a big bite of fried rice into my mouth. I chewed and swallowed, then said, "Delicious," all while looking straight at Sousuke.

He blinked, then a wicked grin spread across his face. He knew exactly what I meant.

"Hey, that's not fair!" he said.

"Ah-ha-ha! Sucks to be you!"

"You piss me off!"

I figured if he planned to laugh it off, the best thing I could do was play along. I didn't want him to feel like he was walking on eggshells around me.

There would be plenty of chances for heartbreak and bittersweetness in the future, but right now, I just wanted us all to have fun. I wanted to stay friends with Sousuke for a long time, too.

“You guys sure are close.” Ai giggled as she watched the two of us, seemingly oblivious to the fact she’d caused the whole commotion.

Next to her, Kaoru was staring intently at my fried rice. Suddenly, she looked up and made eye contact with me. “Can I have a bite, too?”

“Huh?”

Before I could say anything else, she scooped up some fried rice with my spoon and ate it.

“Ramen tastes better,” she said frankly, then tossed the spoon back on top of my plate.

“Really? Aren’t the noodles all soggy by now?!” Ai said, cutting in awkwardly.

Kaoru shook her head. “There’s nothing wrong with soggy noodles. You’re just not mature enough to understand.”

“Huh? No way! Lemme have another bite to see if it’s good or not.”

“Nope.”

“I’ll give you a *takoyaki* if you give me one more bite!”

“I don’t want any *takoyaki*.”

As the girls bickered back and forth, Sousuke shot me a meaningful grin.

Don’t make that face at me, I thought and glared at him. But he just shrugged and slurped his *yakisoba*.

Apparently, Kaoru was taking a more direct approach. We had both agreed not to hold back when it came to our feelings, and she was upholding her end of the bargain. She was no longer hiding her romantic feelings for me, and I was trying to determine how I felt about her in return while maintaining our friendship.

To be honest, the moment she put her lips on my spoon, my heart skipped a beat, and I found myself staring at her mouth for a few seconds.

“.....”

I momentarily wondered if it was okay to keep using my spoon. But it seemed rude to go get another one...

I awkwardly picked at my fried rice while my mind raced.

This might have been the most nerve-wracking meal I'd ever had in my life.

“Hey, let's go ride the banana boat!” Sousuke said loudly as we finished up our lunch.

Kaoru frowned, but Ai's face lit up with excitement.

“You mean that thing?” Ai pointed toward the ocean, where a water scooter was pulling a yellow inflatable boat across the waves at high speed. There was a group of five or six young people sitting on top of it in a row, clinging to the handles.

“Looks like fun, right?” Sousuke said.

“Yeah! I wanna try it!” Ai exclaimed.

“Hmmm...” Kaoru, however, seemed hesitant. She narrowed her eyes as she watched the boat speed across the water.

“What, are you scared?” Sousuke teased, and she glared at him.

“I never said that!”

“Then, you should come with us. You in, Yuzuru?”

“Oh? Uh... Hmmm...”

His sudden invitation caught me off guard. If everyone wanted to go, I wouldn't mind, but Kaoru didn't seem too crazy about the idea. She'd acted defensive when Sousuke challenged her, but maybe she really was afraid.

Still, everyone would be wearing life jackets, so I figured it couldn't be *that* dangerous.

As I thought about what to do, I remembered an exchange we'd had right

before the start of summer break.

Yeah, that should work.

I nodded to myself and looked at Kaoru. "If Kaoru's going, then I guess I'm in."

She blinked a few times in surprise, then seemed to realize what I was doing. She sucked in a sharp breath and glared at me, blushing. "You're so mean!"

"Ah-ha-ha. So, are you in?"

"Fine, fine! I'll go!" she said, annoyed, then leaned close to me and whispered, "Now we're even about the band thing, right?"

I smiled and nodded. "Of course."

"You really piss me off," she muttered.

I remembered how Kaoru had felt bad about pressuring me into the band, and I thought the best way to resolve things was to get even with her. She would've refused if she was truly afraid. I knew she wasn't the type of person to sacrifice her own comfort just to go along with the crowd.

Now that everything was settled, we all headed for the dock. It had seemed pretty far, but as we walked there, I realized it was even farther than I'd thought. It made me realize how big the beach was. Despite the distance, we chatted along the way, and were there in no time.

We must have timed it just right, because we were able to get a whole boat to ourselves.

"I think we should pair up for the ride!" said Sousuke enthusiastically.

We'd be sitting in a line, and he insisted that we go boy-girl, boy-girl instead of the boys and the girls sitting together. No one objected, so we decided the pairs with a game of rock, paper, scissors. I ended up next to Kaoru, with Sousuke next to Ai.

"Yesss!" Sousuke cheered, visibly excited to be paired with Ai.

She smiled gently and said, "Let's have lots of fun!"

"I can't believe I let myself get dragged into this," Kaoru muttered, looking down. "Fine, let's go."

“Yeah, let’s do it,” I said. I was relieved that we’d ended up together. I didn’t want to abandon Kaoru after roping her into the boat ride.

We listened to the driver’s instructions and then put on our life jackets. It was my first time wearing one, and I was surprised by how heavy it was. Sousuke and I played another game of rock, paper, scissors to determine who’d sit at the front. He won, so he took the front seat with Ai behind him.

I climbed onto the boat next.

“Whoa!” It was a lot more wobbly than I expected, and I struggled to get my balance. I had to keep adjusting my position, causing the rubber boat to squeak, until I finally began to feel stable.

At last, it was Kaoru’s turn, and she hesitantly stepped onto the boat.

“Eek!” She nearly lost her balance, but a staff member grabbed her arm and calmly told her to take her time. She was a bit nervous, and just like me, it took a minute for her to find her balance.

“All right, let’s start!” The driver called out enthusiastically. “Girls, feel free to hold onto the boy in front of you! You’ll quickly find out if he’s someone you can count on!” he added mischievously.

I heard Sousuke laughing. “What do you think? I don’t mind at all.”

“I’ll grab onto you if I think I might fall!” Ai said brightly.

“Here we go!” The driver shouted, and the boat began to move.

Sousuke and Ai cheered, but Kaoru and I were silent in the back.

The boat was rocking up and down and side to side a lot more wildly than I’d anticipated. I was worried about Kaoru and tried to turn around to see if she was all right.

But then, I felt something soft pressing against my back.

My body tensed up as pale, slender arms wrapped around my chest from behind.

Then, I heard a voice whisper near my right ear. “I’m afraid I’ll fall.”

“O-okay, go right ahead. And be careful!”

“Just remember, if you fall, you’ll be taking me down with you.”

“Ha-ha. I think we’ll be okay...” I tried to sound casual, but my voice kept trembling.

My back felt so warm with Kaoru holding onto me—her grip was a lot tighter than I’d expected. “Clinging” might be a better description, actually. Her upper body was pressed against mine, drawing all my attention to my back.

How should I put it...? Her body felt soft—specifically in *one particular area*.

My heart raced as the boat picked up speed. The faster we went, the more the wind whipped against my body, and the tighter I gripped the boat’s tiny handles to avoid falling off.

Sousuke and Ai shouted with excitement, but Kaoru and I stayed quiet.

I could see Ai right in front of me, but my focus kept returning to the feeling against my back.

“Yuzu,” Kaoru whispered. I could hear her, even over the rushing wind. “Stop staring at Ai and look at me instead.”

“Huh?”

The moment I turned around, the driver yelled, “Sharp turn ahead!”

The boat jerked to the side, and I lost my grip. “Whoa!” My wet hands slipped off the handles, and I quickly let go. I felt my body lifting up from the boat.

“Aaah!” Kaoru screamed as we both plunged into the water. But the buoyant life jackets brought us back up right away.

“Bwuh!”

We both resurfaced at the same time.

“Ugh! I can’t believe you!” Kaoru yelled, grabbing my life jacket. “I told you not to fall off!”

“Well, you’re the one who startled me!”

We both argued back and forth, and then...

“Ha-ha...”

“Heh-heh...”

“Bwa-ha-ha!”

We burst into laughter.

I could see the boat in the distance, slowing down and turning back toward us.

“Finally, we have a moment alone,” Kaoru said, her wet face shimmering as it reflected the sunlight.

“They’ll be back soon,” I said awkwardly.

She giggled. “I don’t care. We’re alone now, even if it’s just for a moment.” She smiled at me and, with an expression so alluring it made my heart leap, she said, “I want you to look at me and nobody else.”

“U-um, well...”

“Look at me.”

“I-I *am* looking!”

“Heh-heh. Yes, you are.”

I didn’t know what else to do. For a moment, we floated in the water, just gazing into each other’s eyes.

“Hey! You two all right?” Sousuke called as the boat approached.

The driver guided the craft toward us and said, “You okay?” Then, he smirked for some reason and said, “Good going!”

Kaoru and I both blushed as we struggled to climb back into our seats.

Ai turned around to face me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Did you have fun?” she asked innocently, and for a moment, I wasn’t sure how to answer.

But then, I smiled and said, “It kinda felt like I was flying there for a second.”

She giggled. “Hey, that sounds fun! I wish I could fly over the ocean! You’re so lucky!” Then, she added half-jokingly, “Maybe I should try falling in next time.”

“Don’t!” I said, a little anxiously.

The boat began to move again. I could still feel Kaoru’s warmth on my back, but neither of us said anything.

When we returned to the docks, Kaoru casually pulled away from me without a word.

I had a lot of fun on the banana boat, though it’d been a little hard to concentrate... After that, we used bodyboards to play in the water, raced each other on the beach, and generally had a lot of childish, innocent fun. Ai and Sousuke easily won the races, leaving Kaoru and me breathless and panting after every round. I was thoroughly reminded of the importance of daily exercise.

Time flew by so quickly, it was evening before we knew it.

“We should probably change and start heading back,” Sousuke said. Though reluctant to leave, we all nodded.

“There’s so much sand in my swimsuit! I’m all itchy!” Ai announced, prompting both Sousuke and me to fall silent.

I heard Kaoru mutter, “Perverts,” softly, but this time I was certain Ai was at fault.

We went to go shower and change. Since the girls said they had sand in their swimsuits, I figured they’d take a bit longer.

Once I was back in my regular clothes, I grabbed my bag and left the changing room.

The restaurant had been crowded during the day, but now it was empty. Sousuke was already sitting in the tatami room when I got there.

“Oh, there you are! This one’s my treat,” he said, handing me a bottle of *ramune*.

“Thanks.”

I peeled off the seal, placed the plastic cap on the top, then pushed it down firmly. The bottle made a fizzing sound as the marble rolled inside.

"I already knew this, but..." Sousuke gazed out at the sun setting on the horizon. "Mizuno...really likes you, Yuzuru." He had a calm expression on his face. "And now that I've seen how open she is about it, I think I should probably give up."

"Hey, that's not necessarily true. Maybe things will change if you go all out. You're a good guy, Sousuke."

He gave me a sidelong glance and snorted. "You seem pretty confident. You really okay with me stealing her away from you?"

"Not exactly. But it doesn't seem right for you to give up, either."

"For real though, if she likes you back, why don't you two just start dating? If you were actually a couple, I'd have to back off," he said casually. But it wasn't that simple.

"...If we dated now, things would only end up the way they were before," I said quietly. "I thought we understood each other's feelings, but we didn't. I want to make sure we're more careful this time, and that we both really feel the same. That's what's most important... I know that now."

Sousuke listened, a serious look on his face. Then he smiled slightly. "So it seems like you understand each other's feelings, but you really don't, huh?" He spoke carefully, shifting his gaze outside the cabana, the reflection of the sunset gleaming in his eyes. "I think I get that."

I could tell he wasn't talking about Ai or me.

"Sorry if I'm wrong," I began, "but..."

"What?"

"Did you...have feelings for Nagoshi?"

He gave me a self-deprecating smile. "Was it that obvious?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, I did," he admitted. "I really admired her when I was in junior high. I

thought she was so cool. And then, when we met again in high school and were in the same club, I really started liking her.”

“Oh.”

“That was only a few months ago, and I’ve already fallen for another girl. I’m pretty shallow, huh?”

“Nah,” I said, shaking my head. “It sounds like you went through a lot with Nagoshi.”

He gave me a look I couldn’t quite read and then smacked me on the shoulder. “You’re so understanding, Yuzuru.”

“Not really.”

“You are, though. I can tell why Mizuno likes you.” Sousuke stayed quiet for a long time after that.

We sipped our *ramune* slowly and watched the sun set. We could hear the fan whirring in the tatami room and the distant crash of the waves against the shore.

“It’s not like Nagoshi rejected me, and I immediately thought, ‘Well, time for my next romance!’ My attraction to Mizuno is genuine,” he said.

“I know……. Wait, so Nagoshi rejected you?”

“Yeah. But it wasn’t just that.” He frowned, as if remembering something unpleasant. “Actually, never mind.”

He fell silent again, and I decided not to press him any further. I couldn’t bring myself to.

“I still think about her sometimes,” he said after a while. “I think my romantic feelings are gone, but I still worry about her. She’s really changed.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I think I just wish I could see her play bass like she used to, with that sparkle in her eyes.”

As I listened to Sousuke talk, I tried to imagine Nagoshi as she used to be. It was hard to picture her playing an instrument with any kind of joy. These days,

she seemed to mask all her emotions behind a vague smile. And the moment you tried to get closer, her mask would turn to ice, and she'd push you away.

"I really wanna play in a band with her..." Sousuke downed the rest of his *ramune* and the marble inside the bottle clinked. "And with you, Mizuno, and Odajima, of course!"

"Yeah, but I need to practice first," I said.

"I'll schedule something with my friend who plays the drums. Just wait!" He cackled and patted my back.

I realized there wasn't much I could do about Nagoshi. Whatever experiences and feelings she and Sousuke shared were between them, and it was none of my business.

For now, I just needed to focus on practicing the drums. If Nagoshi *did* agree to play bass for us, I didn't want to dull her performance with my lackluster drumming.

"Oh, you guys are drinking *ramune*!"

Ai and Kaoru finished showering and changing and joined us in the tatami area.

Sousuke cheerfully got up and said, "My treat!" as he headed toward a cooler to grab the drinks.

As I watched him go, I took a sip of my *ramune* and savored the cold, fizzy liquid. Drinking *ramune* as I watched the sun set felt somehow nostalgic.

The four of us sat together and drank our soda as we reflected on all the fun we'd had. Then, we boarded the train to return to our normal, everyday lives.

Sousuke got off two stops before the rest of us. We said goodbye to Kaoru once we arrived at the closest station, and after a brief walk together, Ai and I split up as well.

As I headed the rest of the way home alone, I looked up at the sky. The moon was peeking through the clouds.

"That was so fun," I murmured to myself.

It was nice to go out with friends sometimes.

Reuniting with Ai in high school had made me feel like my life was slowly opening up, and I was hopeful that performing at the school festival would become yet another precious memory.



[CHAPTER 5]

“Hey, Yuzuru! You’re early!”

Three days after our trip to the beach, Sousuke asked me to meet him, and I made my way to a station in the city I usually never went to. When I saw the girl walking beside him, I began to get nervous.

“N-nice to meet you!” I bowed to her. She had black hair and was dressed in eye-catching street fashion.

She raised her hand casually. “What’s up? I’m Misuzu Ishigami. You can call me Misuzu.”

“O-okay! I’m Yuzuru Asada!”

“Yuzuru, huh? Nice to meet you.” She immediately called me by my first name.

I was a bit taken aback and bowed again.

When Sousuke told me he had a friend who’d teach me to play the drums, I hadn’t expected such an outgoing, fashionable girl, so I was pretty nervous.

She looked me up and down with an impassive, inscrutable expression and then suddenly leaned in close.

“Wha—”

Without warning, she grabbed my bare arm just below my sleeve.

“You’re pretty scrawny,” she said with a smirk. “You’re definitely gonna be sore for a while. You’d better brace yourself.”

“Um, I’m a total beginner, just so you know.”

“Yeah, I heard. You’re a bookworm, right? And he’s making you play the drums?” She turned to Sousuke and gave him a long, hard look.

He grinned brightly and said, “Well, he’s my friend!”

“Whatever. Let’s stop wasting time and head to the studio.” Misuzu nodded casually and walked off.

I leaned toward Sousuke and whispered, “What does she mean, studio?”

“Well, if you wanna practice the drums, you need drums, right? We’re going to a place where you can rent studio time.”

I still wasn’t sure about the details, but it sounded like this studio place had drums to practice with.

I glanced over at Sousuke, who was carrying a guitar case on his back. “By the way,” I said, “there’s something I kept meaning to ask you.”

“Hm?”

“You can play the guitar?”

“Ah yeah. Kinda. I started practicing back in junior high.”

“After seeing Nagoshi’s concerts?”

He scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah. Got a problem with that?”

“No, not at all. I think it’s great. But why guitar and not bass?”

I saw his gaze waver and his cheeks flush. “Well, I thought that maybe if I knew guitar, me and Nagoshi could play together.”

His words left me speechless for a moment, then I burst out laughing. “Wow, even you can be cute sometimes, huh?”

“Don’t tease me!” He gave my arm a sharp jab, clearly embarrassed. Then, he sighed. “Well, in the end, that never happened anyway.”

“Yeah...” I looked down, feeling a little gloomy.

“Turn right here,” Misuzu said.

She had been leading the way as the two of us chatted. After about ten

minutes, we arrived at the studio.

“Hello?” she called out into the empty lobby. A few moments later, someone emerged from the staff room.



“Oh, Misuzu! ...Who are these two guys?” An imposing man with dreadlocks looked at Sousuke and me curiously. “I thought it would be your usual trio, since the reservation was for three.”

“Today’s a little different. How much will it be for three hours, again?” she asked, taking out her wallet.

“5,400 yen, but I’ll make it 5,000 for you.”

“Oh, thanks!” she said and handed over a 5,000 yen note from her wallet.

“I-I can pay my share!” I said quickly, but she glanced at me and shook her head.

“No need. Sousuke, you pay up.”

“Sure. Here’s 2,500. Good thing I had a 500 yen coin on me.”

“Wait, I can’t let the two of you pay without chipping in,” I protested. It didn’t seem right to have them cover me, but they both shook their heads.

“You already agreed to join the band,” said Sousuke. “I can’t make you pay for studio space, too. Just focus on practicing today.”

“I have a job,” Misuzu added. “It’s fine.”

Both of them made it clear they didn’t expect me to pay.

I finally relented and bowed. “...Thanks.”

They nodded, looking satisfied.

“Okay, you’re all set,” said the man with dreadlocks. “You can use Studio B. Bottled drinks are allowed, but be careful not to spill. No food or open containers, though.”

“Of course. We’ve been coming here forever, y’know.”

“I’m telling the adorable new kid!” he said.

“Huh? I’m way cuter!” Misuzu rudely flipped him off and led us toward Studio B.

I bowed my head slightly to the man to thank him and then followed her. From the outside, the building looked small, but it was surprisingly spacious. We

walked down a winding hallway until we reached our destination.

Misuzu turned the door handle and walked right in.

“Wow...”

The first thing I noticed when we went inside was the drum set, then a guitar and bass on stands. Up close, the drum set was even larger than I’d imagined. I found myself staring at it.

“There’s no way I can play those,” I blurted out.

Misuzu burst into laughter. “Tapping out before you even try? C’mon, go sit down.”

She patted the leather stool by the drum set, which was apparently called a “drum throne.” I cautiously took a seat, increasingly intimidated by the large number of drums.

“Uh...?” I wasn’t sure what I should do next, so I looked at her for guidance.

“Here.” She handed me two wooden drumsticks from her bag. They had slightly rounded tips for striking the drums. They were slender, but heavier than I expected.

“Today, you’ll just be using these.” She pointed to three parts on the left side—a smaller drum closer to me, a large drum with a pedal by my feet, and a smaller cymbal further to the left behind the smaller drum. “They’re called the snare, bass drum, and hi-hat.” She pointed to each one.

I repeated the names, and she nodded.

“First, try hitting the snare.”

“O-okay.” I hesitantly hit the smaller drum, or the snare, which produced a dull sound.

She made a face and then quickly knelt down. “Hm, it’s not set up properly. Well, I guess this is kind of convenient,” she muttered as she checked the snare drum. “Yuzuru, come down here and take a look.”

I got off the seat and examined the snare drum with her. I could see a spring-like contraption attached to it.

“These are the snare wires,” she said.

“The snare wires...”

“Yep. They’re not tightened. That’s why the sound is dull. Now, the strainer... Ah, this thing right here.” She pointed to something that looked like a clamp on the side of the drum and lifted it up. “When you raise the strainer, the snare wires tighten. That changes the sound. Try hitting it again.”

“Okay..... Whoa!” A familiar *tat!* noise rang out.

“The snare should have the snare wires on when you play in a band. Remember that *tat* sound. That’s what you should be hearing.”

“Okay.”

“Also, you were hitting it with your right hand, but you should hit it with your left. Go sit back down.”

I sat down while she stood close behind me. I could feel my heart speeding up.

“Now, hold the left drumstick over the snare.”

“Okay...”

“Your right hand is going to strike the hi-hat.”

“Like this?”

“Yep. Now, use your right foot to press down on the bass drum pedal.”

“Okay... Whoa!”

I followed her instructions and pressed down on the pedal. The loud, deep *thump!* noise startled me.

Misuzu must have been used to it, because she didn’t even flinch. “Those are the basics. Remember this stance for today.”

“O-okay...!”

Having my hands crossed was uncomfortable and trying to coordinate both hands with my right foot was making my head spin.

“Uh... I’m kinda bored. Do you mind if I play the guitar?” said Sousuke.

“Go ahead,” Misuzu replied.

He took out his guitar and began to play. “Good luck with your lesson,” he said with a smirk.

I nodded back, feeling overwhelmed.

“All right, let’s switch places. I’ll show you how to play the hi-hat now.”

Misuzu took the drum throne and demonstrated.

I imitated her. She drilled me on the basics for three solid hours. She understood I was a complete beginner and patiently repeated the same instructions over and over, while giving me tons of praise whenever I made the slightest bit of progress.

As I practiced, I slowly began to grasp the basics. It was really only the barest foundation, but it was a start.

“You’re a really quick learner, Yuzuru,” said Misuzu. “It’s super impressive to be able to play an eight-beat pattern on your first day.”

She’d taught me a four-beat pattern and an eight-beat pattern. It was really challenging to coordinate my hands and feet independently, but the more I got the hang of the rhythm, the more natural my movements became, even if they were a bit clumsy.

Drumming was actually starting to feel...fun.

“Here, you can have these sticks.” After we cleaned up the studio, Misuzu gestured toward the drum sticks we’d been using.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I just got new ones. As long as you don’t mind hand-me-downs.”

“Of course not! Thank you so much! I’ll take really good care of them.”

“Ha-ha, it’s no big deal.” She laughed. “Keep practicing the four-beat and eight-beat patterns at home whenever you can. It’ll get really loud if you try to bang on your desk or something, so I suggest using a folded towel on your bed

as a makeshift snare. Sit on the edge of the bed with your right foot on the floor, so you can practice the bass drum pedal while you move both of your arms.”

“Okay. I’ll practice every day.”

“Good. You do that.” She nodded with satisfaction and then clapped her hands. “All right! Now that we’ve cleaned up, let’s head out!”

“That sure went by fast.”

Sousuke practiced his guitar throughout my lesson. He said he’d been playing since junior high, and I thought he seemed pretty good at it. I wasn’t an expert or anything, but he clearly knew what he was doing. He was certainly good enough to play in our band.

It was already after four o’clock when we left the studio. Since the summer days were long, it was still bright outside, but the sun would probably start setting in about an hour.

Misuzu spoke as we walked toward the station. “I covered the studio fee since it’s your first day. But renting a studio all the time gets expensive fast.”

Her tone was lighthearted, but I knew she was being serious.

“That’s true,” said Sousuke. “But the only other place I can think of with a drum set is the music club, and we can’t keep hogging their equipment.”

“Yep,” Misuzu agreed. “Then I wouldn’t be able to practice.”

“But who has drums at home?” Sousuke wondered aloud.

“Oh, I know!” Misuzu said, clapping her hands. She turned to us with a grin. “Let’s go to Risa’s house. She has an electronic drum set there that she doesn’t use.”

We followed her to the station and rode the train for about ten minutes, before getting off at a small stop that only the local trains used. Misuzu ambled along without a care in the world, but Sousuke seemed nervous, and I was feeling uneasy, too.

“Are you sure we’re not bothering her by showing up unannounced?” I asked.

Misuzu snorted. “Risa spends her weekends sleeping, gaming, or cutting. She won’t mind if we drop by.”

She said it so casually both Sousuke and I gasped.

“You mean...she hasn’t stopped cutting?” Sousuke asked, sounding frustrated.

So he knew, too, I thought.

Nagoshi always kept a box cutter in her breast pocket, and I’d seen her left arm wrapped in bandages. I didn’t know why she cut herself, but maybe Sousuke did.

Misuzu glanced over at him. “There’s no reason for her to stop, is there?”

“.....”

Sousuke fell silent. It seemed he didn’t know how to respond.

“When did she start?” I asked.

“Hmm,” Misuzu said. “After she quit the band. She changed drastically back in ninth grade. I guess that was inevitable, though.”

“Do you know why Nagoshi suddenly changed, Misuzu?” I asked.

She left an intentional pause, then shook her head. “I know, but I can’t tell you.”

“Oh. Sorry for prying.”

“It’s fine. I know you’re asking out of concern, so don’t worry about it.” She smiled faintly and cast a sidelong glance at me. “Just leave her be. It’s not like she’s going to die or anything.”

“But...”

“Forget about it, Yuzuru. Just focus on getting better at drumming,” she said, effectively putting an end to the conversation. Then, she pointed ahead. “That’s Risa’s house over there.”

“What?She lives *there*?”

It was a single-family home that stood all by itself in the middle of nowhere. It

had a foreign construction style, and it only looked more out of place surrounded by a bunch of rice fields.

“The only things around here are rice paddies, and the nearest house is pretty far away, so you don’t have to worry about playing instruments,” Misuzu said, walking along a path between two fields. “There’s a garage with an electronic drum set. It’s sitting there collecting dust, so you might as well use it.”

She seemed to be making a lot of decisions about someone else’s stuff, and I kept wondering if it was really okay. But maybe she and Nagoshi had some kind of bond that I didn’t understand. From our earlier conversation, I could tell that she cared about her, at least.

I, on the other hand, knew very little about Nagoshi, and there wasn’t much I could do for her. *I should just follow Misuzu’s advice and focus on practicing the drums.*

I glanced at Sousuke beside me. His cheerful demeanor had faded, and he seemed lost in thought.



[CHAPTER 6]

As we approached Nagoshi's house, it seemed to get larger and larger. It was a three-story Western-style house with a big, closed shutter to the right of the entrance. I guessed that led into the garage.

Misuzu rang the doorbell without a hint of hesitation. After a few moments, Nagoshi appeared, still wearing her school uniform.

"Misuzu! Whoa, I wasn't expecting you to bring these two!" Nagoshi seemed surprised to see Sousuke and me. Her eyes looked a little swollen, like she'd just woken up. "What a strange combo," she said, tipping her head to the side.

Misuzu pointed to the garage. "Can we use the electronic drum set? Yuzuru wants to practice, but renting a studio every time would be too expensive."

Nagoshi's eyes widened. "Asada's playing the drums? Ha-ha. You sure you can even hit them with those scrawny arms of yours?" She burst into laughter and stepped out of the house, giving me a playful smack on the arm. Then, she walked past us and raised the shutter with a clatter. "It hasn't been used in ages, so it's probably covered in dust. Make sure to clean it off before you start," she said. Apparently, she didn't mind if we used it.

"Are you sure?" I asked, just in case.

She quickly nodded. "Yeah. It's better than just letting it sit there gathering dust."

Her blasé attitude only worried me more.

"Just like that...? We'll be coming over pretty regularly..."

"That's fine. You can come every day if you want. It's not like you're gonna be

in my room.” She froze for a moment. “You’re not allowed in my room, got it?”

“Of course! Obviously,” I replied.

“Then it’s fine. The garage is basically outside.” She laughed and headed inside, then turned on the lights. Warm overhead lighting filled the room.

It had an almost American feel to it. There was a counter with four tall, round bar stools that had the “Coca-Cola” logo printed on the seats, and the walls were covered with posters for movies and bands. In the very back of the room was a compact, electronic drum set.

“Wow,” I murmured.

Nagoshi snorted. “My dad’s the one who decorated it,” she explained. She ran her index finger along the rubber hi-hat of the drum set and grimaced at all the dust she’d picked up. “Yuck, it’s dirtier than I thought. Let me grab a bucket and a rag. Hold on.” She hurried back into the house.

“She agreed to that really easily,” I said.

Misuzu shot me a wry smile. “She doesn’t care much about anything. You don’t have to worry.”

“But she said her dad decorated the place. Are you sure we’re allowed in here without his permission?” I asked worriedly.

Misuzu looked puzzled for a moment. Then, she said softly, “Risa lives alone. So it’s fine.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Her parents aren’t around anymore.”

“Oh...” I nodded vaguely, unable to bring myself to pry any further.

I was shocked that she lived alone in such a huge house. The garage was like a secret hideout or something, and it seemed like no one had touched it in quite some time. It was clear that Nagoshi was full of mysteries I didn’t understand.

I looked at Sousuke and found he was staring silently at one part of the garage. I followed his gaze to a stand meant to hold a guitar or a bass, similar to the ones I’d seen at the studio earlier. But unlike those, this stand was empty,

which only seemed to emphasize the fact that something was missing.

The sound of the door brought me back to the present.

Nagoshi had returned with a bucket of water and some rags. “Here, you can use this to clean up. Once you’re done, feel free to use the drums whenever you want. Misuzu, you can set them up.”

“Gotcha,” Misuzu replied, plugging in the electronic drum set.

I took the bucket and rags from Nagoshi and headed over to join her. Once I got closer, I could tell how dusty they were.

“All right, I’m going back inside. Make sure to close the garage door when you’re done.”

“Um!” Sousuke suddenly called out as Nagoshi turned to leave, stopping her in her tracks. There was an urgency in his voice that alarmed me.

“What is it?” she asked flatly.

He hesitated for a few moments and then seemed to make up his mind. “Um, we’re forming a band, so we can perform at the school festival’s after-party...”

“Oh. So that’s why Asada’s playing the drums. And?”

“Well... I was wondering if you’d...play the bass and—”

“Nope. Won’t do it,” she replied before Sousuke could even finish his sentence.

“What...?”

“Not gonna do it. Find someone else,” she said. Her tone was light, but somehow firm and intimidating. She waved at us dismissively and then left the garage.

Sousuke remained standing in a daze, staring after her.

“Sousuke, don’t tell me you were serious about that,” said Misuzu, walking up behind him. “There’s no way.”

He turned around and looked at her, frustrated. “Doesn’t it bother you that she doesn’t play anymore?”

Misuzu smiled bitterly. “Don’t take it out on me.”

“But...!”

“Of course I think it’s a shame,” she said, and I heard Sousuke’s breath catch in his throat. “But it’s her decision. There’s nothing we can do about it.” Then, she turned toward me and said calmly, “Sorry, but can you wipe down this part for me? It’s covered in dust.”

“Oh, right.” I quickly began cleaning the console.

Sousuke sighed and sat on a red bar stool, spinning the seat left and right with irritation.

I quietly focused on cleaning the drum set until I was done.

“All right,” Misuzu said. “It should be ready to play. Here, put on these headphones.”

She plugged them into the console and handed them to me before I got on the chair.

“Hit the snare like you did at the studio. You should be able to hear the sound through your headphones.”

I followed her instructions and heard the *tat!* sound in my ears. *Oh, okay. I get it.*

“This button here is the metronome. It’ll help you gauge the rhythm. You can adjust the BPM, or the speed of the beats, here.”

Misuzu explained the buttons and showed me how to use everything. Then, she told me to practice the four-beat and eight-beat patterns she’d taught me earlier.

“I can teach you more once you’ve gotten a little better. Give me your contact info.”

“My contact info?”

“Yeah, so I can send you assignments. If you practice one at a time, you should be decent by the end of summer vacation.”

“Oh, okay.”

I took out my smartphone and Misuzu held out hers. On the screen was a QR code for exchanging contact info via a messaging app. I scanned it, and the exchange was complete.

“All right,” she murmured. Then, she turned toward Sousuke, who was still absently spinning on the stool. “Sousuke.”

He jumped a little when she called his name. He must’ve been deep in thought. “Yeah?”

“What’re you gonna do about the bass? Finding someone else would be quicker.”

He shook his head, his expression dark. “I haven’t given up yet.” I could tell by the look on his face and the tone of his voice that he was really determined.

Misuzu let out a deep sigh. “Well, I’m not gonna stop you. Worst-case scenario, I can lend you a member of the music club. I know someone who’s really good and can pick up songs quickly.”

“Thanks, but I’ll have to say no,” he said.

“I said worst-case scenario, didn’t I? ...But like I said, I don’t think you have a chance with Risa.”

“I still don’t want to give up,” he insisted.

Misuzu was quiet for a few moments and then said, “Fine. Do whatever you want.” Then, she stretched. “Well, I’m going home. C’mon, Sousuke.” She started gathering up her things. Sousuke looked like he had more to say as he stood up from his chair.

“What about me?” I asked.

Misuzu glanced at me. “You keep practicing the four-beat and eight-beat patterns until you can’t think about anything else. After that, you can go home.”

“Wait, I can’t just stay here alone at Nagoshi’s house!”

“You’ll be fine. I doubt she’ll even come in here. Just message me if you have any questions.”

“But...!”

And with that, Misuzu left the garage.

Sousuke watched her leave, then came over to me. “If you get a chance to talk to Nagoshi, ask her for me,” he whispered.

“I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises.”

“Oh! And if you see her cutting herself, try to stop her.”

“...Okay.....”

“Well, see ya.” He lifted a hand, then jogged after Misuzu.

Once he’d disappeared, I sighed.

Despite what I’d told him, I didn’t feel comfortable trying to persuade Nagoshi to stop cutting or to play the bass. Like Misuzu said, if those were choices she’d made for herself, it wasn’t any of my business. I knew nothing about her life.

“Time to practice.”

There was no sense in worrying about things I had no control over, and since they’d both left without me, I had no choice but to keep playing.

I picked up the drumsticks and started hitting the drums. It felt a bit weird hearing the sound directly in my ears, but thanks to the metronome, it was easier to tell when my rhythm was off.

For the rest of the afternoon, I dedicated myself to practicing on the electronic drum set.

“Oh... You’re still here.”

When I heard Nagoshi’s voice, I realized it must be almost dark outside. I took out my phone and saw that it was just before 7 o’clock.

“Oh! Sorry for staying so late. I’ll leave now.” I quickly jumped up from the chair, but she laughed and waved me back down.

“It’s fine. You can even stay over if you want. You can use the bathroom and the shower.” She smiled and sat on one of the bar stools in front of the counter. “I never imagined you’d start playing the drums, though. I guess you never

know where life will take you, huh?”

I chuckled awkwardly. “Tell me about it.”

“Ha-ha. Couldn’t say no to them, huh? You’re too nice. Still, if you practice every day from now on, you’ll probably get the hang of it before the festival. You seem like a hard worker.”

“I don’t know. I don’t even have the basics down yet.”

“Well, of course not. It’s only your first day. The fact that you’ve been practicing all this time, despite thinking you couldn’t do it, means you’re a hard worker.” Nagoshi kept smiling and tilted her head to the side. “Are you having fun?”

Her question surprised me. It was hard to put into words, but there was something about her tone of voice that felt different from usual.

“I’m not sure yet, but I’m enjoying trying something new.”

She laughed. “You always give such complicated answers!” she said as she twirled around on the bar stool. “I’m sure those drums are happier with someone playing them, instead of just gathering dust. You can come and go as you please. You don’t need to ask first. Just do your thing.”

“I can’t do that. I’d rather let you know when I’m coming by,” I said, but she just smirked.

“First, you barge in uninvited, and now you’re asking for my number, huh? Talk about pushy.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“I know, I know. Fine.” She took her phone out of her skirt pocket and brought up her QR code for the messaging app. I walked closer and scanned it. “You can contact me, but I probably won’t reply.”

“As long as you read my messages, it’s fine. But let me know if it’s not a good time to come over.”

“I don’t think that’ll happen,” she said.

All of a sudden, she grabbed my arm. The unexpected contact startled me.

“Wh-what?”

“Your arm feels really tense. You should stop for the day,” she said, looking down at it. “Don’t soak in the tub tonight. Just take a shower. That’ll help your arm recover faster.”

“Oh... Thanks. I’ll do that.”

“Heh-heh. I used to be the soccer team’s manager, so I know a thing or two about sore muscles.” She flashed me a mischievous grin and made a peace sign with her fingers.

When she brought up the team, I couldn’t help myself.

“You quit, didn’t you?” I blurted out without thinking.

She nodded casually. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but then she plastered a fake smile on her face. “I got sick of it.”

I could tell she didn’t really mean that, but I didn’t feel like pressing her any further. The expression on her face seemed to say, “Don’t ask.”

“Well, I’m gonna close up the garage now,” she said. “Feel free to come and go as you please. I’ll drop by to check on you if I’m bored.” She walked over to the drum set, unplugged it, and headed for the door.

I quickly shoved the drumsticks back in my bag and left the garage.

She pulled down the shutter and sighed, “Phew!”

“Um...” I still had one more thing I wanted to ask. I knew it would probably bother her, but I decided to go ahead.

“What?”

“Sousuke told me you used to play bass.”

“Oh...yeah,” she said impassively.

“He said he fell in love with your playing.”

“Oh yeah? So, what’s your point?”

“Why did you stop?”

Her eyes narrowed, and she turned to look at me. Even though she was smiling, it felt like she was glaring at me. “What do you want to know that for?”

“Um, no reason, really...”

“Digging into other people’s pasts isn’t a good look, Asada.”

“...Sorry.”

Her tone was so firm, all I could do was apologize.

I could tell she had no intention of sharing her thoughts or feelings. Besides, we weren’t close enough to discuss that kind of stuff, anyway. At this rate, there was no way I could ask her to play bass for us.

“Well, thanks for letting me play the drums.” I bowed.

Nagoshi muttered, “So serious,” before poking my forehead with her finger. “Keep up the good work!” she said and waved.

I bowed again and left.

Walking by myself through the rice fields made me feel a little lonely... I glanced back once toward Nagoshi’s house. With the door and garage shutter closed, it appeared just as it had when I first arrived—all alone, out of place and uncertain, like it didn’t belong.



[INTERLUDE 1]

“How do you get it to sound so good?” I asked him one day. No matter how much I practiced and how calloused my hands got, I never felt like I was getting any closer to the sounds he made. His bass was powerful, beautiful, earth-shaking.

His music always felt like it was roaring.

It was completely different from the thin, hollow sounds I produced.

He sat on a bar stool, drinking a bottle of Heineken. “Hmmm. Maybe you need to be happier, or sadder, or angrier?” he said, then broke into a smile.

I didn’t understand what he meant. I felt like he wasn’t taking me seriously, and it frustrated me.

“Stop being random,” I said, annoyed.

He shrugged. “It’s not random. Strong emotions contribute to your sound. Risa, you’re still struggling to learn how to play, and you can’t convey emotions yet. But sound without emotion is nothing but a symbol.”

“What do you mean, a symbol?”

“Something anyone can write and understand.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I’d be worried if you *did* get it at your age. It’s okay if you don’t understand yet.”

“But I wanna get better.”

“Keep practicing, and you will. Just keep playing. Live your life,” he said, drinking his beer with satisfaction. “If you live your life, one day it’ll become music.”

Back then, I was too young to understand what he meant. I thought he was just making up a random answer, so I'd leave him alone.

But the older I got, the more sense it made.

When I was happy, my music had a lightness to it. When I was upset, it would sound rough. And when I wanted to cry, I would pick up my bass and play instead. On days like that, my music sounded somehow more solemn.

I gradually came to understand how emotions were connected to music.

And yet, *his* music remained a mystery to me.

What kind of emotions allowed him to play such powerful music? When he wasn't playing the bass, he was just a helpless adult. He'd drink alcohol and snore as he slept. He couldn't cook at all, and his partner took care of everything for him. He'd watch music shows on TV and complain, "This stuff is all garbage. Just superficial trash!" as if his way of making music was the only right one.

I'd get tired of his comments...but every time he played, I had to admit I liked his music the best.

Music was all he had. That was probably why his sound was so appealing.

But by the time I realized that...everything was already gone.

I could hear the tapping of drumsticks against rubber downstairs. The rhythm was awkward, but it kept repeating. I could tell that the person making the sound was in deep concentration.

I lay on the living room sofa and played with my retractable box cutter, but in the end I put it away without doing anything.

The tapping made me restless.

It felt strange to hear the electronic drums that Etsuko, who was like an older sister to me, used to play.

I closed my eyes and listened to the shaky rhythm coming from downstairs.

And as I listened, I felt myself drifting off to sleep.

As my consciousness faded, I remembered Etsuko's pained smile as she said,

"I guess it's not enough to just have fun..."



[CHAPTER 7]

Once I started playing the drums, I began dropping by Nagoshi's garage every few days. I'd work on the assignments Misuzu gave me, improving my skills one by one.

I'd practice until my muscles ached, then go home to complete my schoolwork and other tasks until my muscles felt better. Once they'd recovered, I'd go back to the garage and practice some more.

As I repeated this process, my playing started to come together. My basic rhythms had become steadier, and my arms didn't get tangled up anymore.

"Wow, you're making great progress. I can tell you're practicing hard." Once a week, Misuzu would come to watch me play, and she'd always compliment me. "By now, you should be able to handle easy songs."

Thanks to her encouragement, I began to gain confidence.

At first, Nagoshi would check on me briefly once a day, but then she started staying, listening to me practice while she lay on the sofa in the corner. She told me to take the headphones off, so she could listen to the sound through the speakers.

"Use your wrists more. You're trying to use your arms too much. That creates tension and makes your transitions awkward."

If I struggled with complex movements, she would get up off the sofa and come over to offer me guidance.

"You don't need to grip the sticks so tightly. Imagine you're supporting them with just your fingertips and wrists. Let your wrists move as you swing your

arms. Yes, just like that. If you snap them, your sounds will be clearer.”

I was surprised at how relaxed I felt and how clear my playing sounded when I followed her advice.

“Do you know how to play the drums too, Nagoshi?” I asked.

She laughed awkwardly. “Well, better than you.”

For some reason, she looked younger than usual. It mystified me.

Normally, when we talked, she seemed somehow distant. But when we lost ourselves in music together, it felt like she was right there beside me.

I got the feeling we’d gotten closer and tried to bring up topics like her playing bass or Sousuke, but she’d always deflect them. It was clear she really didn’t want to talk about the past.

I knew I shouldn’t push her, so I let it go every time. But I did learn one thing: she truly loved music.

When I felt like I was playing particularly well, her leg would always move to the beat as she lay on the sofa. And when I stopped, she’d say, “That was pretty good.”

Her expression made her look disinterested, but she was clearly listening to me.

I couldn’t understand why, despite all that, she was so adamant about not playing the bass anymore.

I felt like we’d grown closer, but in some ways, she remained just as distant as before.

As I continued practicing at her house, time flew by.

“Thanks for agreeing to help!” said Ai.

It was the end of the first week of August. The temperature had risen considerably, and just walking around outside was enough to make me sweat. Carrying something so heavy was only making it worse, of course.

“I said I could handle it on my own, but it’s surprisingly heavy, huh?” Ai said from behind me.

Between us was a hefty keyboard.

With summer vacation almost at an end, our band had finally decided on a song to play. Sousuke chose a “classic” that wasn’t too difficult, which was lucky for me, since I’d only just learned how to read sheet music. I was beginning to think I might pull this off, after all.

Now that we’d picked a song, the other members could practice on their own.

Sousuke already had a guitar, Kaoru didn’t need an instrument, and I could go to Nagoshi’s house. The three of us were all set.

But Ai didn’t have a keyboard at home, so Sousuke asked Misuzu about it, and she allowed us to borrow one from her music club.

At the moment, we were taking it back to Ai’s house. She’d claimed she could carry it on her own, but I’d been doubtful and wound up coming with her. And sure enough, the keyboard was much bigger and heavier than either of us had anticipated.

“I thought it would be smaller,” she said.

And now, the two of us were hauling around the heavy keyboard, drenched in sweat.

When we got to the fork in the road where we usually split up, Ai said she could manage on her own, but I knew she still had a long way to go.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’ll help you the rest of the way.”

She looked at me apologetically. “Thanks. I’d appreciate that.”

As we turned down the path to Ai’s house, I realized something important. I’d never been to her place before.

She’d come over to my house several times, but I’d never been to hers.

My determination to help her carry the heavy keyboard had completely overshadowed the fact that I was about to go to her house for the first time.

I suddenly felt nervous.

We went up a gentle slope, then back down, then up again. Finally, we arrived at her house.

“Here we are,” she said, and I had to bite my lip to stop myself from crying out in shock.

We were standing in front of a ramshackle, run-down apartment complex.

Because of her innocent demeanor and neat appearance, I’d always assumed her family was pretty well off. Now, I realized I’d been prejudiced and made a mental note to watch out for that in the future.

The metal stairs creaked under our every step.

When we reached the second floor, Ai called out, “Keep going straight!” At the end of the corridor, she said, “Hang on a sec,” and let go of the keyboard. I held it steady, so it didn’t fall. Then, she unlocked the door to one of the apartments and pushed it open wide. “Thanks. I’ll take this side.”

“Okay.”

She took one end of the keyboard and angled it through the door. After slipping off her shoes in the entryway, she carried it further into the hall and set it gingerly on the floor.

“Phew, that was heavy! Thanks!” She said with a bright smile. “Feel free to come in, by the way!”

“Thanks,” I replied softly, then closed the door behind me and took off my shoes.

I helped her lift the keyboard again, and we carried it into the living room.

I couldn’t help glancing around her apartment.

It was a studio with a kitchen. The latter was probably about seven square meters, with about ten square meters of living space. At the far end was a single bed and a desk. Another set of bedding was folded up near the window.

“Sorry it’s so cramped,” Ai said. She wasn’t shy about it, but she seemed a little embarrassed. “I live with my dad. He only comes home two or three times a week, though, so I basically live alone.”

“Oh... I see.” I tried to keep my tone casual, but I wasn’t confident I’d managed.

I realized that I didn’t know a thing about her family structure. I never would’ve guessed she lived alone with her father.

“Well, now I can practice anytime! I’ll use headphones, so I don’t disturb anyone,” she said as she set up the keyboard next to her desk.

She seemed like her usual energetic self, so I decided not to ask her anything else. She’d talk about her family when she was ready. There was no need for me to pry.

“Hang on, I’ll pour us some drinks! All I have is barley tea, though.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it!”

“I don’t have any extra chairs, so just sit on the bed,” she said as she hurried toward the kitchen.

I hesitantly did as she said and watched as she poured the barley tea.

“Here you go!” She brought over two cups and handed one to me, then placed the other one on the desk. “I’ll get the table out. Just a sec!” She opened a nearby storage closet and pulled out a small low table.

I helped her unfold its legs and set it on the tatami flooring.

“Phew! I haven’t used this in a while,” she said brightly.

Did that mean she ate her meals and did everything else at her desk? Since her father wasn’t home very often, I wondered if she typically ate all alone like that. It seemed a little sad.

“How’s drum practice going?” she asked as she sat down on the floor.

“Pretty good. Misuzu is a great teacher, and Nagoshi lets me use her drums whenever I want... So I think it’s going well.”

“That’s good.” She nodded, then she looked at me and stared. After a few moments, she puffed out her cheeks sulkily. “There sure are a lot of girls around you lately.”

“Huh?” Her comment caught me off-guard.

Come to think of it, aside from Sousuke, most of my recent interactions *had* been with girls. But I never expected Ai to comment on it.

“Well yeah...,” I said. “But it’s not like anything’s going on with them.”

That’s right. Nothing was going on. I couldn’t be sure, but Nagoshi didn’t seem too interested in boys, and Sousuke told me that Misuzu already had a boyfriend.

The two of them were just helping me with my drum practice.

“I know, but...” Ai fiddled with her fingers and pouted. “Can I sit next to you?”

We’d been sitting across the table from each other.

“Here?”

“Yeah. I’m coming over there.”

She’d asked it like a question, but she stood up without waiting for my answer and sat back down right next to me.

I felt her shoulder press into mine, but I was too nervous to say anything. I could smell the sweet scent of shampoo on her hair. We’d sweated so much carrying the keyboard that I began to worry I might smell bad.

“When I was in junior high, I was so focused on my own feelings for you, I didn’t really notice what was going on around us, but...” She was so close that her voice softened to a whisper, sending shivers down my spine. Then, her head shifted slightly, and she looked up at me. “Do you think you might be popular with girls?”

“Huh?!” I raised my voice, startled. “No way!”

“Are you sure? You get along with them so easily.”

“That’s just because they’re helping me with the drums!”

“You and Kaoru jumped off that boat together and looked pretty cozy.”

“We didn’t jump, we *fell*.”

“But you *did* look pretty cozy!” She pouted.

Her reaction surprised me. She’d always been so free-spirited and lived life at

her own pace. I never thought she'd care so much about other people's relationships.

"You get jealous a lot, don't you?" I blurted out.

She looked surprised and quickly turned red.

"That's mean!" She playfully smacked my shoulder. "If the girl you liked was always surrounded by boys, you'd feel the same way! Kaoru's been more aggressive lately, too, and you keep getting all flustered around her!"

"You were the one who told me to take my time and choose!"

It was hard to remain unaffected once someone confessed their feelings to you. I wasn't so experienced in love that I could remain calm in the face of someone's earnest advances, and I wasn't sure it was right to feign disinterest.

"I know I said that..." She rocked back and forth, then leaned her shoulder against mine again and grew still. "But ever since summer vacation started, I've been so lonely. We haven't spent any time together, just the two of us."

"Yeah, you're right." I nodded thoughtfully. She had a point.

When we were going to school, we'd walk home together, and sometimes we'd even take detours on the way. Because of that, we were able to find time to spend together... But ever since summer break started, things had been different. Sousuke and Kaoru had joined us at the beach, and then I'd been focused on drum practice. To Ai, it probably looked like I was spending all my time with other girls.

...The fact that her reaction made me happy left me feeling a little guilty.

"Don't worry," I said. "I think about you when we're apart, too."

"Really?" I could feel her big eyes focusing on me.

I wasn't lying. I'd been spending a lot of time practicing the drums, but whenever I lost my focus, my thoughts were filled with Ai.

"It's true. I wonder about stuff like whether you went on a walk that day."

"Yeah, I walk every day."

"Or if you're staying up too late."

“Sometimes, when I watch the stars from the balcony, I suddenly realize midnight has come and gone.”

“Or if you’re getting your homework done.”

“.....”

Ai shifted her gaze and started whistling out of tune.

I pushed back against her, and she giggled. Then, she plopped her head down on my shoulder and rested it there. Her hair tickled my cheek.

“You’re always so kind and fun to be around, Yuzuru,” she said quietly. “I should’ve listened to you more in junior high. Looking back on it now, I realize I was always the one talking. And you were so nice, you just listened to me. But if I’d paid more attention to what you had to say, maybe we wouldn’t have broken up.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“I know it’s pointless to say that now, but I can’t help thinking about it,” she said with a giggle.

She was right.

Back then, I was drawn to the things she said and did. Just being with her made me feel fulfilled, so I let our relationship continue as it was. Meanwhile, little dissatisfactions started piling up, and eventually, I reached my breaking point. Then, I unleashed my emotions on her all at once and ran away.

If I’d been more honest about my feelings, maybe things would’ve turned out differently. But...that was simply how things went at the time. There was nothing we could do about it now.

“We’re where we are today because of what happened back then,” I said. She lifted her head slightly to look at me, her cheek still on my shoulder. “Because we went through all that, we’re finally able to be open about our emotions.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” She nodded. “This time around, I want to take the time to understand your feelings and figure out what’s important to us... And then, I want to grow to like you even more.”

A few moments passed.

“Mmmmmmmmm.” She pressed her head against my shoulder and nuzzled it. “Buuuuuuut...”

“What? What’s wrong?” I wasn’t sure what to make of her sudden movement.

She looked up at me and said, “It’s so frustrating...”

“Huh...?”

“Well, I really, really like you, Yuzuru!”

Her words echoed through my head. My face suddenly felt hot.

She ignored my reaction and fidgeted. “I like you so much, and I want to spend more time with you, and I wanna get all cozy with you, too!”

“Yeah, but...we’re not even dating yet.”

“Even if we’re not dating, I still like you!”

Ai flailed her limbs around like she was throwing a tantrum. “I want to hug you, kiss you, and do even more...” Then, she inhaled sharply as if realizing what she’d just said.

I looked at her in surprise, and she slowly raised her gaze to meet mine. There was heat in her eyes as she stared up at me.

“Yuzuru...” Her voice sounded husky, and I could feel my heart pounding. “Can I...kiss you?” She looked into my eyes. Her face was flushed, and her expression was strangely captivating. She slowly stretched up toward me, her face drawing nearer.

“N...” I forced out a trembling voice. “...No, you can’t!”

I pushed her back.

She pouted. “You’re so uptight!”

“We’re not even dating yet!”

“Who cares, as long as we both like each other? The mood was totally perfect!”

“But if we kissed...” I trailed off.

She locked eyes with me and asked, "What would happen if we kissed?"

"Um... Well..."

"What?" She leaned forward.

I looked away and said quietly, "I wouldn't be able to stop..." My voice trembled as I spoke, and I heard her gasp. Her face turned bright red.



Then, she pressed her head against my chest. “That’s fine with me,” she whispered.

“What?” My heart was racing so fast I was sure she could hear it.

“I don’t care if you can’t stop,” she said, slowly lifting her face. As I stared into her pleading eyes, all I could do was open and close my mouth helplessly.

Gradually, her face inched closer.

“N-no! We can’t!” I pushed her away again.

“Ahhh! You’re so mean!” she protested, flailing her arms and legs again.

But it was no use. I’d made up my mind not to give in.

“You’re the one being mean!” I said.

“Why?! I like you!”

“That doesn’t sound like ‘taking the time to understand each other’ to me.”

“I like you, so it’s fine!”

“If we’re going to kiss, we might as well start dating. And then, what was the point of any of this?!” I grabbed her by the shoulders and shouted. “I want to fall in love with you the right way this time, Ai!” She was at a loss for words. “I feel the same way. I’m pretty sure I like you, too. I want to kiss you, too. But if we get carried away and do that, we’ll end up skipping over all the important things.”

I liked her. The thought of kissing her made me happy, and I knew it would feel good. But if I indulged that desire, I was afraid I’d lose myself in it.

Maybe I was overthinking things. Maybe I should just go with the flow. But I had already ruined our relationship once by letting my emotions dictate my actions.

If we started dating without taking the time to align our values and truly understand each other, we might screw things up again to the point of no return, and I didn’t want that.

I pulled her head against my chest desperately. “Listen to my heart! Do you hear how fast it’s racing?!” My face was bright red.

She nodded. "Yeah...it's beating really fast."

"Now, imagine how it feels to turn down someone you like when they ask to kiss you."

"S-sorry..." She stayed like that, finally seeming to calm down. "Yeah... Yeah, I'm sorry. I was just feeling a little lonely and ended up acting weird."

"I'm sorry for making you feel that way."

"No, it's not your fault." She shifted slightly in my arms and looked up at me. "I think I understand love more than I did in junior high," she said, smiling faintly. "Before, being with you made me feel fulfilled and happy... But now..." She rested her head on my chest again. "It feels a little painful."

Her words made my chest grow hot.

In junior high, Ai was like a goddess to me. Free and sparkling, she seemed to possess wisdom far out of my reach. Now, however...I saw her as just a regular girl.

I got the feeling I felt that way because we'd both grown and talked things out together.

"...It hurts for me, too," I said, and she nodded.

"...I like you, Yuzuru."

"I know."

"I want you to like me, too."

"I know. I already do."

"I want us to be together. To hug and kiss."

"I want that someday, too."

She lifted her head and smiled. "I'll just have to wait until then."

"Yeah. I'll wait, too."

"Heh-heh. We're all mixed up, aren't we?"

"Tell me about it."

She finally pulled away and sat back down on the other side of the table.

“Well, I’ve finally refilled my Yuzuru tank!”

“What does that even mean?” I asked.

She giggled and drank her barley tea. Then, she flashed me a big smile. “Let’s do our best with the band, okay?”

“Yeah, let’s do our best.”

We laughed and chatted for a good while. We spent the time leisurely, but evening quickly crept up on us.

Eventually, I got a message from my mom saying it was time for dinner, and I decided to go home.

“See you later!” I called as I headed out the front door.

“Yeah, see ya.”

Ai saw me off, and I walked down the creaky stairs and away from the apartment building. When I turned around, I saw her leaning over the second-floor railing, waving.

I waved back and then turned toward home.

“Haah...” I let out a deep sigh.

I’d visited Ai’s house and caught a glimpse of her life. It was much more modest and lonelier than I’d imagined. She’d been acting a little differently today, too. She was always friendly and outgoing, but today she’d gone beyond that, leaning on me for comfort like a girlfriend would. Her behavior surprised me, but when I reflected on it after the fact, it felt natural.

Wanting to have the person you like all to yourself was a perfectly normal feeling.

I didn’t feel jealous when it came to Ai, but that was because she was always so clear and direct. It was obvious I was the only one she was romantically interested in.

But like Ai said, I had a lot of girls around me, one of whom had clearly expressed her interest. So telling Ai to be patient and wait things out was quite the ask.

Maybe deep down, I still thought of her as some kind of goddess. She was always quietly watching over me, giving me gentle advice when I needed it. She'd done the same thing even during the situation with Kaoru.

Seeing so many sides of her today made me realize once again that I still didn't fully understand her. As I pondered this, my thoughts suddenly turned to Nagoshi.

We weren't particularly close, but she'd let me use her garage and drum set without the slightest hesitation. She was always up for a lighthearted chat, but never revealed anything about her own thoughts. And yet, while we never had any deep conversations, she always moved her body to the beat of the drums.

She was the total opposite of Ai, who appeared to be completely open, but remained somehow elusive.

Despite, or perhaps because of those differences, I got the feeling that the two of them—Ai and Nagoshi—were somehow similar.



[CHAPTER 8]

It was pouring rain outside. I could hear the drops striking the ground from inside the garage.

“I don’t think this rain is gonna let up anytime soon,” Misuzu said, standing by the door and looking up at the sky.

Sousuke, standing next to her, followed her gaze. “Whoaaa!”

Misuzu had acknowledged that I was able to keep a basic rhythm, although I still had some problems with consistency. Nevertheless, she’d said I was ready to learn “fills” today.

A drum fill was an important technique used during transitions, which helped add a sense of polish. But since I could still only handle basic rhythms, it was all new to me.

“You can definitely manage if you practice a bit,” Misuzu said. But even after watching several examples online, it still seemed pretty difficult.

“Well, there’s no point in just staring at the sky like a bunch of idiots. Let’s get started.” She clapped her hands and walked over to me.

Sousuke picked up his guitar and sat on one of the barstools.

Since we had chosen the song we were going to play at the school festival, part of today’s practice would include drumming along with Sousuke’s guitar.

“Just hitting the snare like *tat-tat-tat!* can be considered a drum fill, even if you don’t do anything complex,” Misuzu explained. She then showed me a few examples. Each time, she moved gracefully, with no wasted movements, producing a powerful sound.

“You don’t need to go overboard in non-chorus sections. Just maintain your rhythm in the A and B verses. Honestly, as long as you keep up the rhythm, no one’s going to care.”

I followed her instructions and slowly learned how to do more than just keep the beat.

Sousuke strummed guitar chords to match my drumming. The fact that we were finally playing music together filled me with excitement.

“Wow, you’re looking a lot more confident now,” he said. “I know you can pull this off!” His words were oddly convincing, and I began to believe in myself more and more.

Misuzu gave me specific instructions for the drum fills before and during the chorus. I struggled a bit with practicing continuous snare hits and tom drum movements since I hadn’t focused on them before, but after a few hours of practice, I managed to improve.

“All right, let’s take a break. Yuzuru, try to relax your arms and rest.”

“Okay!”

“Sousuke, you’ve been playing nonstop too, haven’t you?”

“I could keep going.”

“That’s enough. You should take a break. You don’t wanna get tendonitis before the performance,” Misuzu said firmly. “Since my music club doesn’t have any drummers among the underclassmen, this is my first time teaching a beginner. It’s surprisingly fun.” She grinned and sipped at a sports drink.

I bowed. “Thanks for being such a good teacher. I really appreciate it.”

“Ha-ha. You’re fun to teach, Yuzuru.” She smiled, and Sousuke pouted.

“I think Yuzuru’s just got a way with people,” he said. “He gets along with everyone.”

“No, that’s silly,” I protested.

“Oh, I think you might be onto something,” Misuzu agreed, joining Sousuke in teasing me.

“Right?”

I was starting to feel flustered, but then the door flew open, and someone rushed into the garage.

“It’s pouring out there!” Nagoshi said as she came in. She wiped the raindrops off her head with her hand and flashed us a cheerful grin. “Still going at it, huh?”

She smirked at each of us in turn, then plopped down on the sofa. She was still wearing her school uniform. I realized I’d never seen her in anything else.

“Why do you always wear your uniform even during summer vacation?” Misuzu asked. I was surprised to find we’d been thinking the same thing.

Nagoshi waved her hand in annoyance. “Why bother picking out clothes when I’m on vacation? Plus, the uniform is easy to wash.”

“Oh, so you’re just lazy,” Misuzu said.

“Shut up. If you don’t like it, you can leave.”

Despite their harsh words, it was clearly a friendly exchange. I figured this was just their usual way of interacting with each other.

What’s more, the fact that Nagoshi was too lazy to pick out clothes on her days off seemed somehow very in character.

As I smiled at their conversation, I noticed Sousuke acting a little nervous. *Uh-oh, is he gonna ask her again?* I thought.

By the time I realized what was happening, he’d already opened his mouth. “Nagoshi... I’ve been thinking about it, and I really want you to play bass for us at the after-party.”

Nagoshi leaned back on the sofa and leisurely shook her head. “You don’t give up, do ya? I told you, I’m not doing it.”

“Please? I can’t imagine anyone but you playing bass.”

“Your imagination must be pretty busted if the only person you can think of is someone who hasn’t played in two years. Borrow someone from Misuzu’s music club. Was it Yushima? I’m sure Yushima’s better than me.”

Nagoshi easily waved off Sousuke's earnest plea.

"But you used to enjoy it so much," he said.

She snorted. "The past is the past."

I could see Sousuke's expression growing more heated.

"The reason you stopped playing bass..." He raised his voice, and the air filled with tension. I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. "...was because of Yuugo Ichihara, wasn't it?"

Misuzu gasped beside me. I turned to look at her and saw she was visibly flustered, her eyes wide and fixed on Nagoshi. I followed her gaze and felt a chill run down my spine.

Nagoshi's expression was like ice and, beneath the coldness, I saw unmistakable anger.

But Sousuke didn't stop. "Your idol got busted, so you quit playing bass, right? A musician you really admired wound up—"

"Hey." Nagoshi's voice was very low, and Sousuke trailed off. She jumped off the couch and grabbed him by the collar. "Don't you *ever* say that name in front of me again!" she roared, her voice echoing through the garage, making the walls shake.

It felt like time had stopped.

"...!" Sousuke's mouth flapped open and closed as she held him up by his shirt.

All of a sudden, Nagoshi seemed to realize what she was doing and stopped to take a breath. Then, she released her grip on Sousuke's collar.

"...Sorry." She apologized quietly, before turning around and trudging back toward the door. "I'm not playing bass, no matter how many times you ask. So just give up already."

With that, she left the garage. A few minutes later, we heard the door to the main house close.

Sousuke stood there in shock, unable to process what had just happened. No

one said anything for a while.

“Haah...” Misuzu sighed. “I’m hungry.” She patted my shoulder and said, “I’ll treat you to a meal. Let’s go eat. You too, Sousuke.” She invited him to come along, but he stayed where he was, quiet and motionless.

“Come on already, let’s go!” Misuzu forced the guitar out of his hands and put it back in its case. Then, she put the case on his shoulder and pushed him toward the door.

“...Okay,” he said at last, and Misuzu sighed with relief.

She looked at me, and I stood up and began gathering my things.

As we left the garage, the rain pelted our umbrellas noisily. Under a curtain of gloom, we made our way to the station and then headed to a diner.

“You could tell how much she admired Yuugo Ichihara from the way she played,” Sousuke said bitterly as we ate. “I’d never heard anyone else get so close to his sound. She must’ve really respected his music.”

I glanced over at Misuzu. She was listening without comment.

“She was so good, though,” Sousuke continued. “If she’d kept playing, she would’ve become an amazing bassist. But then, Yuugo Ichihara got arrested and disappeared from the industry. And after that, she stopped playing.”

“Arrested?” I asked, surprised.

Misuzu, who sat across from me, nodded. “He killed someone. His own bandmate.”

“What...?!”

“They were arguing about the future of the band, and it got heated. He strangled them to death. It was all over the news for a while. I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it.”

“Well...I don’t really watch much TV.”

“I see.” Her expression didn’t change, but I saw a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“Yuugo Ichihara was a really talented musician,” said Sousuke. “It’s no wonder she was devastated by his arrest. But she didn’t have to quit over it and squander her own talent. She’s a total mess right now. She’s thrown everything away. It’s really sad.”

I could see the pain in Sousuke’s face. It was the first time I’d ever seen him like this, and I was a little bewildered. He was always so cheerful and carefree, but it seemed he hid his troubles well. I felt uneasy seeing him struggle so much with his emotions.

“I get what you’re saying, Sousuke,” Misuzu said with a sigh. “I’ve thought the same thing myself. But you know, she used to play right next to me—I could see how obsessed she was.” She paused, her voice hoarse. “If it was bad enough to make her stop, I think we have to understand how big an impact it must have had on her.”

There was a heavy weight behind her words. I thought about how it must feel to stop doing something you loved and thought you’d keep up forever—to make that kind of life-changing decision and never look back.

I couldn’t even imagine what it must’ve felt like. What if I decided to never read another book again? What would it take for me to get to that point? I couldn’t think of anything.

“She quit because it was too painful. She made a choice to protect her heart. We should just let her be,” Misuzu said, then took another bite of food.

But Sousuke was visibly trembling. “It’s because the people around her pretended to be adults and never pushed her to start playing again. That’s why things turned out this way,” he said, an accusatory tone in his voice.

Misuzu raised one eyebrow and looked up. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she said sharply.

Sousuke glared at her. “You watched her play bass all that time, right? Then, you must’ve seen the joy on her face when she played! Now all that joy is gone! She was happy, and so was everyone who listened to her! We don’t have her sound anymore. You must know how big a loss that is. So why?!”

He was giving into his anger, and Misuzu was getting dragged into the

argument.

“That was her choice! No one has the right to disagree with her!”

“Who cares? Besides...” Sousuke paused to gather his thoughts, and when he spoke again, it sounded like he was releasing a heavy, suffocating lump from his throat. “...She’s still drawn to music, and you know it!”

Misuzu looked troubled, and I heard her breath catch.

“Ever since Yuzuru started playing drums in the garage, Nagoshi’s been different,” Sousuke continued. “The way she looks now reminds me of when she used to sway to the music at concerts. It’s like she’s coming back!”

“I can see it too, you know...!”

“That means she’s lying when she says she doesn’t wanna play anymore! I...I want her to pick up the bass again!” Sousuke looked like he was on the verge of tears. “If no one else is gonna say it, I will. I don’t care if she hates me for it. As long as she picks up the bass, it doesn’t matter if she never speaks to me again. I’m gonna go back over there and talk to her!”

“W-wait a minute!”

Sousuke slapped a 1,000 yen bill on the table and rushed out the door. Misuzu sighed deeply and pressed one hand to her temple.

“...A real fanboy is something else, huh?” she said jokingly, but I could tell by her tone that she was worn out.

We were sitting by the window, and I could see Sousuke outside, running down the sidewalk with his umbrella. He was heading back in the direction of Nagoshi’s place.

“Sousuke really loves music, huh?” I said. “I didn’t realize until recently.”

Misuzu smiled wryly. “Well, he got into it because of Risa.”

“Yeah, I know that part.”

“We needed people to show up for our band, so I invited him to one of our concerts, and he fell in love with Risa’s bass as soon as he heard it. That’s how captivating her music was.” Misuzu smiled fondly. “Sousuke sounded like a

know-it-all when he talked about Yuugo Ichihara, but actually I was the one who told him Risa's sound was similar, and that got him hooked on Ichihara, too. Those were the days..." She began to reminisce, a distant look in her eyes.

As I watched her, a certain question popped into my mind.

"What do you really think about all this?" I asked.

She glanced at me, her gaze wandering around uncertainly. Then, she slowly exhaled.

"I want to hear her play again, too," she murmured, shaking her head. "Risa's music... Well, once you hear it, you can't forget it. I used to think it was like Yuugo Ichihara's, but...now I'm not so sure." She spoke slowly. Her eyes drifted over the table like she was searching for the right words. "She's always been difficult to figure out, and she never liked to talk about herself. She used to laugh a lot, but I never really knew what she was thinking. She was just odd, you know? But she was incredibly talkative when she played the bass."

"She was?"

"Through her sound, I mean," Misuzu said with a chuckle. "You could always tell how she was feeling by listening to her music. It was like the sound was taking the place of her words. She was a very musical person."

After she said that, her expression hardened. "But if I'm honest about how I feel—if I admit that I want to hear her play again—Sousuke will think I'm on his side. And I can't do that."

"You mean, you can't do that to her?" I asked.

She nodded. "Sousuke doesn't know what happened to her."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. Only those closest to Nagoshi at the time probably knew her real reasons for quitting.

"...But I get what Sousuke means," she said.

"What?"

"...That Risa is still drawn to music." Misuzu scratched her head. She looked conflicted. "Whenever she listens to you playing the drums, she seems happy." Her voice seemed to fall onto the table and tumble to the ground. "I think she's

listening to your words—the ones that come out through the beat of your drums.”

Words within music... I wasn't sure what that meant, but for some reason, what Misuzu said really struck me. Words weren't limited to speech and writing.

“Ugh, now what am I supposed to do?” she said with another sigh. “Should I try to steer her back toward music, or leave her be and watch her wallow in despair? ...I wonder if Sousuke went back to her house,” she muttered.

“Probably. I think so.”

“He's such an idiot. She's just going to be cold to him again...” Misuzu said, looking a little sad.

“Maybe. But I don't think he's an idiot,” I said quietly, and she looked at me in surprise. “He should keep trying to convey his feelings. He knows he'll regret it if he doesn't, and that's why he's being so stubborn about this.”

I was certain he already regretted it. He had probably failed to express himself the way he'd hoped when he met Nagoshi again at the soccer club. Even after she quit, he never stopped worrying about her.

He was battling against his own feelings of regret over not understanding her, and his inability to express what he felt. That was why he was so determined to get through to her, even now.

“If you have feelings that are important, sometimes you just have to confront them head-on. And if he's fighting that hard, then I...” I thought of how he must feel, going up against Nagoshi again, and said, “I'll keep telling him he's right to do it, even if I'm the only one on his side.”

Misuzu's eyes widened in surprise for a moment, and then her expression softened into a smile. “Ha-ha. I see...”

She laughed and nodded slightly. “You two are really close, huh? Yeah... I think you've got a point.” She sighed. “Everyone should do what they want.” She nodded over and over again, like she'd come to a big realization. Then, she looked at me intently. “I'll leave it to Sousuke, then. If I go after him, I'll just stand around awkwardly, unable to comfort either one of them.”

“...Yeah. I think you’re right.”

We nodded to each other and finished up our meals.

After that, we left the diner and parted ways, and I headed back to Nagoshi’s house. I wondered if Sousuke was still talking to her, or if they’d already finished their conversation. Either way, I wanted to speak to Nagoshi about what Sousuke had said.



[CHAPTER 9]

I hurried toward Nagoshi's house in the pouring rain. I'd brought an umbrella, but my shoes and pants were rapidly getting soaked. If Ai were here, she'd probably be splashing around excitedly, but since I was all alone, I found it pretty depressing.

I kept looking down, fixating on how wet my shoes were getting. When I glanced up to see where I was...

"...!"

...I saw someone walking toward me between the fields. It was a boy, his head down. I rushed over to him.

"Sousuke..."

"...Yuzuru."

He looked up weakly. From his expression, I could tell that Nagoshi had rejected him.

".....It didn't work," he said quietly.

"Yeah... But you did your best."

He looked down again and gritted his teeth. "Do you think you could've persuaded her? Your words are always so kind and straightforward. Maybe if I could talk like you, she would've listened." His voice was shaking.

I shook my head. "You're wrong. I'm sure your feelings got through to her."

"They didn't!" he shouted.

A gust of wind blew past, flipping his umbrella inside out. I quickly grabbed it

and pushed it back down.

“She’s always smiling,” he said. “No matter what I say, her expression never changes. It’s like she hides all her emotions behind that fake smile...!”

“Yeah... I think you’re right.”

“I...I don’t know anything about her. When she was playing bass, she seemed so happy, and her music was so full of energy and emotion. I felt like I was having a conversation with her just listening to her perform...” His voice was strained, as if all the pain he felt was flowing out from his mouth. “But ever since she stopped playing music, she doesn’t say anything to me! It’s like talking to a brick wall! It feels like all my words go right through her!” He was trembling. I could see droplets falling down his face—tears, not rain.

“It makes me scared, and sad...and lonely...!”

Unable to stop myself, I folded my umbrella and threw my arms around him, patting his back over and over again.

“I want her to come back... I want to hear her play again. I want to hear how she feels again! Even if my feelings don’t reach her... I just want to hear her talk again!”

“Yeah, I know... You listened to her, through her music, for so long...”

“Nngh... Argh! Did... Did I mess up?”

“It doesn’t matter if what you did was wrong or right.” Still patting his back, I tried to reassure him. “All that matters is that you’re honest with your feelings. Whatever she decides after hearing them is up to her.”

“I...I get what Misuzu is saying, but...!”

“Yeah...”

“But I haven’t heard how Nagoshi really feels.”

“I know.”

“If she wants to play music...she should say so! And if she wants to quit, I wanna hear her say that herself!”

“Yeah...” I kept stroking his back until he finished saying everything that he

wanted to say.

His whole body shook as he poured out all his feelings—emotions he'd been holding in, with no one to tell.

It's okay. I'm the only one listening.

The pouring rain would wash away all the words he hadn't wanted anyone else to hear.

"She keeps saying she won't do it... But that doesn't tell me anything!" He started to sob.

I continued stroking Sousuke's back until he stopped crying.

"I'm sorry for being so embarrassing...", he said. His nose had turned bright red, and he scratched it and flashed me an awkward smile.

"No worries," I said. "It's kinda comforting to know even you cry sometimes."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" He shoved my shoulder. "Are you going back to Nagoshi's house?"

"Yeah."

"Are you going to try to convince her, too?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not."

His eyes widened. "Huh? Then, why are you going back?"

I smirked and said, "To practice the drums."

He looked at me, bewildered, then burst out laughing. "Honestly, man, you're a little *too* serious!"

"Yep. That's me."

"Ha-ha. Okay, okay." He nodded and then smiled, looking relieved. "Good luck with practice. Let's make the after-party a huge success."

"I'll do my best."

We nodded to each other and then started off in opposite directions.

After that, Sousuke didn't ask me to talk to Nagoshi for him anymore. I think he realized that I wasn't going to agree. Like I'd said, I had no intention of pushing her.

But after seeing him break down like that...I got curious about how Nagoshi really felt, too. And if I wanted to find out...my only choice was to talk to her about it. I'd say everything I could think of. It didn't matter if she responded. If she didn't want to, that was fine.

But...if I didn't at least try, it would all end right there.

"Oh, welcome back."

I arrived at Nagoshi's house and opened up the garage to find her sitting on a barstool inside. She twirled around on it and waved at me.

I pointedly looked around the room.

"Oh," she said. "If you're looking for Andou, he already left."

"...Oh," I said, even though I already knew that.

"Where's Misuzu?" she asked.

"She went home."

"Hm. Well, I don't blame her, with this rain."

I set down my things and took my drum sticks out of my bag.

"So, you came back to practice, huh? Impressive."

"Yep."

"You're a real trouper."

"Well, I have the least experience out of everyone. So I need to practice the most," I said, and then she fell silent and stared at me. "...What?" I gave her a puzzled look, and she smirked and shook her head.

"Just thinking how funny it is that Asada the bookworm is suddenly so enthusiastic about playing the drums." She sounded truly mystified. "Andou

pressured you into this, right? There's no reason for you to work so hard."

"I don't wanna suck and ruin the performance."

"What's that got to do with you, though?" she asked.

I wasn't sure what she was getting at. Obviously, I didn't want to do a bad job and embarrass the whole band.

"He forced you into playing, and you're still trying to do the best you can. Don't you think you're overdoing it?" she said with a chuckle.

I thought about that for a while.

It was true that Sousuke had sprung the whole band thing on me. But I'd improved thanks to Misuzu's help, and the better I got at it, the more I enjoyed it.

But despite my progress, I still sucked. I had no confidence in my abilities, and I was desperate to get better... It upset me that I couldn't get the sound I wanted out of the drums.

So then, why was I doing it?

I considered this deeply...and I immediately thought of Sousuke and Misuzu. And even though we hadn't practiced together yet, I thought of Ai and Kaoru, too.

"I feel like I've found a new way to express myself," I said. I saw Nagoshi's eyebrow twitch. "Sousuke and Kaoru and I only became friends because we're in the same class. We're all in the same place, and yet we have totally different ways of looking at the world... That alone makes it fun to be around them, but..."

I paused for a moment to sort through my thoughts before continuing. "Playing with them in a band...doing something like that all together...helped me find a new way to communicate—a way to share something with others without talking. And I think I really like it."

Nagoshi's expression was unreadable as she listened. Then, she said "Hmph" and smiled a little sadly. "You're...really something, you know that?" She narrowed her eyes sharply. "You're so full of emotion and know all the right

words to express yourself. I'm jealous." She stood up from the stool and slowly walked over to me. "Can you get him to stop, though?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Can you get Andou to quit asking me to play the bass?"

I shook my head. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because that's how he feels, and I can't change that."

"Well, it's annoying."

"I know. But there's nothing I can do."

"You said that if a member of your club was in trouble, you'd help them. Well, I'm in trouble right now." She gave me her usual impassive smile.

But I couldn't agree. "I can't... After all, I've only heard how he feels."

For a moment, I thought I saw fear cross her face.

"How are you in trouble right now, Nagoshi?" I asked. "Tell me."

She gave me a self-deprecating smile. "You're a pain sometimes, you know that?"

"Sousuke might be annoying you, but I can't stop him. To me, it looks like you're trying to keep your distance from him, because you don't want to tell anyone how you feel."

Suddenly, her expression got very cold. A chill shot through my stomach, and I felt a little scared.

She glared at me sharply, like she was looking straight through me. "You don't have a care in the world, do you?" she said. It was clear that she was trying to hurt me. I gritted my teeth. "Talking about my feelings is exhausting. Why should I put in that kind of work for you or Andou? You think everything will be resolved if you just talk about your feelings. Well, life isn't that simple."

"I never said it was."

"You think if you open up your heart to someone else, eventually they'll do

the same. But that's because you've only come across kind people. I'm different. I'm not going to waste my time on you. Words are worthless to me," she said, speaking quickly. Then, she took a deep breath and muttered, "They all eventually turn into lies."

I saw a hint of sadness on her face when she said that. She'd been hiding that feeling away for a long time.

"I don't need words," she said, then smiled as if to cover up the emotions that had begun seeping out. "So please...tell him to stop."

"If you don't need words...then what about music?"

She froze.

"You used to speak through your music, didn't you?"

Her gaze wavered, and then she snorted. "Stop talking like you know me. Music isn't any different. Words, music—eventually you realize it's all just lies."

"You were talking to Kaoru about music on the roof. And I watched your body sway to the beat when I played the drums. Even if you've given up the bass, you haven't given up music."

"It's just a way to kill time. I'm not obsessed with it."

"But..."

"Ahhh, you're such a pain!" She raised her voice and glared at me. "If you don't tell Andou to stop, then you can't practice here anymore!"

I fell silent. If she was going that far, I didn't need to hold back anymore. "I was only practicing here because you let me. If that's how you feel, then I won't come back."

I saw her gaze waver again.

"I want to cherish Sousuke's feelings," I continued. "That's more important to me than this place."

"But then, how will you practice?"

"I'll figure something out."

"You'll figure something out...?"

It must've been an empty threat, because she seemed shaken that I'd called her bluff. Maybe she was just trying to make me back down.

Like I thought, she isn't just being mean. She didn't really want to take away my access to music.

"If Sousuke's actions are bothering you, then you should tell him to stop yourself."

She hung her head. "I already told him that a bunch of times."

"Then you should keep telling him until he understands why it bothers you."

"....."

"You must get it by now. Sousuke wants to hear you play so badly, he doesn't care if you reject him. That's how passionate he is. And that's why he keeps confronting you." I stood up a little straighter. "Please just give him a proper answer. He wants to know if you still love music or not. Telling him you won't play isn't enough."

She started weakly shaking her head.

"Tell him how you feel. Please." I bowed and heard her draw in a deep breath. Then, I straightened up and grabbed my bag. "Thanks for letting me borrow your garage." I turned around to leave.

"But he has soccer!" she yelled.

Surprised, I turned around to face her.

"He has tons of friends and a great life at school. There's a bunch of other things he could be doing, so why is he so concerned about me?"

For the first time, she seemed really flustered. I could tell she really didn't understand. But I didn't even have to think about it to know the answer.

"Because he loves the music you make, and he cares about you."

Her eyes widened. Then, she gritted her teeth and ran past me.

"Nagoshi...?"

She yanked the garage shutter down violently and slowly turned back toward me. Her face was twisted with pain as she started unbuttoning her shirt.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I asked.

“Shut up and just watch,” she said firmly as she continued. I was relieved to see that she was wearing a black camisole underneath her shirt.

She shrugged off the outer layer and then started unwrapping the bandages on her left arm.

I already knew what lay beneath, but the idea of seeing it with my own eyes made my chest constrict with anxiety.

She silently peeled off the tape that secured her bandage and then took the whole thing off.

“Nagoshi!”

“.....”

I was speechless. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. There were countless deep cuts etched into her upper arm. Some were completely scabbed over, but others were still red. Some were clearly very recent. There was bruising around some of the cuts and other places where her skin had turned a yellow-green color.

It looked incredibly painful.

“This is who I am,” she said.

“What do you mean...?” My mouth had gone dry, but I forced out the words.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “I mean I'm a piece of trash who can only feel alive when I hurt myself.”

“I...”

“It's disgusting, isn't it?”

“I didn't say that...”

“But it is, isn't it? Be honest.”

“No, I...”

“Say it. Say it!” she said sharply, accosting me.

“It's...scary...!” My voice came out uneven.

I'd never seen so many cuts crammed so close together before. The sight of all those wounds on her skin sincerely frightened me. I didn't know why she was showing them to me.

My entire body started to shake.

She sighed, then raised a hand to hide her cuts. "I'm sorry," she said, bowing. "I'm sorry I showed you something so filthy."

"No, I..."

"I scared you."

"...Yeah, you did." I nodded, and she reached out to tousle my hair.

"Turn around."

I did as she said. I heard her sit down on the sofa, followed by the rustling noise of her re-wrapping the bandages around her arm.

"Now that you've seen something so horrifying, you won't bother me anymore, will you?"

Finally, I understood why she'd done it.

"You did this to Sousuke too, didn't you?" I asked, and she nodded.

"I didn't just show him. I cut myself in front of him."

I could feel goosebumps forming on my skin. *Why?*

"Why would you do that?!" I raised my voice. I could hear it shaking.

She answered me calmly. "Because I knew he wouldn't back down otherwise."

When I heard that, I understood. This wasn't the first time she and Sousuke had clashed like this.

As she wrapped the bandages back around her arm, she started telling me about something that happened several months ago.



[CHAPTER 10]

I lost my music when I was in my third year of junior high. The musicians I loved disappeared, and I felt betrayed by everything. The music I admired and the words of the people who played it became nothing more than lies to me.

After that, I tried my best to get involved in things that had nothing to do with music. But none of it lasted long. One of the things I tried was becoming manager of the soccer team. That was probably the one that lasted the longest.

I got to enjoy sports games and watch the boys work hard to win tournaments. It was decently fun, and it kept me busy. Having the team members rely on me felt pretty good, too.

A few of the guys asked me out, but I always evaded their invitations with the same vague line: “Sorry, but I don’t really get romance.” I said it to keep them off my back, but it was true that I didn’t have a good understanding of love. I’d spent my whole life immersed in music and hadn’t ever paid much attention to romance.

I spent a year as the team’s manager and was equally nice to everyone, never getting too close to anyone in particular.

I felt like I was doing a good job living. Even though I’d lost everyone important to me and my music all at once—everything that made me who I was—I felt like I was getting by. I thought I could keep interacting with others on a surface level by pasting on a smile and keeping the world at arm’s length.

Then, I began my second year of high school, and a new crop of freshmen joined the soccer team...including Sousuke Andou.

I didn't know he'd be going to the same school as me, so I was really surprised...and a little irritated. He knew I used to be in a band.

Misuzu had invited him to one of our concerts to help meet our ticket quota to cover the cost of the show. If we couldn't bring in enough guests, the band members had to split the remaining cost.

At first, he didn't seem interested. I got the impression he'd only come along because a friend had invited him. So I was surprised when he became obsessed with my music. After the concert, he came up to me, eyes sparkling, and asked for my autograph. I was just there having fun; I hadn't come up with a signature or anything, so I refused. But from then on out, he asked for my autograph at every concert, and it became a routine for me to refuse him.

Back then, I found his behavior cute. I had no reason to be upset with someone for complimenting my playing. But when we ended up in the same club, I wasn't sure how to interact with him, since he only knew the old me. Being around him put me on edge.

At first, it seemed like he was just as unsure of how to act around me. But as we spent more time together through the team, I could see that he was gradually getting used to how I'd changed.

I was surprised that he never brought up my music. And honestly, I was grateful. After all, there was nothing for me to talk about. My past was full of things I didn't want to share.

I was relieved that Andou didn't try to compare my current self to who I was in the past, and it meant I had no reason to keep my distance. So I started interacting with him the same way I did with everyone else.

But now and then, he'd shoot me a meaningful look—like there was something unspoken on his mind—and that bothered me. Whenever he looked at me like that, I'd refuse to meet his gaze. He never said anything and simply turned his focus back to practice, seeming a little sad.

He was really devoted to soccer—a lot more than the other guys. He spent tons of time working on the fundamentals, something first-years tended to underestimate and neglect, and he treated practice matches like the real thing, playing like his life depended on it.

He always went all out—and, one day, he pushed himself a little too hard and fell during practice. In the end, he had to be taken to the hospital.

The next day, I asked him what happened, and he told me he tore his right calf muscle. He had to sit out from practice for a while after that. He could only observe the others practicing and do strength training with his arms.

Still, he showed up every day and lifted weights while he watched the others play. Once it stopped hurting as much, he secretly began doing squats, even though the doctor told him not to. One day, I went to the club room during practice to restock the sports drinks and saw him at it. He looked a little embarrassed for a moment, but then just shrugged and continued.

It reminded me of how absorbed I'd been in playing the bass, and I felt like it was my responsibility to stop him.

"You need to make sure you heal properly if you want to keep playing soccer," I said. "Mess up your muscles now, and you might have to sit out of practice for even longer."

He didn't say anything. He just continued doing squats, a determined look on his face. "I need to keep building up my muscle strength, or I'll fall behind everyone else."

"You're still a first-year. There's no need to rush," I said, trying to be helpful.

He continued squatting and ignored me. It irritated me a little.

"You know, when I used to play bass, I practiced way too much and ended up getting tendonitis. I kept practicing through the pain, and the doctor finally ordered me to stop. I couldn't touch a bass for over a month. I got so rusty, I almost forgot how to play."

Before I knew it, I was talking about the past. I thought maybe if I gave him a specific example, I could stop him. Looking back on it now, I still don't know why I was so desperate. Andou complicating his injury had nothing to do with me.

"I understand wanting to get better," I said, "but right now you should focus on healing properly. Otherwise, you'll lose even more time in the long run."

He finally stopped squatting.

I thought I'd managed to convince him, but my relief didn't last long. It was when he turned back to look at me that I realized I'd messed up.

He was giving me that look again. And then, before I could escape, he finally said it.

"Nagoshi... Have you quit playing bass for good?"

I'd managed to keep smiling constantly since I started high school, but for some reason...in that moment, I faltered.

"You had a gentle look on your face when you were talking about playing bass."

There was no way that was true. I'd just given him an example to help persuade him.

"You're wrong. And besides, I'm way too busy managing the soccer team."

"I dunno. Sometimes, you have this unsatisfied look on your face."

I was sure I didn't. *Stop acting like you understand me.* I started to feel irritated.

"You're imagining things. Anyway, squats are forbidden. I'll report you to the advisor if I catch you doing it again."

I grabbed the bag of sports drink powder and escaped the club room.

I was able to put a stop to the conversation that day, but afterward, he kept badgering me, saying things like, "Did you really give it up?" or "You're meant to play the bass, Nagoshi."

What did he mean, I was meant to play the bass? What did he know? I thought he should mind his own business, but I didn't feel like telling him why I'd left music behind. It would only earn me cheap sympathy, and it would be

too stressful to dig up all those memories I'd chosen to bury.

I'd started cutting the day I quit music. But once Andou began pestering me, I started doing it more and more. At first, it had just been a ritual I did to remind myself that I was still alive, not something I did when I was upset. But now, I sliced at my wrists every time I felt irritated. All it did was add to my emptiness.

"Nagoshi."

"Please listen to me."

"Nagoshi."

"I want to hear you play bass again."

"Why did you stop playing?"

"Nagoshi!"

Soon, I started getting annoyed any time Andou spoke to me, no matter what it was about.

Maybe if I still loved music, I'd be happy that my sound had rooted itself in someone's heart like that. But I now knew even music that moved people's hearts—and the desire for it, too—were all just lies.

My irritation turned into anger, and eventually I reached my limit. Abruptly, I turned cold, and the cruelty inside my heart emerged.

It seemed Andou only associated me with my music, so I would have to overwrite that impression with something stronger.

One day after club practice, I asked him to come see me...and I showed him the scars on my arm.

"Just thinking about the past irritates me," I said plainly. "And when I get irritated, I cut my arms like this to distract myself from the pain." It was a lie, but I said it calmly and convincingly.

That wasn't the real reason I cut, of course. I was marking my body with scars to pass the time. To make sure I could still feel. When I saw blood dripping from my body, I felt alive, relieved, and at the same time, a little excited.

I showed him those self-indulgent marks as if to say, "And it's because of you

that I keep cutting.”

But even that didn’t feel like enough. I took out a box cutter right then and there and cut myself more roughly than usual in front of him.

It hurt a lot. But I forced myself to maintain a faint smile.

I must have deeply unsettled him. He stared at me in shock, like he didn’t understand.

“Can you stop talking about the bass already?” I said. “It’s annoying.”

And with that, I walked away.

At one point I turned back and saw him standing there frozen, dumbfounded.

This is for the best.

I had no choice but to cut off this troublesome relationship.

I didn’t want anyone to whisper the word “music” in my ear ever again. That was all it took to make my heart start racing. I’d finally shut my past away in a drawer in the back of my mind, and I didn’t need anyone trying to open it... After all, even if no one touched the handle, it would rattle and try to open all on its own whenever I least expected it.

Later that same day, I was walking home when everything became too much. I just couldn’t deal with it anymore.

When I imagined having to see Andou again and pretend nothing had happened, I grew completely fed up with the situation. Even though I knew I’d hurt Andou, I started feeling like I was the victim, which only made me more exasperated with myself.

The next day, I handed in my withdrawal form to the soccer club’s faculty advisor.

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“The teachers kept nagging me about joining another club,” Nagoshi said, “so I chose the literature club.” She’d maintained her vague smile all throughout her story. “I thought that would be enough to make him give up, but apparently

not.” She chuckled dryly. “...I’ve got my shirt back on. You can turn around now.”

Hesitantly, I moved to face her and saw that she was indeed wearing her usual long-sleeved shirt, rolled up to just below her elbows. I was relieved to see her back to normal.

Her gaze slowly rose to meet mine. “You asked me before, remember? How it felt when I cut myself.”

I nodded nervously.

“I don’t feel anything. It just makes me remember that I’m alive,” she said. “Because if you don’t feel like you’re alive, it’s the same as being dead. I don’t want to die, but sometimes I feel like I’m not alive, so I have to check,” she said, fixing me with her gaze. The corner of her mouth lifted as she spoke. “What about you, Asada?”

“.....”

“Remember how you said you’d cut me with the box cutter if you thought it would really help me? If I asked you to do it now, would you?”

“.....I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head weakly.

She still hadn’t told me why she quit music. I had no idea what could have shocked her so much that she quit playing, when she’d been good enough for Sousuke to not only fall in love with her music, but to call it her “words.”

If, after losing what she loved, she’d found solace in the pain of cutting herself, how was it any of my business to tell her to stop?

Still, now that I’d seen her arms in such a terrible state, I couldn’t recklessly tell her to continue if she didn’t see another way. I couldn’t take either side... there was nothing I could do.

But if I were to put my feelings into words...

“All I can say is...I wish you wouldn’t do that to yourself.”

The words felt pushy and meaningless, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Every time I tried to figure out what was right, I felt like I was only drifting farther and farther away from what I wanted to say.

Nagoshi listened to me, smiled faintly, then lowered her gaze. “You... All of you...are so damn annoying,” she said. “Just when I was sure you’d start playing the hero and tell me, ‘That’s wrong, you should stop!’ you say something totally different. Instead of lying to try to convince me, you’re just telling me how you feel.” She sighed. “If only you would lie more, then I could deny it. If I could call out your tricks, then I could escape. You guys are so depressing,” she murmured, then fell silent.

...Aren’t you the one being annoying, Nagoshi?

It seemed like she was still vacillating between her own feelings and the feelings of others. She was aware that she was wavering, and yet she deliberately pretended not to notice.

If someone tried to push their own values on her, she could point out the flaws in their arguments and escape. But things like values were subjective—they could never be absolutely correct, so arguing about them was a waste of time.

But Sousuke was different. He truly believed that Nagoshi shined her brightest when she was holding the bass, and in order to convince her, he told her how he felt again and again. Since his argument was based on his earnest feelings, it wasn’t right or wrong. She understood that, and it was why she couldn’t make him stop and why she grew more and more frustrated with him.

“You said words would eventually become lies,” I said, breaking the silence. “...But your music was different.”

She raised an eyebrow, and her expression hardened, like she wanted to say something. But she stayed quiet, so I continued.

“Your music wasn’t a lie to Sousuke. It’s stayed with him and never faded.”

“Nothing lasts forever. You can fool yourself into believing it will, but—”

“Nevertheless,” I said, interrupting, “you created something that made him feel that way. His desire to hear your music again isn’t a lie.”

“Maybe that’s true. But there’s no truth in the music I made. I was chasing lies. I was a girl chasing lies, making music that was a lie.”

“What do you mean by lies? You keep talking about lies, lies, and more lies, and refusing to discuss what really matters. In the end, what do you consider the truth, and what do you see as lies?” I realized Nagoshi and I were bickering back and forth. “Why shouldn’t Sousuke be moved by your music? Why shouldn’t he believe in it?” I pressed.

She rolled her eyes and said, “Because it was all a lie! And lies are a betrayal. They hurt those who believe in them and plunge them into despair! That’s why!”

“Is that why you only lie to yourself?” I asked.

Her expression froze. Her mouth hung open, and she remained silent, unable to say anything.

“I get it. You’re much more frightened of hurting others than you are of hurting yourself.”

“N-no... You’re wrong.”

“Nagoshi...” I paused and took a deep breath. My body was shaking slightly. Confronting her like this was scary. I knew this was a line she didn’t want me to overstep, and I was doing it anyway. But I understood that in cases like these, the other person wouldn’t take your outstretched hand unless you were a little forceful about it. “You were betrayed, hurt, and left in despair, weren’t you? And you...don’t want to make anyone else feel like that, right?”

Her eyes widened, and she weakly shook her head. “...You’re wro—”

“But aren’t you gradually hurting yourself when you push others away like this? You’re lying to yourself, betraying yourself. You must know that, right?”

“...N-no, it’s—”

“You still love music, don’t you?”

“No!!” She shouted so loud the walls of the garage shook. “Don’t act like you get it! Why would you think any of that?!”

“Because you’re not pushing me away. You keep letting me come over and play the drums. If you really hated music and didn’t even want to think about it, you wouldn’t let us practice here.”

“I just thought it’d be better for someone to use this stuff, rather than let it go to waste.”

“But letting us use the garage meant you’d have to see Sousuke again. And that’s painful for you, isn’t it?”

She glared at me.

“You don’t hate music...you’re just refusing to play it yourself,” I said. “That’s why whenever Sousuke asks you to pick up the bass, you say ‘I won’t,’ and never ‘I don’t want to.’”

She shook her head over and over. She kept opening her mouth like she wanted to say something, then closing it before anything came out.

At last, I gathered up my courage and said, “Nagoshi... Aren’t you doing all this to convince *yourself* that you don’t want to play anymore?”

Her gaze wavered.

That must be it, I thought.

“Maybe the thing you’re most afraid of is that Sousuke’s pestering will actually convince you.”

She looked down at the floor and sighed. “...I don’t stand a chance against you, Asada.” Then she smiled bitterly.

I slowly shook my head. “It’s not about winning or losing.”

“I hate that about you. You’re so honest. You drive me into a corner, and before I know it, you’ve got me talking, too. You’re such a pain...” She waved her hands in surrender and sat down on a stool. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I just don’t want someone to make me feel like playing again.”

“So then, you *do* want to play,” I said.

She sighed uncertainly. “I don’t know. But...I hope not. I hope I never want to pick up a bass again,” she said with a lonely smile.

“...Because my music died a long time ago.”

Her words were simple, yet oddly heavy. I didn't fully understand them, but they seemed to resonate somewhere deep within me. We'd been speaking for some time, but I felt like her entire heart had been poured into that one sentence.

"I don't intend to deny Andou's feelings about my music. But even if he can't forget it, it's gone for good. That sound is never coming back. Because...I don't believe in music anymore."

Her words echoed sadly through the garage, disappearing like mist into the rain.

"I can't see any value in playing the bass...and nothing is going to change that," she muttered. "So, I'm not gonna play, no matter how many times Sousuke asks." Even I could tell those were her true feelings. "Forget what I said about asking Andou to stop. I know you don't want to. But...I hope you understand that I'm not going to play."

Her answer was so direct, all I could do was nod. If I didn't accept her honest feelings now that she'd finally expressed them, our entire conversation would lose its meaning.

"All right," I said. "I won't mention it again."

"Thanks."

She smiled slightly and said, "I'm a little tired," before sitting down on the sofa.

I bowed a little anxiously. "I'm sorry. That was out of line."

She shook her head. "You really love words, don't you? And words love you, too. Your words are kind and gentle, and somehow they just feel right." She leaned over slightly and peered into my eyes. Her expression was sad and clouded. "But sometimes being gentle and right...can be a little cruel."

I didn't know what to say. I knew nothing about her beyond what she'd told me, so all I could do was consider what I knew and make pronouncements like some kind of know-it-all.

Being made to realize this obvious fact all over again...was really frustrating.

I fell silent, and Nagoshi watched me from her spot on the sofa. I kept my face lowered, but I could feel her gaze.

“About those drums...,” she said. “Someone really important to me used to play them.”

I was surprised to hear her suddenly bring up the past.

“Someone important?” I repeated, and she nodded.

“Yeah. It was my dad’s...girlfriend. She was like an older sister to me.” Her eyes narrowed slightly as she spoke. It was as if she was slowly digging through her own memories. “She used to come here a lot and play those drums. When I heard you practicing so earnestly, it reminded me of those days...and made me feel a little nostalgic.” She stood up from the sofa. “So I don’t mind you practicing here. Sorry if I sounded threatening earlier. Feel free to use the drums whenever you want.”

As she spoke, she leisurely strolled toward the door. “Hope the after-party goes well.” And with that, she left the garage in her usual carefree manner.

I continued to stare after her for some time, thinking about what she’d said... about the woman who was important to her who’d played the drums. Nagoshi had closed off her heart when it came to music, but when she’d talked about that woman, she’d had a gentle smile on her face.

Whatever was going on inside Nagoshi, it was too complicated for me to figure out from what she and those around her had said. The story seemed odd, inconsistent.

Once, she’d played music with such intensity that it had captivated Sousuke’s heart. He’d said her music spoke more eloquently than her words ever could. That was how much she’d loved music.

But then, *something* happened, and everything changed. According to Misuzu, it had been enough to make her stop playing the instrument she loved.

But even after experiencing such great despair, it was clear that she didn’t hate music itself. And yet, she was rejecting her love for the bass and refusing

to play it.

What should I do? My position in all this was too vague. It left me frustrated.

Sousuke wanted to hear Nagoshi play again. He wanted to hear what she had to say through her music. But Nagoshi had made up her mind to give up the bass for good. Though she never said she didn't want to play, for some reason, she held fast to her decision not to.

Sousuke's and her feelings were completely at odds. I couldn't see a solution that would make them both happy. I could only watch them continue to clash until one of them gave in.

A feeling of helplessness washed over me as I took out my drumsticks. I plugged in the electronic drum set and powered up the console, then began my usual basic practice.

Since I was frustrated, I had a harder time keeping a good rhythm. Every time I drifted away from the beat of the metronome, I became a little more irritated and my drumming got rougher.

As I forcefully hit the snare, it made a sharp sound. The off-beat rhythm and the noisy snare exasperated me, even though I was the one responsible for it. I felt like I was stuck in a vicious cycle, but I couldn't stop.

I continued practicing for the next few hours, letting my emotions seep into the beats, until my arms began to ache.



[INTERLUDE 2]

Etsuko truly loved music from the bottom of her heart.

Her drumming reminded me of water—smooth, fluid, and occasionally intense.

She always had fun when she played. Up until that point, I'd been focused on the bass alone, but after watching her, I felt drawn to the drums and asked her to teach me. In the end, I only learned how to play a little bit. Still, she watched over me with a smile on her face and said, "All that matters is that you're having fun."

He and Etsuko were bandmates and lovers. She always supported him and never complained. Their relationship was more like a married couple than boyfriend and girlfriend, and I used to tell them they should go ahead and tie the knot. But *he* would always put it off, saying marriage was a prison and it was too soon for him to be locked up.

He would play the bass and Etsuko would sway to the music, or drum along, unable to resist. I loved watching her.

Back then, I thought of the garage next to the house as a super-cool secret base. I was so happy there, surrounded by the people I loved and the music they made. I admired them, and wanted to be even closer to them. I dreamed of becoming a pro musician one day and performing by their side. It was with that dream in my heart that I played the bass day after day.

"Risa, your music is completely different from Yuu's," Etsuko said one day while listening to me.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I remember snapping back at her, a little miffed. I didn't like being told I was still far away from the sound I admired.

She chuckled. “How should I put it... When you play, I can tell how much you love music and how much you enjoy playing the bass.”

I was at a loss. I thought everyone there enjoyed playing music—that it was something we all had in common.

“If I didn’t enjoy it, I wouldn’t play it every day,” I said.

“Huh. Guess you have a point.”

“Aren’t you the same, Etsuko?”

“Yeah, I am. I play because I enjoy it.”

The way she phrased her answer seemed to imply that it wasn’t the same for *him*, and that made me uneasy.

“Why do you think I sound completely different?” I asked.

She hesitated a moment, then let her gaze wander, as if she was carefully choosing her words. “Because music...is the only thing Yuu has,” she said. She sounded sad, which puzzled me.

Everyone knew that about him—that he had nothing but music. He’d thrown everything else away. That was why he could produce such amazing sounds. What was wrong with that?

“But...isn’t that because he loves music? How is that different from me?” I asked. I never doubted his feelings about music. I’d always thought we felt the same way.

She shook her head and smiled sadly. “Choosing music over everything else isn’t the same as having nothing but music.”

I didn’t understand what she meant at all. It felt like she was saying his way of doing things was wrong, and that bothered me.

When she saw how confused I was, she smiled apologetically and said, “Sorry, this stuff is a bit complicated.”

“It’s okay...”

“Lately, I’ve been thinking...,” she said, gazing off into the distance. “Is just having fun not enough?” She didn’t say so, but somehow I knew she was talking

about the band. “I feel like Yuu just keeps changing...and not for the better.”

“What do you mean? The band is doing well, right? Your music keeps improving.”

“Ha-ha. Yeah. It makes sense you feel that way. You’re focused on his music, after all.” She had an odd look on her face.

He was the leader of the instrumental band “Stray Fish.” They’d made their mainstream debut two years earlier, when I was a first-year student in junior high school. They’d become quite popular and made numerous appearances on prime time music shows. I thought the band was doing well. None of the members had let success make them lazy; they kept creating more and more challenging songs.

But Etsuko...despite being one of the band’s members...didn’t seem completely satisfied with the way things were going.

“Now that the band is gaining momentum, the label is putting more effort into promotion, and they have more influence over us than before,” she explained. “Yuu feels like he’s being backed into a corner.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he feels a lot more pressure to deliver his music to more people.”

What’s wrong with an artist wanting more people to listen to his music? I wondered, tipping my head in confusion. Etsuko paid me no mind and continued.

“You know, sometimes I think...back then, we were just screaming because we wanted to scream. But now, the goal is for people to hear us scream. And it’s scary.”

Etsuko usually just smiled and listened to other people ramble on, so it was strange for her to reveal what she was thinking like this. I knew it must have been a pretty significant concern for her, but...what she was saying was too difficult for me. My inability to understand filled me with frustration.

“I wonder what Yuu’s reason is for making music,” she said, exhaling softly. “I guess it’s not enough to just have fun...”

She smiled, her face full of sadness and pain. I'll never forget that expression.

Ever since that conversation with Etsuko, I was haunted by the question, "What's the point of making music?" It was something I'd never even thought about before.

Maybe haunted is the wrong word—I wasn't fretting over it or anything. But I kept thinking about it and came to the conclusion that I didn't understand anything.

When I watched him play the bass, I didn't simply lose myself in the music like I had before. I started to pay careful attention to his expressions, his mood, and the emotions he was conveying.

One day, he was trying to compose when he hit a wall and got really upset. He was about to slam his bass against the floor when Yasu—Atsushi Yasunaga, Stray Fish's guitarist and his closest friend—stopped him. After that, he sat at the counter, sulking and drinking.

When he was in a good mood, he always used to say, "What's the point of life if you can't enjoy a drink?" But I noticed he drank more when he was in a bad mood.

Yasu leaned against the wall, idly playing arpeggios on his acoustic guitar. The sounds he made were calming, as if he was trying to soothe his friend's frustration.

He gulped down his beer restlessly and stared at a fixed point in front of him. He continued this endlessly, his face etched with anger.

When I thought about it, I realized he really only talked when he was in a good mood and playing well.

Now, he was pouting like a child, looking like he wanted to say something, but refusing to open his mouth, stirring himself up into an even worse mood.

"Hey...What are you thinking about right now?" I asked.

Yasu stopped playing guitar and looked at me in surprise. But in the end, he

just grinned at me and went back to playing.

He seemed surprised too, but he wasn't able to wipe the sour look off his face and merely raised his eyebrows.

"What's with the sudden question?" he muttered, his voice low. "I'm thinking about the song."

"Well, if you're so pissed off you're ready to throw your instrument, you should probably quit for the day."

"What's quitting gonna do? I don't have time to sulk in bed."

"If you don't have time to waste, what are you doing sitting around sulking and drinking?"

I heard Yasu snort, and *he* quickly turned and glared at him. Yasu just shrugged and continued to play.

"I think while I'm drinking!"

"Yeah, I know. That's why I asked what you were thinking about."

"I'm thinking about the song."

"What about it?" I asked curiously.

"Huh?" he said, raising his voice like he was trying to intimidate me. But then, he looked around, like he wasn't sure what to say. "Well...all kinds of stuff."

"Like what?"

"Emotions, momentum, stuff like that. Ah, dammit!" He stood up in frustration, and grabbed the bass from its stand, where Yasu had returned it.

"Don't go throwing it around and breaking it, okay?" Yasu said.

"Shut up!" he shot back as he touched the instrument's strings.

He was intoxicated, his face flushed, but the moment he took the bass in his hands, he straightened up. Every time I witnessed that moment, I shivered with anticipation and drew in my breath.

When he plucked the strings with a sharp *twang!* it felt like the whole garage shook. How could he produce such a powerful sound with his amp unplugged?

The note was sharp, but his expression remained calm. He appeared to be thinking, but at the same time, it was as though his head was empty. Despite being visibly grumpy moments before, his negative emotions seemed to vanish, and now he played with a flat expression on his face. It was like his essence had slipped out of his body and taken up residence in the bass.

He played a few random tunes, then quietly set it down.

"I thought I'd make more progress playing than thinking, but guess I was wrong," he said, his voice uncharacteristically weak. Then, he stumbled toward the garage door, like he'd lost all interest. "I'm going to bed."

"I thought you didn't have time to sit in bed and pout," I said.

"Shut up. I'm not gonna accomplish anything unless I get some sleep."

He slammed the door, leaving Yasu and me alone in the garage. We exchanged glances, and then Yasu chuckled softly.

"Don't take everything he says seriously. It'll just wear you out," he said, taking his guitar off his shoulder. "He means what he says, but his words can't keep up with his emotions."

"His words can't keep up with his emotions," I murmured, thinking over what Yasu had just said.

He nodded and glanced at the bass, now on its stand. "Yeah. That's why it's easier for him to express himself through his music."

He and Yasu had been friends since high school, so Yasu must've known him a lot better than I did. Now that I thought about it, I'd never seen the two of them argue, though *he* bickered with Etsuko all the time.

Yasu was a hard person for me to understand. He always wore a vague smile, but it was hard to tell what he was really thinking. I guess they were similar in that way. But Yasu was kind to everyone, which was nothing like *him*. Yasu seemed so mature.

"I wonder what he thinks about when he plays," I murmured, and Yasu chuckled.

"Who knows?" he said, glancing at me. "Are you curious because you want to

know where he gets his sound?”

“Yeah.”

“Ha-ha. All you think about is music, Risa,” he said with a laugh. “Rather than him, you’re more interested in his sound, huh.”

“I want to be able to make music like his. And...Etsuko’s been really worried lately, so I’ve been thinking about that, too.”

“Hmm,” Yasu said. I’d brought up two topics at once, and he didn’t seem to know what to make of it. He gestured toward a barstool, so I sat down beside him. “First of all, I want to make this clear.” His voice was gentle, but what he said next shocked me. “No matter how much you practice, your music will never sound the same as his, Risa.”

“What?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“You love music,” he continued, “just like Etsuko does.”

He made it sound like Yasu and *him* were different.

“If you play music just because you enjoy it, you won’t be able to produce a sound like his,” he said firmly.

“How can you be so sure about that?” I said, starting to get worked up.

“No reason. I just feel it in my bones. There are plenty of other great bass players out there. But I’ve never heard anyone who can produce a sound like his.”

His gaze was soft and kind. “So...you should work on producing a sound unique to you.”

“My own sound...” I didn’t quite understand. I’d been trying to mimic *his* sound for as long as I could remember.

“And...about Etsuko being worried... Well, I guess everyone can see that.”

“She said the same thing to me.”

“Huh?”

“She said choosing music and having nothing but music are different, or something. I dunno, I didn’t really understand.”

Yasu's eyes widened in surprise, and his gaze wavered for a moment like he was confused. Then, he brushed it off with a laugh. "Ha-ha. Etsuko said that, huh? Well, I guess she's right—you definitely chose music, Risa." He nodded a few times before sighing. "Well... If you wanna understand how Yuugo feels, maybe you should try composing."

I blinked. "C-composing?"

"Yeah. Right now, he's hit a wall. He used to be able to churn out song after song as easy as breathing, but suddenly he's struggling. He's confused. If you want to figure out how he's feeling, maybe you should try putting yourself in his shoes."

After making this suggestion, Yasu stood up and went over to the wall where he'd left his guitar case. He took a stack of papers from the case, then came back and held them out to me.

"I've got just the thing. I wrote out the guitar parts myself."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Since he was stuck, I thought I'd give it a try, but he turned me down."

"Oh..."

Yasu was smiling, but I felt sorry for him. *He* was really picky, and he hardly ever listened to other people's opinions.

"Try coming up with a bass part for this song. If it turns out well, he might even play it."

I imagined him playing a song I wrote. It sounded wonderful to me, though I couldn't put into words how or why.

"Oh... Maybe I shouldn't have said that." Yasu looked at my face and quickly shook his head. "Don't focus on him playing it. Think of playing it yourself."

"...I don't know if I can do that."

"Sure ya can. Anyone who can hum a tune can make a song."

"You're exaggerating."

"I'm not! I really believe that. Humming a little tune to yourself and thinking,

‘Hey, I just made up a song!’ is the best way to make music. Once you have knowledge and technical skill, you start putting too much thought into it, and you lose all that freedom.” His tone was joking, but the last part seemed more directed at himself and *him* than at me. He let out a self-deprecating chuckle, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled sadly. “Don’t worry too much and just make a song. Enjoy playing the bass and making music,” he said, handing me the guitar scores.

I took them and nodded. “Okay. I’ll give it a try.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to seeing what kind of song you’ll come up with.”

“I doubt it’s gonna be anything amazing.”

“It doesn’t have to be amazing.” He smiled and ruffled my hair.

My first attempt at composing was incredibly exciting. I’d always played songs by my favorite artists—like Stray Fish—by ear, and I’d never even thought about composing my own music. So, there was a certain joy in realizing I could take the song in any direction I wanted.

And I had Yasu’s guitar scores as a starting point, so I wasn’t completely on my own. Yasu had only written chords for a lot of it, but the parts he was most interested in were clearly notated, so I decided to add bass lines that matched the guitar rhythm.

For a while, I lost myself in composing. I had my own band back then, and I even played some of it for the other members. I had our guitarist play the part Yasu wrote, but it was so difficult she was in total agony. I’d almost forgotten Yasu was a pro musician. I was always listening to Stray Fish play, so I didn’t have a good grasp of how difficult any of it was.

It took about two weeks, but I finally finished my first original bass score.

Personally, I thought I’d taken a long time, but Yasu looked shocked when I handed it to him.

“Huh? You’re done already?!” He told me he’d expected it to take me at least

a month or two. “That’s amazing. I wonder if it’s because you’re young...” He flipped through the score, an odd look on his face. Occasionally, he would say, “Ohh...” or “Hmm...” Then, he stood up and said, “Yeah, all right! You wanna try it out?”

My heart skipped a beat. “What? Now?”

“Yeah, why not? You wrote it to be played, didn’t you? It’d be a waste not to. Haven’t you practiced it?”

“Well, I played as I composed, so I shouldn’t have a problem, but...”

“Then we’re all good. Let’s go.”

I’d had fun composing, but playing something I’d written in front of Yasu made me really nervous.

Yasu gave me the cue, “One, two, three!” Then, we both started playing.

His sound was sharp and cool. The score only had chords written down, but his playing sounded so lively. I added more force to create a thicker sound, paying close attention, so I didn’t sound sloppy.

Yasu’s technique exploded during the guitar solo. I could hear hammer-ons, pull-offs, trills, choking, and much more. He flew through techniques so rapidly that, as an amateur, it was hard for me to identify them all.

He was so cool. I’d watched him play a lot, but today was different. He usually strove to complement *his* sound, but today Yasu was really pushing his own performance to the front. I’d never heard him play so boldly before.

I was overwhelmed, but I somehow managed to keep up. Then, it was my turn for a solo. After an awesome performance like that, my pride made me want to compete.

So far, I’d just followed Yasu, but now I played aggressively, really hitting the strings hard. As I played, our eyes met. He gave me an encouraging look, daring me to go further.

I felt myself smile, then I remembered something—*he* didn’t smile during solos.

Despite his impressive sound, he was always frowning. You might even say he

looked *pained*.

What did he think about while he played? I began to get lost in thought, and my fingers slowed down. But I couldn't stop my mind from spinning.

How would he play this solo? Would he produce an even cooler sound?

Soon, my solo was finished, and we were at the last part of the song. My bass and Yasu's guitar wove together, and I felt a sense of excitement, like we were lifting each other up, as we played the final notes.

Then, there were a few seconds of silence.

"Yeah, that was good. It's a fun song," Yasu said, walking over to me. He tousled my hair vigorously with both hands. "You did a good job. It's amazing you could make something like that on your first try."

"It's no big deal. Hey, stop doing that to my hair!"

"Ha-ha. This is my special technique for head patting. It means you did a *damn fine job*," he said, emphasizing the last three words.

"You're tangling my hair!"

"You're like a big old dog, Risa. It's cute."

Yasu always said that to me. I knew he wasn't trying to be mean, but I couldn't imagine why he thought a teenage girl would take that as a compliment.

He sighed with satisfaction and sat down on one of the barstools.

"During your solo," he began.

I felt my heart contract. *He knows*, I thought.

"Your sound changed, huh? What were you thinking about?" he asked. I hesitated. "Lemme guess. You were wondering how *he'd* play it, right?"

"...How did you know?" I flushed.

"'Cuz suddenly it wasn't your sound anymore. I could see you hesitate. All of your sparkle disappeared."

I knew he was right. Up until that point, I'd been enjoying myself, but then I

got distracted and lost. Playing like that made me feel strange, like I was detached from the music.

“...That’s what’s bothering *him* right now,” Yasu said. His voice was gentle as always, but his expression scared me a little. “I wonder what it means to have your own sound. It shouldn’t be any more complicated than putting your emotions into the music. But...the more people are listening, the more you feel like you’ve gotta put on a show. That’s the fate of any artist, and their curse,” he said sadly. “Even if those around say, ‘Hey, you don’t have to show off,’ you’re in too deep before you know it. And then, after it’s too late, you finally remember what you were looking for, and then you’re full of regret.”

I couldn’t tell if he was talking about himself or about *him*. It probably applied to both of them equally. They’d been making music together for a long time, after all.

“Let’s have *him* play this song. Maybe it’ll help him return to his roots,” Yasu said with a smile. “Music saves people, ya know? I’m sure he wants to keep saving people.”

Yasu’s words made me feel warm inside. *Music saves people*. I believed that, too. It had brought so much brightness to my own life.

After that conversation, I waited eagerly for *him* to come back home. I wanted to hear him and Yasu play my song together and to compare our interpretations. I wondered how he’d play it, what expression he’d have...

But he never came home.

After a week away, he killed someone and got arrested.

My music didn’t save him.

× × ×

The sound of the electronic drums downstairs stopped. I could tell that he’d been playing more roughly than usual, and I was sure it was because of me and what I’d put him through.

He was clumsy, but gentle, and he had a way with words.

When Odajima was having problems and came up to the roof, he'd helped her bounce back in under a week.

He had a mysterious ability to verbalize the emotions smoldering deep inside people's hearts, releasing them.

That was why I tried my best to hide my emotions from him...but he ended up exposing them anyway. And yet, I was still trying to hide them, and that unsettled him.

I felt bad about it...but there was nothing I could do.

I slowly took off my shirt and gently unwrapped the bandage on my left arm. My skin was covered in ugly scars. Why was I doing this? I'd thought it was to confirm that I was alive. But what was I thinking the day I cut for the first time? No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember.

"I want to hear your sound again, Nagoshi! You're the only one who can make music like that!"

I thought of Andou's face as he pleaded with me. He was almost in tears.

I should've been happy to hear someone say that, but I knew in my heart that I wasn't. Music didn't save people. Even if you thought it had saved you, it would only betray you and leave you in despair.

I had betrayed Andou. I hurt and rejected him to protect my own heart, despite knowing his earnest feelings. And yet, he was still attached to my music.

I could have understood it if he had romantic feelings for me. If he were trying to win me over through the bass, everything would be a lot simpler. But it was clear that wasn't the case anymore. The only thing he talked about was my music.

His desire was straightforward and genuine. He just wanted to hear my sound.

His feelings reminded me of how I used to feel about *him*, which pained me deeply.

I wasn't confident enough to believe I wouldn't betray Andou in the same way. But as he continued to bombard me with his feelings, anxiety bubbled up inside me. What if I started wanting to play again?

Clank!

It sounded like Asada was closing up the garage. I looked outside and saw that it was already dark. I slipped my fingers through the gap in the thin curtains, pulled them aside, and peeked out.

He was walking along the path through the rice fields more slowly than usual. Suddenly, he stopped and turned back toward my house. Flustered, I quickly pulled my hand away and closed the curtains. As I stared at the fabric swaying back and forth, I sighed.

I felt pathetic. Why was I so afraid of someone younger than I was? I peeked outside again and saw his figure shrinking into the distance.

"Just have fun with your friends," I muttered. "And keep enjoying yourselves... right up until the end."

I could feel all sorts of words swirling around in my head, but I couldn't grasp any of them. It was so frustrating.

"Otherwise, I'll..." I couldn't finish my sentence, because I didn't know what I wanted to say.

I sat on the sofa by the window, my arms wrapped around my knees. I stayed curled up like that for a long time. I felt like crying, but for some reason, no tears came out. I realized that, without the bass, I couldn't express anything.



[CHAPTER 11]

It was already the final week of summer vacation. We'd had more than a month off, but the time had flown by.

"All right, let's get started!" Sousuke called out, guitar slung over his shoulder.

Everyone finished setting up and nodded.

We were at the studio, and we were finally going to play the song we had chosen and practiced separately over summer break.

Sousuke, Ai, Kaoru, me, and...

"Ready, Yushima?" Sousuke asked, looking at the black-haired boy holding the bass.

We'd borrowed Gen Yushima, the bass player in Misuzu's music club. Sousuke said he still hadn't given up on Nagoshi, so I was surprised when he invited Yushima to practice with us, but I was sure he had his reasons.

Yushima nodded quietly. He wore his bangs long over his face, so it was hard to see his expression.

Misuzu sat on a chair by the wall with her legs crossed. "Pretend it's the real thing. I'll give you feedback just like I would if it was an actual performance." Her tone was stricter than usual, and everyone nodded.

"Let's go, then....," said Sousuke. "One, two, three, four!"

At his cue, I started to drum. I managed to play the first fill without any mistakes.

I could tell Sousuke was good, while Yushima's playing was somehow

detached. The sounds of their instruments wove together. Ai didn't have a part in the intro, but I could see her body swaying to the rhythm in the corner of my vision.

I started to have trouble keeping up as soon as the other instruments joined in. It felt completely different from playing alone. I realized then that Sousuke had been adjusting to my pace when we'd practiced together.

I kept the tempo in my head and frantically tried to maintain the rhythm. I could feel Misuzu's piercing gaze.

Once the intro was done, I heard Kaoru begin to sing into the microphone. *"When night falls, I forget about what happened in the morning..."*

The opening line was quiet and gentle, yet it had a certain presence to it. Kaoru's singing voice was so beautiful I accidentally lost the rhythm. Sousuke glanced over at me briefly. Grinning, he nodded a few times as if to say, "I get it, man."

Sousuke had chosen two songs for us to play at the festival. A quiet ballad first, and then something more upbeat. Both were famous songs everyone knew...except for me, since I didn't really keep up with TV and pop culture.

Sousuke's plan was to start by emphasizing Kaoru's pretty voice, and then pump up the crowd with the second song. So far, things seemed to be going smoothly.

Kaoru's gentle singing voice joined together with Ai's keyboard. As the guitar and bass played the harmony, an indescribable, enchanting quality began to come through. The original song had a string section in it, but I thought it was coming together pretty well with just us.

"I miss you... I miss you... Just the feeling of longing for you...shakes me, burns me, scratches me, hurts me. Just once, in the darkness of night...I dream of you..."

I couldn't tell if Kaoru was nervous or if she was singing like that on purpose, but the sound of her voice added an extra layer of intensity to the song.

This practice marked the first time I'd heard Kaoru's singing and Ai's keyboard, as well as the bass. By the second half of the song, I was messing up

the rhythm constantly, but everyone adjusted without complaining. And somehow, we managed to make it to the end.

“Kaoru!” Ai blurted out. And instead of Ai, everyone looked at Kaoru, like they all knew exactly what Ai was going to say.

“Wh-what?” Kaoru fidgeted uncomfortably as everyone stared at her.

“You’re too good!” Ai rushed over and threw her arms around the other girl.

Kaoru’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Seriously, you were amazing! I almost stopped playing!” Sousuke clapped, sparkles in his eyes.

Yushima was looking down, his bangs covering his expression. He sat down beside Misuzu and quietly sighed.

“Right?” Ai said, turning to me. “Wasn’t Kaoru amazing, Yuzuru?!”

Kaoru looked at me, waiting for my response. I could see her gaze wavering.

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, you were amazing. I was so surprised—”

“So surprised you lost your rhythm,” Misuzu said, cutting me off.

She was right. “I’m sorry.”

“Being moved is fine, but remember this is a performance,” she said dryly, then stood up from her folding chair.

I nodded solemnly as she approached us. Everyone gulped.

“Well, for your first time playing together, it was better than I expected,” she said. Instantly, the tension in the room dissolved.

Ai turned to Kaoru and cheered, “We did it!”

“Also, Odajima?” Misuzu said.

“Y-yes?” Kaoru suddenly stood up straight.

Misuzu approached her with a serious expression. “Will you join the music club?”

“Huh? ...What?”

“I want you to sing. You’ve got a great vibe. You’d be perfect for our vocalist.”

“W-wait a minute!” I slipped between the two of them. “Kaoru’s a member of the literature club!”

Misuzu frowned. “I thought that was just an excuse club for ghosters. That’s what Risa said.”

“Yeah, but Kaoru’s a serious member!”

“Oh yeah? Does she read books?”

“U-um, not really...” I stammered.

Kaoru tapped me on the back and peeked over my shoulder.

“The club president will be all alone if I don’t show up,” she said firmly, shaking her head. “So I appreciate the offer, but I’ll have to pass.”

“.....Oh, well. That’s a shame.” Misuzu shrugged and sighed dramatically.

I glanced over at Kaoru. She wore her usual absentminded expression. When she saw me staring, she shot me a puzzled look.

“Hm? What is it?” she asked.

“Oh, um. Nothing.” I hastily averted my gaze and started fiddling with my drumsticks.

I was really happy she’d refused, but I couldn’t say that in front of the others, so I just fidgeted and looked down.

“Well, anyway. Let’s continue,” said Misuzu. “Overall, you did decently. Now, I’ll give you each individual feedback.” She crossed her arms and began to point out how each person could improve.

“Yuzuru, your playing was sloppy. You made the whole band sound bad. You need to make more of a conscious effort to keep up the rhythm. Your fills were better than I expected, though. I can tell you practiced them.

“Next, Sousuke. You’re too relaxed, and it gets on my nerves. That’s okay when you’re practicing, but remember you need to perform. If you slack off on stage, the audience is gonna notice. I want you to give it your all.

“Odajima. Try not to let your voice tremble. It’s fine for emphasis now and

then, but it's distracting if you do it all the time. Your voice is really good, so you don't need to change anything else.

"Mizuno... Hm. Good. You managed to blend into the overall sound well, despite all the disjointed playing. But if everyone else improves, you could work on standing out a bit more.

"Yushima, try to look like you're actually having fun. Once the band starts to come together, I'll have more to say to you."

The surprise over Kaoru's voice and the sense of accomplishment from finishing our first song together had caused everyone to relax, but now that Misuzu had started seriously critiquing us, we all tensed up again.

"Let's run that song one more time," said Misuzu. "If it sounds better this time, we can move onto the next one," She clapped her hands and settled back into her folding chair.

We repeated the full song several times, trying to keep her feedback in mind. Our performance improved quickly, no doubt thanks to all our individual practice.

Gradually, I got better at keeping rhythm while everyone else was playing. That allowed me to hear the nuances of their sounds—their volume, dynamics, and finer details—and adjust the intensity of my drumming to match.

The guitar and bass began to mesh more naturally, and Kaoru's voice stopped wavering as much.

I had a lot of fun listening as the song came together. The hours flew by, and even though we'd rented the studio for longer than usual, it was time to leave before I knew it.

We gathered our things and did a quick clean, then left the studio as a group.

"All right! It's coming together nicely," Sousuke said once we were outside. "We've got about a month or so left before the festival, so let's continue working hard and improving!"

Misuzu nodded beside him. "Yeah, it sounds a lot better than I expected. From here on out, it'll come down to how well you guys keep your focus. Good

luck,” she said, and everyone responded enthusiastically.

She was just supposed to teach me the drums, but at some point, she became like our manager and started giving everyone advice.

I thanked her several times, but she always awkwardly brushed it off, saying, “Well, I didn’t have anything better to do.” I could tell she was a really kind person.

“Let’s call it a day!” said Sousuke. “Our next practice will be after school starts.”

“I can’t believe summer’s already over!” Ai exclaimed. “It went by way too fast!” She shook Kaoru as she spoke. The other girl was clearly annoyed, but had resigned herself to her fate.

“Did you finish your summer homework, Ai?” Kaoru asked.

“Eep!”

“.....” Kaoru sighed and glared at her. “How much do you have left?”

“Umm, about eighty percent? No, maybe seventy. Uh... possibly sixty? ...Half! I’ve got about half left!”

Kaoru’s expression grew increasingly stern as Ai spoke, until Ai was visibly panicking.

Sousuke burst out laughing. “Sounds like you’re in trouble! I still have a little left, too. How about you, Yuzuru?”

“I finished all the mandatory assignments two weeks ago. I just have the optional ones left. But that’s...you know...” I glanced at Sousuke meaningfully. He blinked in confusion a few times, then said, “Ohhh!”

The optional homework assignment was rather vague, but it was about trying something new over summer and documenting your progress and results. Thankfully, I had something to write about—playing the drums, of course.

“Yeah, you just started playing this summer,” he said, “and you’re already pretty good.”

“I couldn’t have done it alone. It’ll be a little hard to summarize it into a

report, but everyone will see us at the after-party, so they'll have to believe me."

"Yeah, makes sense. But I guess that means you can keep focusing on your drums for the rest of the break."

"Yep, that's the plan. I'm still the one who needs the most practice, so I'll keep working hard."

Sousuke chuckled. "You're so serious," he said. Then, he paused for a moment to think.

Oh, that's right. I wanted to ask him about something.

I had a feeling I knew what he was thinking about, and I thought I should make some time for us to talk.

"Yuzuru!" Ai called out and waved at me. Kaoru had just finished scolding her about something.

"What's up?"

"I'm going to do homework with Kaoru later. Wanna join us?" she asked.

I felt a pang of guilt as I shook my head.

"Sorry, but I have plans with Sousuke," I said.

Sousuke flashed me a surprised look, but after a moment he seemed to understand and quickly said, "Right," before turning to Ai. "Sorry about that! We have plans!" We didn't—he was just going along with what I'd said.

"Oh, okay. That's too bad. Well, we're gonna get going. Good work, everyone!" Ai bowed cheerfully and Kaoru did the same.

The two of them walked toward the station, arm in arm. We watched them leave, and then Sousuke let out a small sigh.

"Sorry," he said. "You did that for me, right?"

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it, and thanks for playing along."

"No problem, man. Let's change locations. Misuzu, Yushima, can you join us?" Sousuke turned toward Misuzu, who immediately nodded.

Yushima wasn't as eager. "Huh? Me too?"

"You're coming, get over it!" Misuzu shot back.

We all went to a café near the station together.

After we sat down and ordered drinks, Misuzu spoke up. "There's something I've been meaning to ask," she said, shooting a meaningful glance at Sousuke. "You asked me to lend you Yushima. Does that mean you've given up on Risa?"

I nodded. That was exactly what I'd wanted to ask him.

Sousuke's gaze wandered around the table as he carefully chose his words.

At last, he said firmly, "Yes. I've given up on trying to persuade her."

"Huh? Really?" Misuzu's eyes widened in surprise. I was shocked, too.

Just a week ago he was crying, saying he wouldn't give up on her. What had changed?

Sousuke smiled when he saw how shocked both of us were. "Ha-ha. Sorry, I misspoke."

"Huh?"

"I haven't given up on getting Nagoshi to play the bass. But I've stopped trying to convince her with words." He smiled gently. "In the end, the only part of her I know is her music. So, from my perspective, the new Nagoshi was like an imposter."

He spoke as if organizing his thoughts in his mind, and we all listened to him quietly.

"I never said it out loud, but deep down I wished that the 'real' Nagoshi would come back," he continued. "Now, I know there's no such thing as the 'real' Nagoshi. Eventually, I realized that the only way to re-ignite her passion was through music. Words won't reach her. But music will." He smiled, looking both relieved and refreshed. "So, I'm gonna play with that goal in mind! And if that doesn't work, then I'll give up."

Misuzu sighed, her expression softer than usual. "All right. I get it." She nodded a few times, then directed a piercing gaze at him. "I understand how

you feel, but you know that you didn't really answer my question, right?"

"Huh? Oh... Yeah, I guess I didn't." His gaze darted around, and he laughed awkwardly. "I figured if I kept insisting on Nagoshi, the band wouldn't get anywhere, and there was no point in that. So I figured I'd have Yushima play the two songs we'd already chosen."

"I see. Then, what did you mean about reaching Risa with music?"

"Well..." Sousuke took a deep breath and then seemed to make up his mind. "I'm gonna play one more song alone. I'm hoping I can use it to reach Nagoshi, and maybe...we can have a jam session together."

Misuzu frowned. "What do you mean? You make it sound simple, but...do you really think you're that good?"

"Not yet, but I'm gonna practice like crazy. I'm gonna put everything I have into it." He spoke casually, but it was clear this was no joke or spur-of-the-moment idea.

Misuzu fell silent for a few moments, then sighed in disbelief. "Whatever. Do what you want." She fell quiet again, seemingly lost in thought. Eventually, she muttered, "Well, if you're serious about it, then I have something to give you." She rummaged through her bag and pulled out a bunch of papers from a folder. "I had a hunch something like this would happen. Glad I brought this with me," she said as she handed it to him.

He took the papers from her and stared at them. "What's all this?"

"Isn't it obvious? Sheet music."

"Well yeah, I can see that. But for what?" He looked confused.

Misuzu paused for a moment and considered her answer. Then, she slowly shook her head. "I won't tell you. But if you want to move Risa's heart, you should play this," she said firmly, looking at the sheet music in his hands.

He flipped through it, a serious expression on his face.

"It's really difficult music. I'm not kidding," Misuzu said.

"Yeah, I can tell."

“To be honest, it’ll be impossible for you to get it down perfectly, even if you practice every day until the festival.”

“...You might be right.” He nodded solemnly as he looked over the sheet music.

“If you try to play this, you might screw up on stage and embarrass yourself.”

“Yeah.”

“Still... I want you to play the whole thing through. Can you do that?” Misuzu said seriously.

Sousuke had a determined gleam in his eyes as he nodded. “I can.”

Misuzu sighed and put on a gentle smile. “Good. Give it a try, then.” She looked pleased.

“Uhh...” Yushima, who had been silent until now, timidly spoke up. “I don’t really get it... Am I supposed to be the opening act for this Nagoshi person?” Although I couldn’t see his expression, he sounded reluctant.

Misuzu burst out laughing. “Oh, don’t pout. You’re really good, too.”

“I don’t like the way you said that. Is Nagoshi really that talented?”

Now he sounded openly hostile, all over someone who wasn’t even here. Maybe it was his pride as a performer. As a newbie, I found it hard to understand.

Yushima sulked, and Misuzu laughed at him.

“She’s really good,” she said. “You’d never be able to match her, no matter how hard you tried.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. You’ll understand if you hear her play.”

Dissatisfied, Yushima bit his lower lip. He must have been a pretty competitive person.

“You’ll understand if you hear her play,” Misuzu repeated, leaning back in her chair. “It’d be great to hear her play again.”

Her voice was soft. I could tell that wish came from somewhere deep inside her.

After that, we quietly finished our drinks and went our separate ways.

The air conditioner rattled, vibrating slightly as it pushed out cold air. It was all I could hear with the windows shut, so I cracked them open just enough that the cold air wouldn't escape, letting in the sounds of the sports clubs practicing outside.

It had been a few days since summer break ended, and some of the students were still in vacation mode, groaning, "I wish we could have another month off!" and so on. But for me, it was somewhat reassuring to have school every day.

After classes, I would go straight to the literature club room. That daily routine had practically become muscle memory for me.

With the school festival only a month away, there was a sense of excitement in the air. It felt strange to hear everyone's animated voices in the hallways after school.

My class didn't have much to prepare. Aside from the students that had volunteered to design our decorations, no one had anything to do, so I was free to continue attending literature club as usual.

I opened up a paperback and realized it had been a while since I'd read a book. It was quite a revelation for me. Up until now, apart from school and daily tasks, all my time had been filled with reading. But lately, lots of different people had come into my life, and I'd begun to get interested in other things.

I'd been essentially dragged into the band, but I found improving my skills enjoyable, and it had felt incredibly rewarding to play together with the other members in the studio. If I hadn't been roped into joining the band, I never

would have known how fun it was to play an instrument. These days, I was feeling pretty fulfilled.

Soon, my mind drifted to the topic of Nagoshi. According to Sousuke and Misuzu, she'd been completely devoted to music back in junior high, to the exclusion of everything else.

Sousuke claimed she'd quit because of Yuugo Ichihara's arrest. He clearly cared a lot about her, and I could tell he hadn't brought it up lightly. Judging by Nagoshi's reaction, this Yuugo Ichihara person must have been very important to her.

But there was something I couldn't understand.

I closed the book in my hand and stroked its cover.

I tried to imagine an event significant enough to make me quit reading. I loved reading so much I felt the urge to open a book any time I had a free second. What could possibly make me want to give it all up and disavow that love as a lie?

What if my favorite author, Koujirou Aisaka, murdered someone? His writing had a light humor to it, but deep down, you could sense a rich philosophical core. I loved his work. But what if he killed someone and got arrested?

When I tried to imagine it... I felt a detached resignation. The only reaction I could muster was, "I suppose things like that happen sometimes." I admired him, but it wasn't as though I knew him personally. And besides, you can never fully know another person.

"Oh..."

At that point, I realized something.

I had never listened to Yuugo Ichihara's music before.

If his music had inspired Nagoshi and then plunged her into despair...then, maybe listening to some of it would be a good place to start.

I took out some earphones from my bag. I'd never really listened to music, so I never used to bring earphones to school...but ever since I started practicing on an electronic drum set, I'd begun carrying them everywhere.

I stared at the smartphone inside my bag.

“.....”

I debated whether I should take it out, but ultimately chose to plug in my headphones while leaving the phone itself inside. I didn't have Kaoru's courage, and I wasn't able to boldly break the school rules.

I opened a video site and typed in “Ichihara” into the search box. “Yuugo Ichihara” immediately popped up as a suggestion, making it clear how famous he was and how little I knew about the subject.

I tapped on the top video and listened to his performance.

...Soon, I'd completely lost track of time.

Yuugo Ichihara was an incredible performer. He played in an instrumental band without vocals. Occasionally, the guitarist would shout out something, but it seemed more like he was just caught up in the mood and couldn't help himself. Otherwise, there were no lyrics and no voice to shape the melody.

The guitar usually led the song, but sometimes the keyboard would take over, or the bass would go wild by itself. There was a strange heat to the performance. I didn't really listen to music that much, and when my mom watched music shows on TV it was always J-Pop, so an instrumental performance like this felt fresh and exciting.

Even through earphones, Yuugo Ichihara's bass was so powerful and full of passion that I could feel it resonating inside my body. When he wasn't the main focus of the music, he supported the other instruments, but he never stopped asserting his presence.

His playing is like the ocean, I thought. The ocean was always there, stormy and tumultuous at times, at others still and quiet, holding countless creatures within its depths.

His performance was passionate and all-embracing.....but something about it bothered me.

As heartfelt as the music was, it was also painful. I felt like I was being hit by a wave of indescribable emotions. It was as though energy was bursting forth from the music, moving me and making my chest constrict.

What is this feeling?

I'd started listening with the hope of understanding Nagoshi better, but before I knew it, I was watching one video after another, my body swaying to the music. The more I listened, the more my chest tightened. And yet, I wanted to keep going.

As I gave into that strange sensation and listened to all sorts of songs, I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder and jolted in my seat.

"Whoa!"

"You don't have to be so startled," Kaoru said, so surprised by my reaction that she jerked her hand away. She must've come in without me noticing. "I called out to you a bunch of times. Just how high do you have the volume turned up on that?"

"Sorry..." I'd gotten so absorbed in the performance that I kept turning up the volume. But if I hadn't heard the door close, I must have turned it up way too high.

"It's not like you to have your phone out at school, Yuzu."

"Yeah, sorry..."

"I'm not trying to scold you," she laughed, then leaned over and narrowed her eyes at the smartphone inside my bag. She was reading the title of the video. "Oh, Stray Fish. They're amazing, huh?"

Kaoru nodded and slipped past me, plopping down on the sofa like always.

Stray Fish was Yuugo Ichihara's band. I was surprised Kaoru was familiar with it.

"Oh, you know them?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. They're famous. Didn't you know that?"

"I didn't know they existed until Sousuke told me about Yuugo Ichihara."

“Oh yeah, you don’t watch TV, do you?”

“Not really.”

“I guess that makes sense, then.” Kaoru dropped her bag onto the sofa and looked at me. “It’s a shame they broke up, though. They were all incredible musicians.”

“...Yeah.”

“Yuugo Ichihara killed Ecchan—Oh, I mean Etsuko Sajima—and that was it. I think it happened when I was in junior high.”

“Who’s Etsuko Saijma?”

“Huh? Weren’t you just watching their videos?” Kaoru frowned skeptically. “She was Stray Fish’s drummer.”

“Oh, uh...” I played the video again, not bothering to put in my earphones.

I could see a cheerful-looking woman playing the drums. She had on a black tank top and seemed to be really enjoying herself.

Now that I’d started playing the drums, I could tell how amazing her technique was. She swung the drumsticks lightly, but her sound was powerful. She wasn’t relying on brute force either—she had a lively, smooth sound. It seemed to roll and bounce, like a child’s laugh.

She’s...dead? Even though I’d never met her, I felt an indescribable feeling of loss. She looked so happy in the video.

“It was all over the news when it happened. They were dating, so there were all sorts of speculations being thrown around. It was pretty awful,” Kaoru said, laughing bitterly. “I can remember it now, but if you hadn’t been watching that video, I never would have thought about it. It’s kind of sad, forgetting a band you used to listen to, huh?” There was a hint of sorrow in her voice.

Stray Fish must have been a pretty big deal for people who loved music. Just watching a few videos made that clear to me. I’d never listened to them before, and their music had still managed to lift my spirits. I could only imagine what it must have been like for those following them in real time and going to all their concerts back in the day.

But then, the drummer, Sajima, was murdered and Ichihara was arrested. Two core members were gone, and the band ceased to exist.

Their fans must have felt an incredible sense of loss. Even I could understand that now. The truth felt so heavy, but it also didn't feel real, which only made it more terrifying.

"I can't believe you're so into music now you're breaking school rules just to listen to it," Kaoru teased. "Seems like you're enjoying our band more than you expected." She was clearly making fun of me, but I couldn't bring myself to joke back. After all, she was completely right.

"Well...it's fun to do something new with people you like. Don't you think?"

Kaoru fiddled with her hair bashfully. "Yeah, I guess so." She nodded vaguely and then fell silent.

Despite the noise of the sports clubs drifting in from outside, the club room felt unusually quiet. Maybe it was because I'd been listening to all that intense music just now.

"By the way," Kaoru said, as if she'd just thought of it. "Is Yushima going to play bass for us after all?"

"Yeah, he'll be playing during the festival."

"Hm." Kaoru made a noise I couldn't quite decipher and then nodded. "So then, Nagoshi won't be playing?"

I didn't know how to answer that. The other members of the band didn't know that Sousuke would be playing a third song and asking Nagoshi to join him on stage.

"...I don't know."

That was the only answer I could give her. I didn't know for sure if Sousuke's plan would work, so I wasn't technically lying.

"I see. That's too bad," she said. Her answer surprised me. I hadn't realized that Kaoru wanted Nagoshi to play, too.

"Did you want her to?" I asked.

Kaoru tilted her head, an impassive expression on her face. “I don’t know that I *wanted* her to, but... Hmmm... I guess I thought her real feelings might come out through her music...” She trailed off into a murmur. “I was kinda looking forward to it.”

My gaze dropped to my phone. I’d forgotten to stop the video and Stray Fish was still performing.

I definitely got the feeling Yuugo Ichihara was expressing various emotions through his music. Sometimes they seemed scattered and turbulent. Other times he played quietly, like he was locking his feelings up inside.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in hearing Nagoshi play. If, like Kaoru said, she expressed her emotions through music instead of words...what would her bass say to us?

I was sure that was what Sousuke wanted to hear.

The school festival was now only three days away.

It felt like summer break had just ended. But as I attended school, went to the club room and filled my spare time with drum practice, the days had passed by in the blink of an eye.

Every Saturday, the whole band would meet up and practice in the studio. We split the fee six ways along with Misuzu, making it pretty affordable.

Since I didn't have a part-time job, I had to ask my mom for money. But once I told her it was for band practice to perform at the school festival, she was more than happy to add a little more to my allowance.

We improved little by little, week by week. Everyone practiced on their own, and we confirmed each other's progress each Saturday. Over time, we began to sound pretty good.

Last week had been our final group practice session. The festival was this weekend, with the after-party on Sunday. Until then, we would be practicing individually.

As preparations for our performance wound down, our focus shifted to our class projects.

"Someone get extra brushes from the event committee! We need two more!"

"And grab a hammer while you're at it! Just one is fine!"

Inside our classroom, the team assigned to put together the decorations had taken charge. The plan was to have an area where visitors could watch the *takoyaki* being made and another area for dining. The cooking area was being

decorated to look like a real *takoyaki* stand. The girls had come up with elaborate designs that the boys followed, using wood to build the structure.

I didn't have the skills to do anything too complicated, so I was put in charge of painting the signs.

Students on sports teams who couldn't afford to skip practice were allowed to continue attending their clubs. But others, like Kaoru and me, who would only be sitting around and reading if we went to our club room, were heavily involved in decorating the classroom.

Time flew by as we continued preparing for the festival. Before we knew it, the last bell had rung, and it was time to leave school. It was the first time I'd stayed until the final bell for something other than literature club, and as I changed into my outdoor shoes at the school's entrance, a strange feeling came over me.

Kaoru and I were walking toward the gate, when we heard light footsteps approaching from behind.

"Yuzuru! Kaoru!"

We turned around and saw Ai running toward us.

"Were you two preparing for the festival?" she asked.

"Yeah. You, too?"

"Yep! Decorating the classroom is more work than I thought! It feels like we might not finish until the day before the festival."

"Ha-ha. Same here."

"There's so much to do!" It sounded like she was enjoying herself. "I can't wait for the festival and our performance at the after-party!" she said excitedly, and I nodded.

"Ai, there's something on your uniform." Kaoru had been walking slightly behind us and she pinched something off Ai's shirt, then held it up to examine it. "Oh, it's masking tape."

"Heh-heh." Ai blushed slightly. "I used a lot of that stuff today. Some must've gotten stuck to me. Thanks!"

“But how’d it get on your back?” Kaoru asked.

Ai thought for a moment, then clapped her hands. “Oh! It must’ve been when I lay on the floor during break!”

“Ai, you’ve gotta stop doing that.”

I recalled the first time I’d seen Ai after she moved back. She’d been lying on the ground out on the school’s soccer field.

Kaoru and I looked at her in disbelief, but Ai just smiled innocently.

We walked to the station together, discussing the festival along the way. Once there, I got on a train going in the opposite direction from my house. I was in the mood to practice the drums. I was still amped up from the excitement of preparing for the school festival, and I didn’t feel like going straight home.

I texted my mom to let her know, then continued on my way to Nagoshi’s house. I’d sent her a message in advance. Normally, I’d see the message marked as read with no reply, but she hadn’t read it that day. I figured she was busy.

I got off at the station nearest her house and checked my phone again, but she still hadn’t read my message. I wondered if she was asleep.

It was a ten minute walk from the station to her house. There were a lot of buildings near the station, but they grew fewer and further apart the farther I walked. After about five minutes, I was surrounded by rice fields.

There weren’t many streetlights and the road at dusk was a bit scary. But since I’d been making this trip for several months now, I’d grown used to walking through the quiet darkness.

At first, I felt bad about visiting so much, but Nagoshi always said it was okay, so eventually I stopped worrying about it.

I was concerned that her parents might be less understanding and asked her about it, but she simply said, “My parents don’t live here,” like it was nothing and smiled. “So stop worrying about it, okay?”

I felt like I’d learned a lot about other people’s family situations in the past few months. Kaoru lived with her mom and Ai lived with her dad. And apparently, Nagoshi lived by herself.

My dad was always away on business, and I basically lived alone with my mom, but other than that my situation was pretty normal. I could see either of my parents whenever I wanted, and I'd never really considered how many people couldn't say the same.

Everyone had their own circumstances in life. But thinking about walking down this dark road every day back to an empty house made me a little sad.

After a few more minutes, Nagoshi's house came into view across the rice fields. I sighed in relief when I saw the lights on. I hadn't wanted to wake her up with the sound of the garage shutter if she was asleep.

But as I got closer to the house, something felt different. I could see that the shutter was already half-open, and a light was on inside.

"Maybe she's in the garage?" I wondered aloud.

I jogged over to her house, then hesitated in front of the garage and peered inside.

I saw Nagoshi sitting on the chair in front of the electronic drum set, lost in thought. She noticed me right away. Startled, she said, "Oh! It's unusual for you to come this late on a school night."

"Sorry. I tried to contact you..."

"Ah, I left my phone in my room."

I nodded vaguely. She must've been in the garage for some time. I glanced around, but I didn't see any drumsticks. Was she just sitting there without playing?

She got up and closed the shutter with a clatter.

"Um, did something happen?" I asked.

"Huh? What do you mean?" She'd pasted on that smile of hers again.

"It's unusual for you to be alone out here. And I've never seen you sitting at the drums before."

She laughed and said, "You're so observant." Then, she walked over to the counter and sat down on her usual barstool. "Today's the anniversary of her

death.”

“What...?” I expected her to brush off my question like she always did, so her straightforward answer surprised me. And on top of that, it was pretty heavy. I didn’t ask who she was talking about. Somehow, I just knew—it had to be the woman she’d spoken about, the one who used to use the drum set.

“The woman you mentioned before...she passed away?” I asked.

Nagoshi chuckled softly. “You don’t have to look so sad. You didn’t know her.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Forget it. You came at just the right time. Why don’t you play a little?” She gestured toward the drums. “I can only sit and reminisce. So how about you play instead? I’m sure she’d like that.”

“Huh? Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. In fact, it might be just the thing.”

I hesitantly took off my bag and got out my drumsticks. She plugged in the drum set for me and switched on the console. Then, she turned on the speaker.

“It’s all ready for you.” She smiled faintly and moved over to the sofa, quietly sitting down.

Nervously, I began to play. I was practicing the first song we were going to perform at the festival. It was a ballad, so the tempo was slow. Even without the other instruments, I tried to adjust my playing to create a mellow atmosphere. I wasn’t confident in my technique yet, so being able to focus on that signified a lot of progress.

I was playing the same drums as a woman Nagoshi had loved like an older sister, on the anniversary of her death.

Something warm bubbled up in my chest, but at the same time, I felt a strange sense of calm, like a gentle breeze. I wondered if my drumming would be a fitting tribute for the woman who’d passed away.

I glanced over at Nagoshi and met her gaze. She seemed surprised, her mouth slightly open as she stared back at me.

Almost as quickly, I had to turn back to focus on my hands. But Nagoshi's expression was burned into my mind. I desperately continued to hit the drums. The song was less than four minutes long, but it felt like I'd been playing for ages.

Once it was over and I put down my drumsticks, Nagoshi clapped enthusiastically.

"You've really gotten better, Asada!" she said with emotion. "At first, you seemed overwhelmed just hitting the drums, but now you're able to focus on the mood of the song." Her gaze wavered a bit, then she stared straight at me. "What were you thinking about while you were playing?"

Recently, I'd noticed that when Nagoshi asked a question, it was because she really wanted to know the answer.

I wasn't sure what I'd been thinking over the course of the song's four minutes, but I had a feeling she was referring to a specific moment.

"I was hoping my drumming would be a fitting tribute for the woman who passed away," I replied.

She sucked in a breath, then smiled. "...Oh." She nodded a few times like she understood, then leaned her head back against the sofa. "You really do have a way with words. I'm sure Etsuko would be happy."

Etsuko...

I'd heard that name somewhere before. Suddenly, it struck me. I felt like I'd been hit by lightning.

"Etsuko... Was that her name?" I asked, my voice trembling. "The person who used to play these drums."

"Ah." Nagoshi hesitated and looked away.

She must have let down her guard and said the name by accident. But now that I'd heard it, I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"Was her name... Etsuko Sajima?"

Nagoshi looked around anxiously. That was all the answer I needed.

“How do you know that name?” she asked.

“Sousuke...told me your music reminded him of Yuugo Ichihara’s. I ended up watching some videos of Stray Fish and...”

“Oh...” She closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. Then, she slowly nodded. “Yeah.”

“I see...”

All the strength drained from my body. My drumsticks slipped out of my hands and fell to the floor with a clatter.

Yuugo Ichihara had strangled Etsuko Sajima to death. And Nagoshi said the person who had played these drums...had been her father’s girlfriend. I’d heard from Kaoru that Yuugo Ichihara and Etsuko Sajima were dating.

When the puzzle pieces came together, the truth chilled me to the bone.

“.....He was your father, wasn’t he?” I asked.

She didn’t respond, but her silence was enough.

After a little while, she said, “I really believed in my father’s music, you know? I thought it could change the world. Etsuko always seemed like she was having fun, and I thought my father’s music made her happy. I really thought that. But...in the end, my dad changed my world in ways that had nothing to do with music.”

As I listened to her speak, my eyes blurred with tears.

I’d been filled with doubt this whole time. Was the arrest of a musician you revered really enough to invalidate everything you loved about music?

But now I understood. Yuugo Ichihara wasn’t just a musician Nagoshi had admired. He was her father—someone she deeply respected, both as a human being and as a musician. And he had killed another person she cherished and ended up in prison.

Now that I’d listened to Stray Fish’s music, I could understand Nagoshi a lot better. She’d lived surrounded by that wonderful music. She must have really respected the people who made it.

Then one day, that music vanished. Her beloved father went to prison. A person she cherished vanished from the world forever... And all she had left was despair.

“This garage has been empty ever since. I used to only open it on the anniversary of Etsuko’s death, when I’d just sit on the chair and...think about what I could’ve done.” She spoke calmly, like it was all over and done with. “So I’m glad you came and played the drums. I’m sure you made Etsuko happy, too.”

“But..... I.....”

“Hey, why are you crying?”

“Because...!”

“You’re so hopeless.” Nagoshi walked over to me and ruffled my hair with both hands. “Come on, why don’t you play some more? You guys are doing two songs, right? Misuzu told me. Let’s hear the other one.”

“I... I can’t.”

“Sure you can. Here.” She picked up the drumsticks that had fallen on the floor and shoved them into my hands. “If you care enough to cry, play for me instead.”

“.....”

I wiped away my tears with the sleeve of my school uniform. And then, I began to play the drums. Tears blurred my vision, and it was hard to see. But I kept going.

Nagoshi returned to the sofa and sunk deep into the cushions. She put an elbow on the armrest and crossed one leg over the other, swinging it in time to the rhythm.

My heart was a total mess.

Everything I’d ever said to her now felt cheap and superficial.

She’d lost her father, a woman she admired, and her music. I now realized how cruel it had been of me to ask her to play again.

But as I watched her swaying to the rhythm, a satisfied look on her face, I couldn't shake the feeling that she still loved music.

Everyone seemed to be struggling with something they couldn't do anything about.

Nagoshi didn't know how to deal with the love she still had for music, or how to wipe away her lingering despair.

Sousuke yearned to hear Nagoshi's true feelings, and he knew music was the only way for her to express them. That she still refused to pick up the bass tore him up inside.

If Nagoshi stayed away from music forever, would she eventually be able to leave her anguish behind? Was that the best choice for her own happiness?

Like Sousuke had said...it seemed to me that she still had a deep attachment to music, and lingering regrets. Would denying that and pushing it away truly make her happy?

I didn't know. I didn't know anything.

No matter how much I thought about it and turned over the words in my mind, I couldn't come up with any answers. So I just hit the drums with everything I had.

Nagoshi kept listening the whole time I played, seeming to enjoy it.



[INTERLUDE 3]

Confusion.

Sadness.

Disappointment.

Anger.

Those were the things I felt when I learned Etsuko had been murdered by my father...by Yuugo Ichihara. I kept cycling through each emotion at a dizzying pace.

He killed Etsuko?! But why? How could this have happened?

Just the other day, she was sitting and laughing with me in the garage. Now, I would never see her again. How?

Wasn't the point of music to save people? So why would he kill someone?

My thoughts kept circling back to the same place. I couldn't even cry. It was like my mind couldn't catch up with reality.

On the news, they announced that Dad had confessed, saying, "We were arguing about the band's future, and it escalated to the point where I strangled her."

I had seen Etsuko and Dad arguing a lot lately. But...he'd *killed* her? They were supposed to love each other!

For a long time, I couldn't accept reality. I skipped school and lay in bed. I didn't touch my bass.

At some point, a visitation date was set, and I went to the jail with Yasu.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay," he said, patting my back.

I knew he was just trying to be nice, but none of this seemed “okay.” And by the time I accepted reality, my heart felt like it had turned to ice.

“If you live your life, one day it’ll become music.”

Those words had been like a treasure I’d received from my father, but now they rang hollow in my mind. He’d looked so pleased with himself when he said it... But then, he’d stolen Etsuko’s music and her life away from her.

After we entered the visitation room, a guard escorted my father inside. His eyes were dark and his cheeks sunken. He looked pathetic.

“Risa,” he said as soon as he sat down. “.....I’m sorry.”

I felt something explode inside my cold heart.

“What’s the point in apologizing to me?!” I shouted. I couldn’t stop myself.

Dad gritted his teeth, his mouth a straight line.

“Why did you kill her?” I asked. “She loved music so much...and she loved you!”

“I didn’t mean to kill her,” he said in a low voice. But he sounded like a child making excuses, and I couldn’t contain my anger.

“What did you think would happen if you strangled her?!”

“We were having a life-or-death argument.”

“What?!”

I couldn’t understand what he was saying. A life-or-death argument? Had Etsuko felt the same way? It would have been one thing if they were pointing knives at each other or something, but that wasn’t the case. Dad had *killed* Etsuko.

“She told me...to ignore the sponsors and make music the way I wanted to. Then, she started insulting my music, saying that lately it was painful to listen to. So...”

“So what? So you killed her? You’ve gotta be kidding me! She was worried about you!”

“I never asked her to worry about me! We’re professionals now! I had to think

about making our music better!”

“So because of that, you...” The words “*killed Etsuko?*” stuck in my throat, unable to come out.

I had thought he was an adult worthy of my respect. But looking back on it now, I was only listening to my father’s music. I admired the way he played the bass, so I started playing, too. I’d been following in his footsteps ever since. He was a man of few words, who communicated his feelings through his music.

But I’d never dreamed he was lacking in such basic, common sense.

“Etsuko wanted to be with you, Dad! She cared about more than just your music. She cared about you as a person, and she was worried about you!” I said desperately, but my father just stared at me impassively.

Then, he said quietly, “Someone like me...can only live for music.”

It sounded like he was cutting himself off from everything else.

I’d been trying to convey Etsuko’s feelings to him, to knock some sense into him, to make him remember how to be a human. But now, I realized that was pointless.

“Ha-ha.” A dry laugh escaped my lips. “Yeah. Right. You can only live for music, huh?Sounds real cool.” I glared at him as I spoke. “In that case, you should’ve died, too.” I heard Yasu gasp beside me. “Because your music is already dead.”

“Risa, I...,” Dad began.

“I don’t want to hear anymore!” I yelled, slamming my hands against the acrylic panel separating us. The guard’s gaze flickered toward me. “I don’t believe in you or your music anymore!”

With that, I stormed out of the room.

“Ah! Risa?!” I heard Yasu calling me from behind, but I didn’t stop. I ran and ran until I was outside the building. It wasn’t very far at all, but I was panting, and my heart was pounding. “*Huff... huff...*” My legs gave out, and I collapsed onto the ground. “Haah, haah... Waaah!”

Tears spilled out from my eyes, and my vision blurred. I couldn’t see anything.

You should've died, too.

I thought about what I'd said to him. That wasn't what I'd wanted to say. But I couldn't stop myself.

I still couldn't accept that a person I loved had taken the life of someone so important to me. I'd thought the two of them would continue making music together, side by side, forever. Thinking about that had made me so happy.

Surely, they hadn't worked so hard to have everything end like this?

My beloved father, my precious Etsuko, and their music...all vanished in an instant.

My body shook with sobs as I doubled over in front of the jail and cried.

"Risa!" Yasu came rushing over to me. "It's okay. Calm down."

"It's not okay..."

"It's okay."

"It's not okay!" I yelled. "Everything... Everything's gone!"

"Oh, Risa..." Yasu rubbed my back as I cried.

My core felt frozen, and I couldn't stop myself from shivering. I sobbed pathetically. All I could do was cry.

My mom left us right after she gave birth to me. I heard she was a broke, struggling musician, and she ran. So when Dad ended up in prison, I was left all alone.

For a while, I was taken in by relatives I'd never met before. I could tell I wasn't wanted there, and I had no intention of becoming a burden. So I told them I wanted to live alone in Dad's house, and they immediately gave me permission.

The family had seemed well off, and in the end they said, "We'll give you enough money for your living expenses. Just don't cause any trouble," and sent me on my way.

From then on, they deposited enough money in my bank account each month for me to live comfortably.

I didn't feel lonely. Once I accepted that I'd lost everything, it was easier to live alone than with someone who pitied me.

I completely avoided the garage. Since my father was arrested, I'd lost the desire to play music.

In addition, graffiti appeared on the garage shutter every day. Words like "Murderer," "Disappear," and "Die" were spray-painted over and over, no matter how many times I cleaned them. Eventually, it was too much of a hassle, so I just left it.

I started to get threatening letters in the mail. To be honest, they were more like childish insults than threats. I felt nothing as I trashed them.

Honestly, I didn't care. It didn't seem like I was in danger, and even if I had been, I was so deep in despair at the time, I probably wouldn't have even felt scared.

One day as I was robotically dealing with yet another hate letter, I opened a neatly addressed envelope and reached in to touch the paper.

"Ow!"

There was a razor inside. It sliced my finger open, and blood dripped out. As I gazed at the crimson liquid dripping from my fingertip, I thought, *It was all a lie.*

Yuugo Ichihara's music, which once seemed so great, was now the target of petty harassment. That would be his legacy.

"...Ha-ha."

I'd believed in it once. I'd thought his music would travel throughout the world, making it a better place. I'd convinced myself that was why he was making music.

Seeing what had become of it now made me laugh.

I peeled the razor off the paper inside the envelope, and then I cut my arm with it.

More blood gushed out than when I'd cut my finger, and it hurt. Even after the bleeding stopped, it still stung. I gazed at the cut, and for some reason, I felt relieved.

At least, this pain felt real.

After that, I gave up everything related to the bass and quit music altogether.

Life after that was flat. Boring. Almost like a chore.

I went to school every day, attended classes, and aimlessly wandered around when they were over.

I got addicted to the pain of cutting and spent some of the money in my account on piercings. I wanted to scream in agony when I got my industrial piercing, but the long-term pain as my body got used to it was a perfect distraction. Pain made me appreciate the small things in life a little more than usual.

I strove to live self-indulgently. I spent my money and my free time however I wanted, and didn't worry too much about exams. I still had to get into a decent school to keep up my relative's reputation, though. I didn't want to cause trouble, after all.

In high school, I became the manager of the soccer club as another way to kill time.

I guess you could say I was pretending. Even though my heart was empty now, I still had to live my life. So I lived pretending to be human. I thought I could keep going if I just kept up the deception.

But everyone kept knocking against my heart. Even when I said, "It's empty in there," they shook their heads and insisted, "No, you're hiding your true feelings inside."

It scared me.

I couldn't risk having that part of myself exposed. The thought of facing music again after I'd turned my back on it filled me with fear.

When I saw how earnest Andou's eyes were when he asked me to play, I was terrified.

I wondered how my music had made such an impression on him. I'd never thought that hard about playing the bass, it had just been part of my life. That was all there was to it.

I'd innocently worshipped Yuugo Ichihara and played the bass in an attempt to chase after him. And ultimately, the music I'd worshipped had plunged me into despair.

When people pinned expectations and dreams on you, you could betray them, and ruin their lives. I knew that from experience.

So I didn't want anyone to believe in me.

My spirits lifted a little when I heard Asada playing drums in the garage. The sound was desperate, sincere...and cheerful. Of course, he was nowhere near Etsuko's skill level, but somehow he reminded me of her.

I pretended not to care, but then I got greedy and tried to get closer to the sound. And little by little, he extracted the truth from me.

My actions were inconsistent.

I'd shut out my own heart, so I didn't understand what I really wanted. Even though I said I didn't want to, I was getting closer to music again.

Soon it would be time for the school festival. How would I feel when I saw them perform on stage at the after-party?

The day of the school festival had finally arrived. It was my first such event since starting high school, and I was a bit overwhelmed by just how much was going on.

Way more people than I'd imagined were stuffed into the school, and our class's stand received a ton of customers.

"Number fourteen, your order is ready!"

We'd made numbered tickets in advance and handed them to customers when they ordered. So far, the *takoyaki* stand was doing well.

As expected, it was really crowded during lunchtime. But then the other classes, whose products required more expensive ingredients, began to close one after the other, sending all the afternoon guests straight to us. In the end, we were still operating at full capacity until after 3 PM.

I was part of the waitstaff. We were supposed to work in shifts, but all that fell apart in the face of the crowd, and I ended up working all day until we finally ran out of flour.

Despite all that, I enjoyed myself. It was pretty fun to run around the classroom with everyone else amid the exciting atmosphere of the festival. We closed up shop on the first day, pleased with our success.

"All right! A big thank you to everyone for working straight through the day! Now hurry up and go visit the other classes!"

The festival was open until 5 PM. Most of the food and drink stands had closed, but there was still time to go see plays and other exhibitions. For the

former, final performances were about to start, so I'd have to hurry.

I looked around the classroom and saw that Sousuke and Kaoru had already headed out with other friends. In that case, I decided to go straight to the place I wanted to visit the most.

I'd hoped to see a few plays, but it was already too late for that today. Since I'd already put in my hours as waitstaff, all I had to do tomorrow was early morning prep. I could go see the plays after that.

I walked out into the hallway and looked at the other first-years' offerings.

All the classes in my year had ended up doing food stands. One did *yakisoba*, and the other ramen. Both had already run out of ingredients and closed. The only people still around were tired students resting in their classrooms and their non-student friends visiting them.

"Takoyaki, yakisoba, and ramen, huh?"

I couldn't help but laugh when I saw the signs all lined up. It was exactly what Ai, Sousuke, and Kaoru had eaten at the cabana at the start of summer vacation. As I walked down the hall, I found myself wishing that there had been a fried rice stand, too.

Soon, I reached the farthest classroom and peeked in. There were still people inside.

This was Ai's classroom. Her class was running a "bar." They weren't serving alcohol, of course. But the girls in the class, most of whom belonged to the cooking club, were making non-alcoholic cocktails for the guests.

It would have been tough for everyone in the class to memorize the recipes and make them perfectly, so the bartender roles were voluntary. Twelve people signed up in all, six for day one and six for day two. The bartenders worked tirelessly until the shop closed on their designated day, so they had the other one completely off.

Ai had told me all this beforehand.

I stood in the doorway and looked around the classroom.

"What do you need, sir?"

“Whoa!”

I suddenly heard a familiar voice whispering in my ear, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Everyone in the classroom looked up at me, and I felt my face flush.

I turned around, flustered, and saw Ai standing there, looking totally different from usual.

She wore our school uniform’s collared shirt adorned with a bow tie. In addition, she wore a black vest, slacks, and a sommelier’s apron. She looked like a real bartender, and it suited her so well that I was rendered speechless.

Her laughter was the only thing familiar about her.

“Ha-ha. I saw you standing there as I came back from the bathroom and couldn’t resist surprising you!”

“I can’t believe you sometimes...”

“Were you looking for me?”

“Of course. You told me to visit, remember?”

She laughed again and slipped past me into the classroom, still smiling. “There’s a seat right over there. Go ahead, sir.” She glanced at me, and I felt myself blushing again. Even the way she was walking was different from usual. Normally, she flounced about in her skirt, but since she was wearing pants, she stood up straighter and swayed her hips to the side as she walked. She was probably putting on an act as part of her character, but I was overwhelmed by how much she looked the part.

“This way, please,” she said.

“Yes, of course!”

When I responded extra politely, Ai giggled and reverted to her usual self for a moment, then quickly resumed her cool expression.

“This is our menu. My apologies, but the Scarlet Passion and Yellow Moon are all sold out for the day, so you’ll have to choose from the other two. Whichever you pick, I’ll pour my whole heart into making it!” She bowed, placing her hand over her chest.

I bowed slightly as my heart began to race. I looked at the menu and saw that the two remaining drinks were called Midnight Green and Marine Blue.

“Marine Blue, please,” I said quickly.

I thought that would be the best one for Ai to make for me, since she had the character for “blue” in her name.

It seemed she’d expected me to choose that one, and her eyes narrowed slightly as she smiled. “Coming right up.” She bowed again.

She scooped three ice cubes into a plastic cup, tilted it, and poured some Sprite inside, making sure the liquid didn’t touch the ice directly.

As I watched her, I remembered what she’d said on the way home the other day.

“Even though we’re trying to act cool and calling it a bar, we don’t have any shakers or any of the other tools, so we’re basically just pouring and mixing. That’s why it’s really important that we act like bartenders to make it convincing!”

I hadn’t understood what she meant at the time, but now that I saw her in action, it clicked.

She poured the soda into the cup as if she were a skilled bartender, then lifted it up to my eye level and drizzled blue syrup over the liquid. It spread inside the cup like smoke, creating a mysterious pattern.

She let me watch this process for a few moments, then stirred the drink several times. The syrup must have been heavier than the soda, because it gradually accumulated at the bottom of the cup, creating a gradient effect.

“This is Marine Blue, a taste of the ocean’s vastness,” Ai said in an unusually gentle and elegant voice as she placed the glass in front of me. “Please enjoy.”

“Th-thank you very much.” Still nervous, I bowed awkwardly.

She smiled. “If you don’t mind, would you take a sip and tell me what you think?”

“Huh...?”

The classroom was divided into two areas: six “counters”—a fancy way to say two desks pushed together—where bartenders served the drinks one-on-one, and a section consisting of a large table with chairs placed around it. After the bartender gave you your drink, you could either drink it at the table or take your cup with you while you visited other classrooms.

“But...” I had intended to move over to the table, so I glanced back at her, confused.

“It’s okay, there’s no line now,” she whispered. I looked around again and saw that only three of the six counters, including mine, had customers. It seemed the rush had died down.

I felt some of my tension dissipate, probably because Ai had spoken to me in her usual voice.

“All right, then...”

Ai resumed her mature expression and said, “Yes, please enjoy.”

I slowly brought the cup to my lips and took a sip of the mocktail she’d made.

“...Ah-ha-ha.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

Ai smiled slightly; she must have understood my reaction. Her eyes crinkled, and I could tell she was holding back laughter.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“It just tastes like Sprite,” I said.

“Ha-ha-ha!” She couldn’t take it anymore and burst out laughing, completely back to her usual self. After she’d gotten the laughter out of her system, she nodded. “That’s right. I just added a little syrup to it.”

“But the experience felt pretty authentic.”

“Right?” She laughed childishly.

My next words came out before I could think.

“...You were so cool, my heart skipped a beat,” I said, and she stared at me, her eyes wide.

The classroom was dimly lit to set the atmosphere, but I could see a shy smile

spreading across her face.

“Heh-heh, really? ...I’m glad.” She leaned in and whispered in my ear. “Tomorrow, let’s walk around together.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I wanna watch some plays.”

“That sounds great! I’d love to do that, too!”

After we chatted for a bit, I walked around the school with my cocktail, which was just blue Sprite.

The hallways were filled with excited students and their guests. But at the same time, there was a hint of relaxation in the air, like everyone was winding down as the first day came to a close.

We’d spent more than a month preparing for the festival, and just like that, it was already halfway over.

Surely, tomorrow would pass just as quickly, followed by the after-party. And then, we’d go back to our regular lives, attending school just as before.

The summer break I’d spent immersed in band practice already felt like a distant memory. What would be left after tomorrow’s after-party was done?

I hoped that, at the very least, all of us would have some great memories to cherish.

As I browsed the other stands, the first day of the festival came to an end.

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The second day felt even livelier than the first.

“There are so many guests!” By my side, Ai looked around, beside herself with excitement.

I had finished setting up the *takoyaki* stand, and I was free to spend the rest of my time with Ai. And since she’d worked all day yesterday as a bartender, she had the entire day off as well.

Around this time the previous day, I’d been busy serving customers, but

whenever I'd dashed out to use the toilet, I'd been shocked by how many people were in the halls. Today, there were even more. The *takoyaki* stand was probably swamped with customers.

"What's wrong, Yuzuru?" Ai peered at me, noticing the concern on my face.

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm fine. Let's head to the gym."

I suggested a change of scenery to clear my mind. There was no point in worrying about my classmates. The space inside each classroom was limited, and we had just the right number of staff. If I tried to help, it'd only add to the chaos.

Besides, I wanted to see all the things I'd missed the day before.

"I'm pretty excited!" I said.

I knew I'd have a good day with Ai by my side.

She smiled brightly. "Me too! I'm so happy I get to walk around with you!"

Ai's class and mine left at different times the day before, so I hadn't been able to walk home with her. The last time we'd met, she'd been dressed as a bartender, and seeing her now in her usual uniform with her usual smile was oddly reassuring.

We walked side by side toward the gym.

The plays were all organized by third-years. At our school, it was tradition for all the students in that year to perform in the gym for the school festival. There were four classes in total, and they would each perform one play per day. Then, after the performances, the class with the most votes for Best Play would receive an award.

We got to the gym early and took seats near the front. The rows of chairs were densely packed together.

"Hey, Ai...", I began.

"You wanna see all four plays, right?" she guessed. "It's okay. So do I."

"Really? There's not anything else you want to look at?" I asked, but she shook her head.

“I’ll have fun no matter what. Plus...” Ai casually bumped her shoulder up against mine. “I just wanna be with you.”

“...Okay.” I blushed and nodded.

With everything that had happened at the end of the rainy season, Kaoru had grown more aggressive in her affections. I’d been too distracted by that to notice at first, but little by little, Ai was changing, too. Before, being with me was just another thing she did, but now, it was something special in her eyes.

Whether that was good or bad, I couldn’t say. But it made my heart race.

Even after she moved her shoulder away from mine, my skin continued to feel warm, like we were still touching.

A voice echoed through the gym, announcing the start of Class 3-1’s performance. As the play began, the noise around us vanished, replaced by a unique sense of anticipation.

This play was a historical drama.

A deep voice narrated the story as actors in traditional clothing appeared one by one. The performance had the unmistakable ambiance of a high school play. Some of the actors were noticeably unskilled and read their lines without any hint of emotion. Even so, they tended to be cast in comedic roles, which lent their stiff delivery an air of humor and added to the performance’s charm.

The play had a warm, amusing quality to it that was different from movies or professional productions. I soon lost myself in the story.

During the funny scenes, I heard Ai giggle beside me, and during the emotional ones, she would sniffle. Watching the same thing with her and sharing in her excitement and joy made me really happy.

In the end, Ai and I managed to sit through all four plays in one go. By the time the last performance finished, it was past 3 PM, the same time I’d finished working the day before.

We filled out our votes and slipped them into the ballot box.

“Which one did you vote for?” she asked.

“That’s a secret,” I said.

“Huh?! Why?”

“Don’t you think it’s more fun that way?”

“Hmm,” she hummed thoughtfully, apparently unconvinced.

Once we returned to the main school building, she gasped and reached into her pocket, pulling out her phone. Normally, we weren’t supposed to have them out, but during the festival they were allowed as a means of communication with guests from outside the school. I was sure the teachers would still confiscate them if they caught us playing games or something, though.

She stared at the screen and blurted out “Oh no...”

It seemed she’d gotten a message from someone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sounds like one of the students bartending today isn’t feeling well and needs someone to fill in...” Ai’s gaze wandered.

I understood how she felt. I’d probably feel the same way in her shoes.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said.

She wavered. “I’m sorry. I invited you and...”

“It’s okay. Just watching the plays together was a lot of fun.”

“I had fun, too.” She smiled happily and squeezed my hand. “Well, see you at the after-party!”

“Yeah.”

She smiled again and hurried off to her classroom.

The mention of the after-party got me feeling kind of nervous. It would begin in just a few hours. I was anxious about how well our band would do and worried about what would happen with Sousuke and Nagoshi.

But there was no point in freaking out about it now.

“I guess I should head back, too,” I muttered and made my way to the classroom.

If things went the same as yesterday, the *takoyaki* stand would be out of ingredients and about to close up.

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“Did you just get back? We’re already done,” Kaoru said grumpily.

She sat in one of the chairs in the dining area. There was a handwritten sign on the door that read, SOLD OUT! The other students who had spent the day working were all sitting down, looking exhausted.

“Was it busy?” I asked.

“Yeah. It went by in a flash, though.”

Kaoru had been one of the cooks that day, so she was wearing a *happi* coat like at a real festival. It didn’t really suit her, which amused me, but I kept that thought to myself. She’d probably yell at me if I said something.

“How about you, Yuzu? Did you have fun today?”

“Yeah, I got to see all four plays.”

“Hm. With Ai?”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“Oh,” Kaoru muttered, her expression impassive. “If you watched all four, that means you haven’t eaten, right?”

“Oh... You’re right. I’ve been in the gym all day.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, but I can hold out.”

“Hmmm.” Kaoru hummed and looked down at the table.

She stared at a tray of *takoyaki* in front of her which was missing a few pieces. Then, she looked back up at me. “Want some?”

“Huh? But aren’t those yours?”

“Yeah, but I’m not that hungry.”

She skewered a *takoyaki* with a toothpick and held it out to me.

“Mmph...”

“Uh, actually...”

“Mmph!”

She pushed it right up to my lips, so I reluctantly took a bite.

Then, she pulled the empty toothpick away, a triumphant smile on her face. “I made that, you know.”

I chewed the *takoyaki*. It wasn’t fresh, but it was still slightly warm. The small bits of octopus were perfectly chewy, and the inside was creamy with a savory sauce I could taste better now that it had cooled down a little.

I swallowed it and nodded. “That was delicious.”

Her face lit up. “I guess I got pretty good at it after making them all day.”

“I wish I could’ve seen you make them.”

“It wasn’t that cool. Anyway, have another one.”

“That’s okay. They’re yours.”

“Eat it,” she insisted, thrusting another *takoyaki* ball toward my mouth. This time, she pushed it all the way past my lips, so I had no choice.

As I chewed, I silently glared at her, which made her laugh.

“Heh-heh. Want another one?”

I shook my head, but she’d already skewered a third one on her toothpick.

“Mmph.”

“Urgh!”

She pushed another one into my mouth.

“Heh-heh-heh.”

She seemed to be enjoying herself quite a lot. Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

“Wow, looks like you two are getting pretty cozy!” said someone behind us as

Kaoru skewered the last *takoyaki* in the set. She jumped slightly at the sound.

Sousuke entered the classroom and grinned at us.

“Thanks for holding down the fort, Sousuke,” I said, once I’d finished chewing.

“No problem,” he said with a wave. “I just saw Mizuno in her bartender outfit. It looks way too good on her. Did you see it yet?”

“Yeah, yesterday.” I nodded with a soft smile.

Ai must’ve filled in for the student who wasn’t feeling well after all. Despite her carefree nature, she was also kind and considerate.

“But the cocktails were kinda...you know,” Sousuke said, looking around the room as he considered his words. “Mine tasted exactly like Kirin Lemon.”

“Ha-ha. Yeah,” I said, knowing exactly what he meant.

“The yellow color was pretty, though.”

“It was fun watching her make the—” Before I could finish my sentence, Kaoru caught me off-guard and shoved another *takoyaki* into my mouth.

She looked irritated, probably because I’d been talking about Ai the whole time. As I chewed my *takoyaki*, I had to admit her pouting face was pretty cute.

“Ha-ha. You guys sure are close,” Sousuke said, putting his arm around my shoulder. “See ya at the after-party. Let’s do our best.”

My mouth was full, so I just nodded.

Satisfied, Sousuke glanced over at Kaoru. “I’ll be counting on you too, Odajima!”

She nodded, and Sousuke let go of me.

As he did, I glanced at his right hand. He had bandages on every finger. I looked at his left hand and saw more bandages on his index and middle fingers—the ones he used to press the frets. *He must have practiced more than all of us*, I thought.

“Sousuke!” I called out as I swallowed the *takoyaki*.

He turned around just before he reached the door. “Yeah?”

“Let’s make our performance a success, no matter what!”

He looked at me in surprise, then grinned and nodded. “Yeah!” He gave me a thumbs-up before leaving the room.

“Right, the after-party’s coming up soon,” Kaoru murmured.

I nodded quietly.

“I’m starting to feel a little nervous,” she said. The admission surprised me. Normally, she would keep those feelings to herself.

“Your voice is beautiful, so you’ll be fine,” I teased. I wasn’t sure if I just wanted to ease her nerves, or if I was getting her back for stuffing all those *takoyaki* in my mouth.

Her face turned bright red. “Shut up!”

“Ah-ha-ha.”

Once her homemade *takoyaki* had taken the edge off my hunger, we chatted to pass the time. Before I knew it, an hour had passed.

It was 5 PM, and an announcement played over the school’s loudspeaker.

“The school festival will now be concluding.”

Everyone still in the classroom clapped and congratulated one another, and I did the same. Cheers and applause could be heard up and down the hallway.

The festival was over.

“It went by so fast,” I murmured, and Kaoru nodded thoughtfully.

“Yeah, it did.”

We’d prepared for over two months, and now the festival was over, leaving only the after-party. I wanted us to put on a really great performance, and I wanted Sousuke’s wish to come true.

Naturally, I began to think about Nagoshi. It was true that I hadn’t seen much of the festival, but it surprised me that I hadn’t passed her even once. I quickly stood up from my seat. I had a hunch of where I might find her, and I wanted to check.

“Yuzu? If you’re going to the gym, I’ll come with you.”

“Oh no. I’m going to the bathroom. You go on without me.”

She looked like she wanted to say something, but in the end she just nodded.
“Okay.”

I had a feeling she knew I was lying, but if she was willing to ignore it, then there was no need for me to explain.

I quickly walked out into the hallway and up the stairs to the roof, then opened the door without hesitation.

And there was Nagoshi, leaning against the fence and looking up at the sky. She slowly turned toward me.

“Oh, you came, too? I must be popular,” she said jokingly, then shrugged her shoulders like she was fed up.

“Did Sousuke come by?” I asked as I made my way over to her.

“Yeah. He looked so serious I thought he was gonna confess to me again.” She was still joking around.

“What did he want?”

“He just said, ‘Make sure you come to the after-party.’” She shrugged again, before leaning back against the creaky chain-link fence. “I thought for sure he was going to ask me to play, so I was a little surprised.” She shot me a sidelong glance. “Did you tell him anything?”

I shook my head. “No, not a thing.”

“...Okay.” She nodded vaguely and looked up at the sky. “First, he asks me to play. Now, he wants me to come listen.”

“I really want you to come to the performance,” I said directly. She stared at me, her mouth half open. “Sousuke worked really hard to prepare what he wants to say to you.”

I recalled the bandages on his fingertips. He’d clearly practiced a lot. He must’ve realized that words alone couldn’t move her heart and worked hard to reach her another way, even if it left his hands cut and bruised.

She snorted. “What, is he planning to confess on stage? There’s already an event for that, ya know.” She was still joking, but when she saw the serious look on my face, her expression changed.

She reached for my tie and pulled me toward her.

“...Ack!”

I automatically threw my arms up against the fence to prevent myself from falling forward. The metal clanged when I hit it.

Nagoshi’s face was so close, we were almost touching. A breeze blew past, swaying our hair. Her gaze was fixed on me.

“Words, music... They don’t mean anything to me. I thought I told you that.”

I couldn’t say anything in response, but I wanted to show her how I felt, so I nodded. My nose brushed hers.

“But I can’t completely forget the past,” she said. “When I hear your joyful music, I remember. And it hurts. You know that.”

Yes, I understood that.

She’d lost a father she admired and a woman she loved like a sister, and at the same time, she’d lost the music deep inside her heart. To protect herself, she’d kept that music at arm’s length, so she wouldn’t remember. But in doing so, she’d wound up suppressing a great many precious feelings, too.



“...Yeah, I know,” I said.

She huffed a laugh, but I could tell from her gaze that she wasn't amused. And yet, she hadn't closed up, either. I could see something wavering in her eyes. It was like she wasn't sure of herself—like she was looking for some kind of answer.

“Despite all that, you still want me to come and listen?” she asked, staring at me from only centimeters away.

I could see something deep in her eyes, behind the confusion and turmoil. I got the feeling it was the answer both Sousuke and Nagoshi herself were seeking.

“Yes,” I said clearly, nodding. “I still want you to come and listen.”

She stared at me for a few more seconds, then lowered her gaze and let out a slow breath through her nose. At last, she loosened her grip on my tie.

I took a slow breath, too, and straightened up.

“You guys are really cruel,” she said with a laugh.

I smiled. “It seems like that's the only way...to get you to tell us how you feel.”

“That's called coercion.”

“Coercion works both ways. Showing us your cuts, threatening not to let us use the garage. Coercion is the only way you communicate.”

“You're pretty bold.”

“And you're stubborn.”

“My feelings haven't changed.”

“But Sousuke still believes in you,” I said, and she stopped responding and swallowed. “Even if you ultimately can't reach someone...if you truly believe in what you're saying, then your words aren't wasted. Even if your wishes don't come true, that doesn't negate your earnest prayers.”

The wind blew gently around us, tousling our hair. The light of the setting sun flickered in Nagoshi's mysterious eyes every time her bangs swayed, adding a subtle sparkle to them.

I'd racked my brain over what I could do for her, and I'd finally come to a realization: I only had one thing to offer her.

I didn't have any relationship with her outside our conversations. She was never serious, and I could tell she didn't put much energy into talking to me.

She'd opened up about her past only because I happened to wind up playing the drums in her garage, then stumbled onto the story of Stray Fish and connected her to Etsuko Sajima. That was all. I hadn't done anything especially impressive or difficult.

I wasn't familiar with her music like Sousuke was, and her experiences were so different from mine, I could only try to imagine her pain. But through my conversations with the two of them, I'd figured some things out.

I could see how deep and sincere Sousuke's feelings were, for one. His emotions were so straightforward, all I'd had to do was hear him speak.

Nagoshi always kept her true feelings hidden, but now and then, I caught glimpses of them—moments where her expression softened and she swayed to the rhythm of my crappy drumming.

All I could do was respond to what I'd seen and what I'd heard.

Even if that didn't change anything directly, even if I couldn't save either of them, I had to keep listening and reaching out.

Even if we didn't understand one another, the time we spent facing each other and talking wouldn't just fade away.

Though it might be small, the simple act of communicating made a difference somewhere no one could see, changing things which seemed beyond our control. That's what I wanted to believe, anyway.

"I hope Sousuke's words and prayers reach you," I said.

I'd been praying, too.

I prayed that Sousuke wouldn't spend the rest of his life regretting this summer. And I prayed that his music would pierce through the uncertainty in Nagoshi's heart and lay bare her true feelings.

".....Well, then!"

“Ow!”

Suddenly Nagoshi flicked my forehead, using a bit more force than I’d expected.

“If you’re that serious, I guess I’ll have a listen. It’s not like I have anything better to do.” Nagoshi strode over to the door, then turned to look back at me. “Speaking of, do you really have time to worry about someone like me? You’re gonna be on stage, you know. Don’t get nervous and screw up in the middle of your performance!” With that, she waved and left the roof.

Though Nagoshi had a careless way of speaking, she never lied. I was sure she’d come watch our performance.

“All right.” I patted both my cheeks and looked up at the sky.

I’d been inside all day and hadn’t paid much attention to the weather, but I could see it was a pleasant, bright day. I squinted against the rays of the setting sun and breathed in deeply.

“Let’s do this,” I muttered softly before leaving the roof.

Now all I had to do was give my all on the drums.

I knew that Sousuke’s desire to hear Nagoshi play the bass had been a big factor in his inviting us all to join the band. But I was sure a large part of him had also wanted to create new memories together.

I didn’t want those feelings to go to waste, so I made up my mind to drum my heart out. Now, it was time to do just that.



[CHAPTER 15]

“Risa Nagoshiii!! I like you! Please go out with meeee!”

A second-year boy I didn’t know shouted, and the gym erupted in sound. Spotlights roamed over the audience as everyone cheered and whistled. At last, they settled on a spot at the very back of the crowd.

It was Nagoshi.

She smiled wryly as she stood in the light. Then, she raised both hands over her head and made an X with them.

“Awwww!” came the crowd’s disappointed reaction. The boy had been rejected.

“I guess Nagoshi’s still pretty popular, despite the rumors about her being a delinquent,” said Sousuke, sitting to my left.

“Yeah, because she’s cool,” I said.

He nodded. “Yeah, she *is* cool,” he murmured, a distant look in his eyes.

I glanced at him, then turned my attention back to the second-year boy on stage.

“I won’t give up yet!” he shouted before leaving the stage. He received a big round of applause from the audience.

The after-party had begun, and we were in the middle of an event where people walked up on stage and publicly asked out their crush. It was modeled after a popular bygone TV show called, “*His and Her Heartfelt Shouts.*” Technically, you could shout out anything you liked, but most people used it for

love confessions. The event was responsible for several student couples, and the air was full of excitement. I soon found myself caught up in the festival mood.

The on-stage confessions went on for over thirty minutes, and then it was time for the school beauty pageant. This event was open to second-and third-year girls. According to the rules, boys were allowed too, but most of the time they just entered as a joke. Typically, the girl deemed “cutest” was chosen to represent each class, and after they had all appeared on stage and delivered speeches, the audience would vote for the winner.

All the competitors had dressed up in a style that matched their personality and done their hair and makeup. One student in the front row was acting as a photographer, shooting live footage and projecting it onto a large screen to one side of the stage, so we could all get a good look at the contestants.

Everyone looked great, but...

I glanced over to my right and stole a look at Ai, who was enjoying the show. We weren't required to sit with our class at the after-party, so she'd come over to join us.

I could see her face clearly in the illumination from the stage. The light reflected in her eyes, and she looked radiant.

She's so beautiful. She was cuter than any of the girls in the show. I couldn't say something like that out loud, but I thought it.

Suddenly, she looked over at me and tipped her head to the side. “What?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said, embarrassed that she'd caught me looking at her.

The gym was too noisy to hear each other, so she bent close to my ear and asked, “What is it?”

My heart pounded as I leaned toward her to reply. “Um, I was just thinking you should compete in the beauty pageant next year.”

She pulled away and stared at me intently. She looked surprised. Then, she leaned close to my ear again.

“Does that mean...you think I'm cute?” The question was so direct, I had no

choice but to nod.

“Yeah.”

She chuckled bashfully.

Then, with a mischievous glint in her eye, she pulled on Kaoru’s arm. Kaoru, sitting to her right, had been engrossed in the performances and now looked back and forth between Ai and me, confused.

“What?” she asked loudly, trying to make herself heard over the noise in the gym.

“If Kaoru and I end up in the same class next year, which one of us do you think will be chosen for the beauty pageant?” Ai asked me.

I wasn’t sure how to answer.

Ai smiled as Kaoru narrowed her eyes and glared at me.

Ai was very beautiful. And Kaoru...was incredibly cute. I’d seen how stylishly she dressed outside of school, too. Picking one or the other was way too difficult.

“I have no idea!” I said.

“Ah-ha-ha!” Ai laughed, and Kaoru looked away, clearly disappointed.

Suddenly, I felt someone slam a hand against my back. I turned to my left in surprise and saw that it was Sousuke.

Leaving his hand where it was, he leaned forward and said, “I’ll vote for you if we’re in the same class next year, Mizuno! No matter who else is running, I’ll definitely vote for you!”

Ai’s eyes widened, and she glanced around shyly before saying, “Thanks!”

Her expression made my heart speed up. I hadn’t seen her react to a direct compliment like that before. *Wow, so that’s the expression she makes.*

Sousuke was always straightforward and fun to talk to. I liked that about him. But if I tried to keep things casual with Ai, saying I wanted to build up our relationship slowly, maybe her heart would drift toward him.

Currently, I was able to stay calm in such situations because of how clearly Ai

expressed her affection for me. But I was just taking advantage of that aspect of her personality.

I could tell that Sousuke, for his part, was serious about her.

I got the feeling I could stand to take my own relationships a little more seriously, too. That included Kaoru, of course.

“I’ll vote for Kaoru!” I said.

All three of them exclaimed, “What?!”

“I think you’re both equally attractive, so I’ll support whoever Sousuke doesn’t!” I said with a smile. “That way, the class votes will be evenly split, right?”

All sorts of emotions crossed Kaoru’s face. First, she smiled bashfully, then her eyes narrowed, and she exclaimed, “You’re so indecisive! That means you don’t care either way!”

“I want to support both of you!”

“That’s called being indecisive!”

Sousuke and Ai laughed.

It was true—I *couldn’t* decide. Because both of them were irreplaceable friends to me, and I was torn between them.

Should I rekindle my relationship with a girl I still loved from my past, or should I pursue a new relationship and let it evolve from friendship into romance? The possibilities swirled around me, each path still malleable and unfixed. Which should I choose?

I liked Ai. But I didn’t want us to start dating again just because we liked each other. Then, it would be the same as before. Since we’d been given a precious second chance, I wanted to communicate properly and build our relationship carefully, so we didn’t have any regrets.

And then, there was Kaoru. I cherished her friendship, and I knew that she was in love with me. I wasn’t sure if I could see her in that light, but now that I knew her feelings, I owed it to her to sincerely consider them. No matter what my conclusion was, I knew that if I dismissed her out of hand, I would regret it.

“Hey, Yuzuru. I bet next year’s school festival will be here before you know it,” Sousuke said, leaning in toward me.

I had a feeling I knew what he was trying to say.

“Yeah...,” I said with a firm nod.

Time was passing by every moment. I was sure to have countless conversations with irreplaceable people, and our relationships and feelings would change with each one. No one could stop that. I couldn’t keep standing still and pondering things forever.

“You can keep hesitating, but I’m gonna give it my all.”

“I know.”

Sousuke always seemed to know what I was thinking.

I hadn’t told him about Kaoru’s confession yet, but I was sure he’d noticed the changes in our relationship. And he knew that I was still attracted to Ai.

I cast a sidelong glance at him and saw him doing the same to me. He smirked.

I nudged him in the side and said, “I appreciate the advice, but shouldn’t we be focusing on our performance right now?”

“Yeah! It’s coming up soon.”

“Are you ready?”

“Not really, but I’ll do my best,” he said with a shrug.

I could tell he was determined. He didn’t seem the slightest bit nervous. His resolve was so strong he was able to completely hide his anxiety. *Sousuke’s so cool.*

As the beauty pageant got closer and closer to finishing, I felt myself gradually tensing up.

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“All right! Let’s give this our all!” Sousuke grinned as he slung his guitar strap

over his shoulder.

Right now, we were standing offstage while the music club performed. They sounded a lot better than us.

“Geez, couldn’t the committee have thought about the performance order a little more?” Sousuke complained. “Why is the music club going first?” Despite what he was saying, he had a smile on his face as he glanced toward the stage.

“Ahhh, I’m getting nervous!” Ai said, dancing in place.

“You never made any mistakes during rehearsals, Mizuno. You’ll be fine,” Sousuke reassured her casually.

Ai nodded and thanked him, but it seemed she couldn’t quite shake her nerves, and she anxiously rubbed her hands together.

Kaoru stood stiffly beside her. Her face was blank, but I could tell she was tense.

“Are you nervous, Kaoru?” I asked.

“Obviously.”

“Yeah. Me too,” I said.

Kaoru glared at me. “That’s not very encouraging.”

“It’ll be okay. I’ll definitely make more mistakes than you,” I said.

“I’d rather you didn’t make any.”

“Just enjoy yourself. Besides, your singing is really beautiful. Everyone will love it.”

“Yeah! You should be more confident!” Ai said, placing her hands on Kaoru’s shoulders.

Kaoru nodded several times and then dropped her poker face. She started to take deep breaths.

The music club’s performance ended, and applause filled the gym.

My heart was pounding like crazy. I didn’t have to touch my chest to feel it pumping. My hands and feet felt numb and tingly. I gripped the drumsticks

tightly, reaffirming the sensation of them against my palms.

The members of the music club left the stage. Misuzu waved to Sousuke, smirking. "I warmed up the audience for you," she teased.

"I didn't want you to! You warmed 'em up too much," Sousuke said.

Misuzu grinned and balled one hand. She thrust it toward Sousuke as he did the same, and they bumped fists.

Then, Sousuke called out to Yushima, who had returned to the wings with Misuzu.

"You ready for a back-to-back performance?" he asked.

Yushima flipped him off. "Don't underestimate me."

"Ha-ha. Good answer. I'm counting on you." Sousuke whacked him on the back. His mouth twisted in annoyance, but he looked like he was enjoying himself.

Misuzu's gaze wandered over to me. "You look nervous, Yuzuru." She approached me and clapped me on the back. "You practiced more seriously than anyone else, so you'll be fine. You've really gotten better," she said, smiling kindly. "Get out there and show everyone how cool you are, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"All right." She nodded as the emcee began announcing our act.

"Next up is another band! This one is composed entirely of first-year students! Let's see what kind of performance they have in store for us!" The emcee turned in our direction and Sousuke nodded. "Get ready everybody, because here they come!" Applause echoed through the gym.

Sousuke led us all on stage.

As I emerged from the wings, my field of view opened up. "Whoa..."

The stage lights were shining right at us, illuminating the students' faces in the audience. There were so many people watching.

My nerves reached their peak.

I went to sit down on the drum throne, but I accidentally dropped my

drumsticks in the process. They clattered to the floor with a deafening noise, and the audience stirred.

“Are you okay?!” I heard someone shout.

I blushed and hastily picked up the sticks, then one by one, I made eye contact with the other band members.

Yushima, Ai, Kaoru, and Sousuke.

Sousuke flashed me a little grin.

Man, he’s so cool.

I felt my tension ease. We had to make this performance a success for our incredibly cool friend, so he could go into his next performance looking good.

And, if we could pull this off, I was sure we’d end up with a bunch of unforgettable memories, both for our friends and for ourselves.

It was time to show off our months of practice, and all the emotion we’d put into this performance.

I lifted my face and raised my sticks high. And then, I tapped them together, making a clacking sound.

“One, two, three!”

I started the performance off with a fill. Although my fingertips were numb with tension, the sound that came out was sharper than I expected. It was the most satisfying sound I’d ever made. And then the song began.

Sousuke’s guitar and Yushima’s bass wove together, and the gym erupted in cheers. Sousuke had picked a popular song to get everyone excited. The audience seemed to recognize it, and they were starting to get pumped up.

Ai swayed happily to the rhythm. She looked so natural, a complete one-eighty from the nervous girl of a moment ago.

Kaoru was standing in front of the microphone without moving a muscle. I could tell she wasn’t as tense as she’d been backstage. I was behind her and I couldn’t see her expression, but I could feel a kind of presence about her. *Yeah, she’ll be fine.*

After the intro ended, I heard her take in a deep breath and grip the mic.

“When night falls, I forget about what happened in the morning...”

She began to sing, and the venue fell silent.

Then, a roar erupted from the audience. High-pitched screams from the girls and low, excited cheers from the boys. None of them had expected such a gorgeous singing voice to come from Kaoru.

Sousuke was grinning from ear to ear. He had a look on his face that seemed to say, “See?”

I felt my tension melt away as the song progressed. I was relieved that my drumming was going just as I’d practiced, and the thrill of having so many people watch our performance made my hands feel strangely light. It felt like my body was floating.

We’d been practicing for this day for so long.

When Kaoru finished singing the chorus, the audience erupted into loud applause, even though the song was still going. Everyone raised their hands and waved them enthusiastically from side to side.

We were right at the center of the festival, filling the audience with explosive energy.

I’d been so busy practicing that I hadn’t realized—making music was exhilarating!

“Ha-ha!” Before I knew it, I was laughing as I played the drums.

The first time we’d practiced this song, it had felt like it would go on forever. But on stage, it flew by in an instant.

We made a few small mistakes here and there, but overall, we got through the whole thing without missing a beat, and I was incredibly relieved.

When we were done, the student emcee rushed onto the stage and handed the mic to Sousuke.

“Thanks for letting me play that song for you with my best friends! You recognized it, right? It was ‘*When Morning Fades!*’”

Sousuke spoke confidently, and the audience applauded again.

“You know, when I told the girls in my class I play the guitar, they all said, ‘Yeah, right!’ I haven’t forgotten. What do you think now, huh?”

Some girls from our class shouted, “Sorry!” and the audience burst into laughter.

“Anyway, I decided on a whim to form this band, and these great people graciously came along for the ride. Yuzuru Asada, on the drums, did an especially great job. He’s a total beginner who started over summer vacation. Isn’t he amazing?!” Sousuke continued riling up the crowd, and I heard applause and cries of “Asadaaaa!”

I blushed and bowed repeatedly.

“And how about our classmate, Kaoru Odajima? Her voice is amazing, right? She should be a pro!”

I heard an excited cheer from the boys. I couldn’t help but smile. Kaoru had always been popular, even if people weren’t loud about it. Now, she was bound to have even more fans.

“And we have Ai Mizuno on the keyboard! She’s great, isn’t she? And she’s cute, too!”

As Sousuke continued to introduce the band members, I thought to myself, *He’s really good at this.*

Ai giggled and various people in the audience shouted, “So cute!”

“And Yushima from the music club helped us out! He’s cool as a cucumber, even though this is his second performance in a row!”

Yushima stood motionlessly in place, but the audience cheered anyway. I could never tell what Yushima was thinking, even at times like this. I supposed that was a talent in and of itself. For what it was worth, I could at least tell he

wasn't upset.

"Well, now that I've introduced the band, it's time for our second song. This will be the last one, so I hope you enjoy it!" Sousuke shouted, then handed the mic back over to the emcee.

But not a moment later, he snatched it back and said, "Oh, I almost forgot! The second song is '*Running Around Riot!*'" he said with a clumsy grin, and the audience cheered again.

My tension was completely gone, and I felt even lighter than before as I raised my drum sticks above my head.

"One, two, three, four!"

Since I wasn't starting with a drum fill, this time I hit the sticks a full four times.

The guitar started with an arpeggio, followed by the bass joining in. Then came the keyboard, forming a complex rhythm.

Someone cried out, "Wow!" from the audience.

I played a fill, then settled into the beat. When we first began practicing, I struggled with this part. Trying to keep up with the guitar and bass always made me stumble. But thanks to Misuzu's advice—"A drummer needs to be assertive! The others can just follow your rhythm!"—I finally started to get the hang of it. Now that I'd managed to nail it during the actual performance, I was filled with relief.

The second song was faster and more intense than the first, and the audience excitedly clapped along.

Kaoru's voice was all warmed up now, and she sang confidently and powerfully.

It was fun—pure fun.

I could feel the excitement of the crowd rubbing off on us, and our performance began to heat up. We achieved a kind of synergy, and I stopped being afraid to make mistakes. Strangely, once I embraced that feeling, I started playing perfectly.

Occasionally, I looked up and made eye contact with the others.

Sousuke smiled, Ai squinted happily, Yushima remained expressionless but met my gaze for a few seconds. Only Kaoru couldn't turn around to look at me, since the mic stand was fixed, but I could feel that she was focused on the whole band, too. Maybe that was because I could hear her voice entwining with the rest of our instruments to form a cohesive sound.

I realized we were sharing the same emotions without exchanging a single word, and I finally felt like I understood what Sousuke had been saying.

This was a form of conversation, too. We'd been practicing all this time to speak the same language, to share this warmth.

The song reached its climax.

I couldn't believe it was almost over. We'd practiced and practiced, and our moment of glory was so fleeting.

Yet, I wasn't sad. When I thought about how much blood, sweat, and tears we'd put in just for this one brief moment, every second of it felt like a treasure.

The moment was coming to an end, but if it didn't end, then our hard work would have been for nothing.

My emotions were running high, and I had to hold back tears. My hands trembled as I hit the snare's edge. *Kah!* It was a different sound than usual, but I didn't let it shake me. I knew it wouldn't stop our rhythm.

Kaoru sang the final line of the song, and then the outro began.

Before I knew it, the outro was over, and the last note faded away.

"Yaaaaaaaaahhh!" The crowd cheered. They clapped and whistled. It was incredibly loud.

The sound, at first chaotic, gradually took on a rhythmic quality. *Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!* They were calling for an encore.

Sousuke turned toward the rest of us and nodded. We nodded back and left the stage. I saw Misuzu waiting for us in the wings. She rushed over and hugged me tightly.

“Whoa!”

“Great job! You were amazing!” she said. “You should totally join the music club!”

“Th-thank you! ...I think?”

Misuzu kept jumping up and down as she hugged me.

“You must have practiced so much! You sounded so confident. It was incredible, Yuzuru!”

“Well, I had a great teacher.”

“Ha-ha. What a charmer.” She looked around at the others and clapped. “A fantastic performance, everyone! Really well done!”

Ai and Kaoru bowed bashfully. Yushima, as always, was expressionless.

The performance was over, but the excitement still lingered. And I couldn’t help but notice that Misuzu was carrying something on her back.

“Um, Misuzu? Is that...?” I started, and she gasped and began to panic.

“Oh, right! There’s no time to waste!” She flailed around a bit, then put on a serious expression. “I have a job to do.”

“Huh?”

“I need to hurry, or I’ll miss Sousuke’s performance! You guys head into the audience, too!”

Misuzu quickly opened the stage door and headed back out into the gym.

“Thanks for the applause, everyone!” Sousuke shouted. “That’s all for the band, but I have another song to perform solo!” He’d begun his speech.

“Let’s hurry.”

We all rushed out into the gym.

We found spaces to sit and looked up at the stage. Sousuke was right in the middle.

“A certain someone taught me the joy of music,” he said. He was smiling, but his tone was serious.

The spotlight shone down on him. It looked like he was sparkling.

Hang in there, I silently cheered.

“I was just a kid, but I’ve never forgotten the sound of her music. I still haven’t forgotten, even now! I keep pestering her, because I want to hear her play again, and I’ve caused her a lot of heartache.”

The gym fell silent. Everyone was captivated by his speech.

“But when I thought about it carefully, I realized that she’d never spoken to me in words. She’d spoken to me with her music. That was what captivated me and made me fall in love with music itself. So...” He lifted his face and smiled confidently. “I want to speak with my music, too—the music I got from her. This is the music in my heart, and I’m going to play it with everything I have. Please listen!” He pumped his fist into the air, and everyone applauded.

I could tell the audience was filled with expectations. Of course they were. It was only natural to get your hopes up after hearing such a poetic speech.

Sousuke took a single deep breath. Then, his fingers flew over the guitar strings.

“Whoa.” I couldn’t help but gasp.

The audience stirred.

He was playing an arpeggio, much faster than anything from the previous two songs. It was intense and powerful, but somewhat unsteady. Then, he transitioned into strumming. He’d moved on to a basic rhythm, but the chord changes were extremely rapid. It was a really technical piece. And it was clear even to an amateur like me that his skill couldn’t keep up with it. But he never looked strained. His expression remained confident the whole time.

The audience started clapping along, warmly rooting him on.

A strange feeling was welling up inside me. What was it?

Up until now, we’d just been having fun playing music. We’d all shared that feeling. But Sousuke’s current performance was something else—sincere, earnest.

Sometimes, I could tell when he made mistakes. There were moments when

his sound was off, when the rhythm faltered. But I didn't think he sucked. It wasn't because I was an amateur or anything like that. It was because I could feel earnest emotion coming from his music. Even though his performance was halting, I could feel his determination.

"Keep going, Sousuke...", I muttered. *Keep going. Keep screaming. Let it all out until you're satisfied.*

I didn't know exactly what emotions Sousuke was trying to express. He was speaking in words I couldn't understand. Would they reach her? Would his words reach the person he was speaking to?

I hoped they would.

I listened to Sousuke's performance and prayed for his success.



"Ah, geez. They're having so much fun up there." I leaned against the back wall of the gym and listened to Andou, Asada, and their friends play.

At first, Asada's drumming was hesitant due to his nerves, but as he fell in sync with the other members, it became smoother and smoother. By the time the second song started, he was doing great.

"...He really is.....a lot like her," I murmured to myself. The crowd was too loud for anyone to hear me. I felt a pang in my chest.

I could feel the pure joy in their music.

Asada. Even when it comes to music, you've got a way with words.

I looked away from him and focused my attention on Andou.

A little earlier, he'd come up to the rooftop with a determined look on his face.

"I'm going to express my feelings to you through music. So please come and listen."

After that and Asada's follow up, I'd felt too guilty to ignore them. The after-party was optional, and I'd originally intended to just go home. But when I saw this band Andou had thrown together synchronizing so well...I was kind of moved.

I remembered when Asada was practicing fills in my garage. Andou had seemed so seasoned as he adjusted his playing to Asada's clumsy rhythms. But now, they were confident enough to smile at each other during performances. It wasn't just them. The whole band was harmonizing well together.

They're doing so good.

But watching their joyful performance only reminded me of Etsuko, and it hurt a little.

When Misuzu brought Asada and Andou to the garage, I was worried it might dig up my feelings about music, and I had intended to do what I could to keep that from happening. But even as I listened to their performance, I felt detached, like it had nothing to do with me. And that came as a relief.

It's true. I've completely let go of music. Being able to confirm that was really comforting.

"I guess it's not enough to just have fun..."

Etsuko's words echoed through my mind.

No, Etsuko.

Just having fun is enough.

When it stopped being enough...everything went wrong.

Asada's cheerful drumming sounded pleasant to my ears. His sound was a fine tribute for Etsuko—it was proof that having fun was music itself.

But I'd lost that joy and radiance when I lost Etsuko and my father. Music was irrelevant to me now. In my mind, I shut the case of my bass with a *click*.

I applauded when the second song ended. The audience was ecstatic. I was pretty impressed they could get them this hyped with only two months of practice.

The audience began to call for an encore, and I got up. There probably wouldn't be one. With so little time to practice, and complete beginners in the mix, there was no way they'd prepared a third song. Besides, I'd only heard Asada practicing for two.

I stood up and smoothed out my skirt. I'd worn this skirt all summer break, and when school started back up, I'd had a real time of it straightening out the pleats.

"Thanks for the applause, everyone! That's all for the band, but I have another song to perform solo!"

I started to walk out, but then Andou's speech froze me in my tracks.

Wait, he's going to play alone?

"A certain someone taught me the joy of music."

I heard the audience fall silent. My chest felt tight. I knew he was talking directly to me.

My body trembled, rejecting his words. That was never my intention. I wished he would stop going around saying things like that.

"I was just a kid, but I've never forgotten the sound of her music. I still haven't forgotten, even now! I keep pestering her, because I want to hear her play again, and I've caused her a lot of heartache."

Yeah, you have.

I couldn't help but think how selfish it was that he'd kept on going despite realizing that.

But Asada had said he couldn't stop someone's feelings, and I couldn't help but agree. You couldn't change how someone else felt. All you could do was reject them. But what should you do when someone doesn't give up despite your rejections?

If I'd done anything wrong, it was letting him hear my music. I never should've done that.

"But when I thought about it carefully, I realized that she'd never spoken to me in words. She'd spoken to me with her music. That was what captivated me, and made me fall in love with music itself. So..."

I never intended to captivate anyone. I was just playing the bass, innocently following in the footsteps of someone I admired.

I never thought it would linger in someone's heart and they'd grow so attached to it. I never imagined that my past, and the music I made then, would come back to haunt me.

"I want to speak with my music, too—the music I got from her. This is the music in my heart, and I'm going to play it with everything I have. Please listen!"

Please stop.

My body trembled.

His—no, *their*—determination was a kind of violence to someone like me, who couldn't live like that. When someone gave up trying to be right and just

kept marching forward, wrong or not, it didn't matter what I said anymore. They were invincible. If they kept coming toward me even after I rejected them, then all I could do was run away.

"...I'm sorry," I whispered softly. Then, I started walking.

I was sure my heart would never waver, but for some reason I was afraid to hear his performance. I couldn't shake the feeling that the sound he remembered, altered and distorted within him, would drive me crazy. So I hurried toward the exit.

But I didn't make it in time.

"Huh?"

Once he played the first note, I froze. I instinctively glanced at the stage where he stood and felt his gaze stop on me for a moment. Everyone in the audience was staring at him, entranced. But it was clear to me that his music was directed only at me.

"Why...?" I muttered. Then, someone suddenly appeared in front of me. "... Misuzu."

When I saw what she was carrying on her back, my eyes went wide.

"When you quit the band, you said 'Do whatever you want with this,' didn't you?" she asked, looking me right in the eye.

"...Yeah."

"Well, that's exactly what I did."

"Idiot. There's no way Andou can play—"

"He's playing it right now," Misuzu said, interrupting me.

He...

I looked at Andou up on the stage.

...He sounds terrible.

His arpeggios were all over the place and so was his strumming. Why was he putting so many embellishments into a part where the music only specified the chord? The techniques he was attempting were too advanced—something a

pro would do. It didn't match his skill level. And because he was recklessly challenging himself, the rhythm of the chord progressions was all out of whack.

But I knew what he was trying to play, because it was the song Yasu and I wrote together.

"Sousuke accused all of us—me included—of trying to act mature and letting you quit music. And I agree with him. I should've forced you to keep playing the bass, even if you didn't want to."

"How could you have done that back then?" I protested. "And it's good you didn't. That saved me."

"Don't lie." Misuzu usually just brushed off my words, but now she was aggressively confronting me. "You confused admiration, disappointment, and music. You knew the difference, but you lumped them all together, closed the lid, and ignored them all. You know it too, but you're pretending not to see! That's why you're still suffering!"

Andou's crappy guitar playing echoed through the gym, and so did the audience's clapping. Despite his embarrassing performance, everyone was cheering him on. And thanks to their cheers, his music grew stronger.

"Don't act like you know everything!" I shot back. "I believed in music and it betrayed me! I'm done! Done with being betrayed, and done with betraying others!"

"Aren't you the one betraying yourself?!" she yelled.

A few students turned to look at us, but I didn't care.

My chest ached. Misuzu's words were raw. It felt like they were scraping against my skin, trying to rip out my heart.

"Your music was always so clear. And when you held the bass, you always had so much to say! You never spoke your mind, but your true feelings always came out through your music! Then, you got better at covering them up with shallow words and fake smiles." She glared at me, her eyes glistening with tears.

Bombarded by her heartfelt words and the music in the background...I felt my chest constrict.

"I saw how much you enjoyed listening to Asada playing the drums," she continued. "Music is still alive inside you!"

"It's dead! And I'm not digging it back up now!"

"Then, why did you leave this behind?!" She roared. "Why didn't you tear up the sheet music you made with Yasunaga and throw it away? Why didn't you smash your bass to pieces? Instead, you purposely saved it!"

"I..."

My words stuck in my throat.

I couldn't destroy it. But I also couldn't explain why.

When I fell silent, Misuzu arched her eyebrows and strode up to me. Then, she lifted the case off her back and opened it.

My heart skipped a beat.

There it was. My bass, just the same as it was back then.

My heart was pounding now, sending blood rushing through my body.

Misuzu picked up the bass and thrust it at me.

"Andou's putting it all out there up on stage. He's waiting for you!"

"Why would...?"

"Play. Please play." Tears spilled from her eyes, and I couldn't look away from her. I could hear more crappy arpeggios in the background. "If you don't do this now, you'll regret it for the rest of your life!"

Why? How could she know that?

"I regret it, too. I regret silently watching you give up on music."

She said I left those things behind on purpose...and that I regret it. Why? How?

Those words kept repeating in my mind.

"This is your song," Misuzu said. "It's for you. It's the song you left behind. Sousuke cherished it, and now he's inherited it. Can't you hear it?"

I could hear it loud and clear. And it hurt.

“He’s screaming. Clumsily, awkwardly. But he’s calling out to you, Risa!” Misuzu pushed the bass toward me again, her voice hoarse.

“He’s screaming that he wants to hear your music again. That he wants to hear you speak again!”

I gasped.

The words were stuck in my throat, refusing to form, swirling around in my chest. If I took the bass, would those words take shape and come out?

“Risa!” Misuzu looked straight at me, tears streaming down her face. Even in the dim light, I could see her makeup streaking. “Please.” She pleaded. “Please tell us how you feel.”

Something inside me exploded.

I wanted to say something, but the words wouldn’t come.

I grabbed the bass. Misuzu’s eyes widened. I slipped past her and started walking. I walked and walked, and then I started running. Why? Why was I holding the bass? Why was I running toward the stage?

I locked eyes with Andou.

He smirked.

I climbed the stairs up to the stage.

The audience murmured.

I didn’t care.

I plugged the adapter that had been connected to Yushima’s bass into mine and switched on the amp. The speaker crackled. I knew that wasn’t the proper way to connect it. But right now, I didn’t care. The speaker buzzed with a low,

electronic noise. I knew if I plucked the strings, they would sound through the speaker.

Andou kept playing guitar, looking at me.

I met his gaze and said,

“...You suck.”

He flashed me a genuine smile from the bottom of his heart.

“I don’t care. Because now, you’re here.”

My heart felt like it was going to burst. I didn’t understand what I was feeling. I was full of all sorts of emotions, and I couldn’t name any of them, because I didn’t know the words.

But that didn’t matter. That was how it was meant to be.

And then, I started plucking the strings on my bass.

It felt like the world around me went silent.

The thumping of my heart, the roughness of my breath.

Thump, thump. Haah, haah.

Only the sounds of my body echoed in my ears.

And then, the “*Why?!*” inside my heart exploded.

Its energy traveled down my arms, making the bass strings vibrate. I couldn’t really hear the sound I produced, but it moved from the amp to the speaker and shook my body.

The cheers from the audience sounded very, very far away.

Why?

What pushed him so far?

Why?

Did Etsuko have to die?

Wasn’t it enough to just have fun?

All I needed was the two of them and their music.

So why did they both have to disappear?

The sensation and the emotions from the first time I cut my arm came back to me. Forgotten feelings resurfaced.

Why did things turn out like this?

I didn’t understand. Something had gone irreversibly wrong, and everything I believed in had disappeared. I was left behind, all alone, and the only thing I could do was try to forget.

But music had been too big a part of my life to force myself to forget it.

Music had always been there for me.

I realized that, even when I tried to erase it, I’d been leaving a piece of it there, in the corner of my heart.

And without music, I'd lost my only means of expressing how I felt.

Why?

Why?

Why?

A dam in my heart burst, and my emotions overflowed.

I couldn't tell if I was making any decent sounds.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit!" I muttered, as if trying to swallow my emotions. But my hands didn't stop playing. Music had been tormenting me all this time, so...

Why?

Why does it...

"...feel so satisfying?!"

My vision blurred. My cheeks felt hot. I realized tears were streaming down my face.

The nameless emotions I'd bottled up inside were all flowing out at once, turning into music and tears.

Finally, I felt like I understood my father's music.

It was made of this kind of confusion, anger, and sadness. He had no way to put those feelings into words, so he put it into his music.

I was sure he'd hoped to reach people suffering in the same way. But the moment he wished for that was the moment making music stopped being fun for him.

He anguished over how to take the outpourings of his heart and arrange them into something beautiful for other people.

And in the end, no one could truly empathize with his suffering. Even his own daughter had told him to die and turned her back on him.

“Ahhh...”

I wished I’d realized all this sooner. I felt pathetic, sad, and lonely. I was sorry, angry, and in pain.

“If you live your life, one day it’ll become music.”

I finally understood what he meant, but it was too late.

I played the bass with all my heart as I cried. And despite Andou’s lack of skill, he kept going by my side, accompanying my sound.

His awkward playing intertwined with the sound of my emotions. It was mismatched, but it felt intentional.

I’d written this song for my dad to play. In the end, that never happened, and I’d let it go.

Yet here I was, playing it again.

Andou came over to me on stage. He leaned forward like he was challenging me and clumsily strummed his guitar. He was crying...but there was a smile on his face.

“You’re a total idiot,” I said, smiling through my tears. I didn’t stop sobbing, and my voice trembled.

You’re an idiot. Did you want to hear my music so badly that it moved you to tears? I didn’t write this song for you.

Still, I kept playing the bass.

“Ha-ha... You’re an idiot,” I said again.

“Yeah. I’m an idiot. But that’s fine.”

The audience probably couldn’t hear us. Our instruments were too loud and drowned out our voices.

“Finally, we’re able to talk.”

Yes, I... I’ve been wanting to talk to someone for so long.

My words were different from everyone else’s... It had taken me far too long to realize that.

“Ah-ha... Ha-ha-ha!” I laughed through my tears as I continued playing. Andou kept going, too.

It was a terrible performance, hardly good enough for the festival after-party.

But for me, and for Andou, it felt like coming up for oxygen after a long dive. Like taking a deep breath of fresh air.

It was insanely satisfying, and we needed it to keep living.

Andou and I kept crashing our sounds together like idiots, conversing through our music, right up until the end.

× × ×

I felt as if I’d forgotten how to breathe.

The moment the two of them finished playing, I remembered and took a big gulp of air.

Applause shook the whole gym as I wiped away my tears.

I looked to my side and saw Ai staring blankly at the stage, tears streaming down her face, too.

Sousuke and Nagoshi went to the wings after their wild performance. It had felt like they were screaming.

Through her bass, Nagoshi had released emotions I couldn’t even name. I couldn’t say if it was anger or sadness, but I felt its intensity reverberate deep in my chest and stomach. And before I knew it, tears were flowing down my face

and I couldn't move.

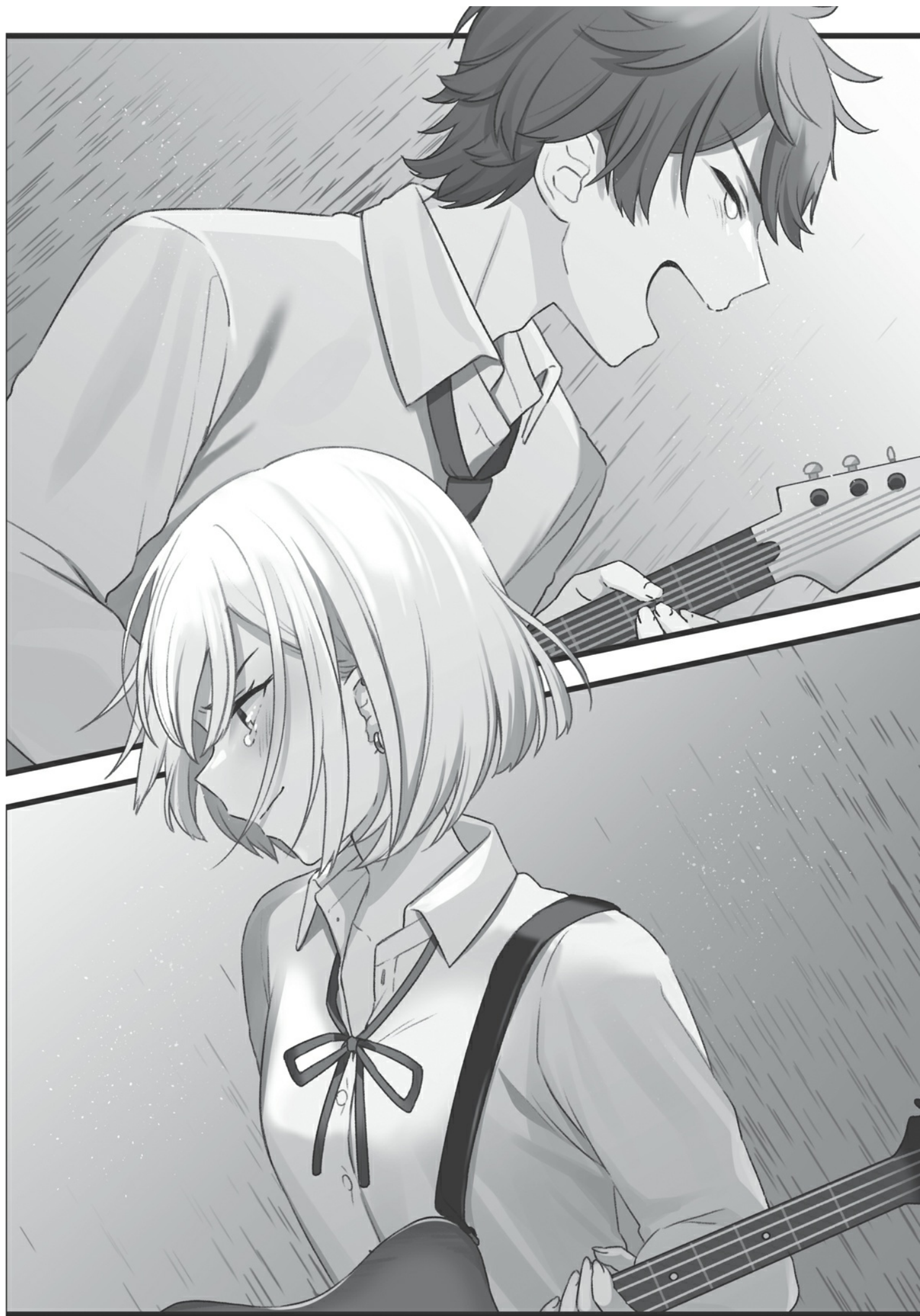
I didn't know why she'd gotten on stage. She must have spoken with Sousuke in a language only they could understand.

At first, it was like being hit by an incomprehensible flood of emotions. But in the end, they were playing their instruments happily, chatting like friends. Sousuke had managed to draw out Nagoshi's words.

"That was an amazing performance," said the emcee. His hoarse voice brought me back to reality. "I can't quite describe it, but...it really moved me to tears! This isn't the end, though! There's still more to come!"

I took a deep breath and ran toward the door leading backstage. I threw it open and found Sousuke leaning against a wall, slumped over.

"Sousuke!"



“Hey... Yuzuru...” He was sobbing uncontrollably.

“Sousuke, that was amazing! You did great!”

“Ha-ha... Thanks. Thanks, Yuzuru.” He smiled for a moment, but then his face crumpled, and he immediately burst into tears again.

I hugged him. I couldn’t stop myself.

“Yuzuru, I...”

“Yeah?”

“I finally...talked to Nagoshi...”

“I know... I’m so glad. I really am.” I meant every word.

He stayed true to his feelings and managed to reach Nagoshi. We’d seen the results on stage just now. He’d done something only he could do.

I kept patting him on the back until he could stand up on his own.

× × ×

“Risa!”

As I left the gym holding my bass, a loud voice called out to me. I rubbed my eyes and turned around.

It was Misuzu. Her face was a total mess.

“Ah, geez. Your makeup’s all smeared!”

“I’m so glad!” she shouted back. Then, her face squished up with emotion. “That was so good, Risa...” She stumbled over and clung to me.

I wrapped my arms around her back.

“I was terrible...,” I said. “I haven’t played for so long, it wasn’t any good.”

“You’re wrong. You were born to play, Risa,” Misuzu said with a sob. “I heard everything you said through your music...”

“Yeah. Sorry...I was quiet for so long.”

“Idiot, it’s okay. I’m the one who should apologize.”

“What for?”

“For letting you go silent!”

“It’s okay, that was my own decision.”

“But!”

“It’s fine,” I said firmly. I felt like there was something more important to tell her right now. I took a small breath, then spoke. These words were so simple even I could say them.

“Thank you.”

The next moment, a high-pitched noise came from Misuzu’s throat, and she screwed up her face. “I can’t believe you! That’s *my* line!” She pressed her face against my chest and sobbed like a child.

“You’re getting your makeup all over my shirt.”

“Shut up, idiot!”

I hesitantly stroked Misuzu’s back as she wailed and cried.

Seeing her sob like this right in front of me, I felt like she was crying in my place. And for some reason, it made me feel lighter. I let out a slow sigh.

“Even if you ultimately can’t reach someone...if you truly believe in what you’re saying, then your words aren’t wasted. Even if your wishes don’t come true, that doesn’t negate your earnest prayers.”

Asada’s words echoed in my heart.

“I can’t believe he was right,” I murmured under my breath, too quiet for Misuzu to hear.

You hear that? You were right.

It seemed there was a grain of truth in his simple, honest words.

It was kind of frustrating that it took being accosted by two younger boys to get my life straightened out. It annoyed me, but I was grateful to them.

“Misuzu.” I tapped on her back as she sniffled.

“Hm?”

“Give me back my bass case.”

“Huh? Oh, sure.” She sniffed loudly and then took the case off her shoulder and handed it to me.

I put my bass inside and snapped the case shut. It sounded just like it had when I’d decided to never open it again. And yet somehow, it also sounded completely different.

“Heh. Words, huh?” I muttered as I slung the case over my shoulder.

“You don’t need to return the sheet music. Let Andou keep it.”

“Huh?”

“Tell him I’ll play it with him again once he can manage it perfectly.”

“Really? You mean...you’ll play the bass again?” she asked, her eyes wide.

I smiled wryly and tilted my head. “Dunno. Haven’t decided yet.”

“Huh?”

“But it seems like I can’t even express myself without this thing,” I said, smiling awkwardly. “So I’ll start practicing again, a little at a time.”

Misuzu’s expression brightened, and she nodded. “Yeah! Yeah, let’s play together again someday!”

“I said I haven’t decided yet.”

“We have to!”

“You’re not listening, are you?” I chuckled, then waved. “Well, I’m heading home.”

“What?!”

“I’m tired. See ya.”

“Oh... Uh... Okay, I guess.” Misuzu blinked as I quickly headed off.

With each step, I felt the weight of my bass on my back. I’d completely forgotten that feeling. It seemed like the weight of all the words swirling in my chest that I’d finally gotten out were now attached to the bass.

“Dad...,” I murmured to myself.

Ever since I played with Andou up on stage, I couldn’t stop picturing my father’s face.

“...I’ll never forgive you,” I said. “Yeah. I’ll never forgive you.”

I thought about everything he’d dealt with, and how his music had come out of it.

Even if I now understood a part of what he’d felt, the sin of taking someone else’s life would never disappear.

I had no intention of forgiving my father for taking Etsuko away from me. I’d loved her so much, and she’d cared so much about him.

And yet...

I held back the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes.

“...I want to hear your music again, Dad.”

I couldn’t help it. His music had always been inside my heart. No matter how much I tried to bury it, I could still hear it.

That music was my life. An indelible, singular sound.

“So...” I roughly wiped away the tears at the corners of my eyes with my shirt sleeve. “I’ll play it, Dad.”

As soon as I murmured those words, the last emotion lodged in my chest

came unstuck and disappeared.

He left his words and his sound to me, and no matter what happened, I would keep treasuring them.

I'd been denying it up until now, but I'd finally decided to gather up what he left behind, and carry it forward. I'd accept everything that had happened and weave it all together into who I was.

As the one left behind, that was the only thing I could do.

[EPILOGUE]

YOU ARE
MY REGRET...

The school festival came to an end, and the next day, we all went to school to clean everything up.

“It was so hard to make, and yet it only takes a second to dismantle it,” grumbled Naitou, the design team’s leader.

“Yeah.” I chuckled and nodded in agreement.

I saw a piece of tape on her shoulder.

“Oh, let me get that,” I said, peeling it off for her. She looked a little embarrassed and nodded.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” I smiled back at her.

“Ah!” she said, turning to look at me. “Your band was amazing, by the way.”

“Oh, thanks. I was a total amateur, so I was worried I’d make everyone sound bad.”

“No way! You had a totally different aura from usual. It was really charming!”

“Really? Wow, I’m not sure what to say. Thanks.”

We both blushed, but then someone interrupted us.

“Yuzu. Take this cardboard.”

“Huh? Oh!”

Suddenly, someone shoved a heavy cardboard box full of even more folded cardboard into my arms, almost toppling me over.

“Kaoru!” I exclaimed.

“Maybe if you moved your hands as fast as your mouth, we could go home early,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah. Is the rooftop okay?”

“Yep. Hurry it up.”

“Geez, you’re so strict.”

I lifted the box, and Naitou chuckled and looked between the two of us.

“You two seem close,” she said, and I nodded.

“Yeah, we’re in the same club.”

“The literature club, right?”

“Yeah. But Kaoru...”

“I said, hurry it up!” Kaoru shouted impatiently. I chuckled and said goodbye to Naitou.

Kaoru plopped down on a chair and started tearing up the posters that had been plastered all over the wall and stuffing them into garbage bags.

“Stop flirting,” she muttered under her breath as I walked past.

“It’s not like that,” I said.

She glared at me. “Hurry it up!”

Ooh, scary.

The cardboard box was pretty heavy, and I could barely see in front of me, so I had to walk down the hallway really slowly.

“Yuzuru?”

I heard a voice from the other side of the box. It was Ai.

“That’s a lot of stuff. Want some help?” she asked as she poked her head out to one side.

She was carrying an armload of garbage bags, all filled to bursting.

“No.” I shook my head. “You’re taking out the trash, right? I’m going in the opposite direction. I’ll be fine.”

We were putting all the cardboard and wood up on the rooftop and taking everything else to the garbage area on the first floor.

“Hm, okay. Well, be careful not to fall!” she said as she passed me. “Oh!” She stopped, then turned around with a grin and said, “Let’s walk home together today!”

Just then, a male student passed us by and gawked.

I nodded, a little embarrassed. “Sure. I’ll wait for you in the club room when

I'm done."

"Thanks! It might take a minute, though. We still have a lot of black poster paper stuck on the windows."

"It's okay. I'll read while I wait for you."

We smiled and then took off in different directions.

For some reason, it felt like it had been a while since I'd walked home from school with Ai. Since we started the band, I'd been going to Nagoshi's house all the time to practice, and then we'd been preparing for the school festival, so there hadn't been a lot of chances to head home together.

Now I had something else to look forward to after school, and my steps felt a little lighter.

I carefully climbed the stairs, and by the time I reached the roof, I was completely out of breath. Opening the door was quite a challenge while holding the cardboard box.

I twisted the knob with my left hand and pushed against the door with my shoulder.

Suddenly, it swung open, and I stumbled forward. "Whoa!"

"Whoops!" Someone caught me just as I was about to fall.

When I looked up, I saw beautiful golden hair reflecting the sunlight.

"Nagoshi."

"We just keep meeting like this, don't we? Are you stalking me?" she joked.

"Come on! You're the one who's always hanging out on the roof!" I shot back and glared at her. But then, I added quietly, "Thanks for catching me. I didn't expect to see you here."

She burst out laughing.

The teachers asked everyone to come to school and help clean up, but attendance wasn't mandatory. They probably couldn't figure out a subject to assign the time to. Though if that was the case, I wondered why we couldn't just do it during homeroom. There was probably some reason or other.

But since it wasn't mandatory, some students were bound to skip out. A few people in my class hadn't shown up, and I'd assumed Nagoshi wouldn't either, but...

"Do you think I'm some kind of delinquent?" she asked.

"Well, aren't you? Serious students don't skip class to hang out on the roof."

"Ha-ha. I suppose you're right."

As if to prove my point, Nagoshi had shown up at school, but she was clearly still skipping out on the cleanup.

"Do you have any friends, Nagoshi?" I asked as I set the cardboard box down in the designated spot.

"No. Girls find me annoying, and guys only want to date me. So I'm a loner."

"That must be pretty tough."

"Yeah, it is." She laughed, sounding like she didn't care at all.

Maybe she was the type who could live alone. Maybe she found it easier that way.

I took the folded cardboard out of the box and stacked it in the storage area. The last box hadn't been flattened yet, and I struggled with it.

"Hrm..."

It was reinforced with multiple layers of duct tape, making it tougher to take apart than I'd anticipated.

"Here."

As I was crouched down struggling with the box, Nagoshi handed me a box cutter.

"Oh, thanks."

Seeing her with it unsettled me a bit.

I hesitantly took it from her and used it to cut the tape. It made the job a lot easier, and I was finished in no time. I stared at the box cutter for a while and said, "I think I'm gonna need this for a few more boxes. Can I borrow it?"

She leaned against the fence and snorted.

“You’re not going to return it anyway, are you? Just keep it.”

“Huh?” Her casual response caught me off guard.

She grinned mischievously. “Or would you rather have the one I use for cutting my arm?”

“What?!” I froze, box cutter in hand, and she burst into laughter.

“I’m only kidding! Just take it.”

“Um, thanks.” I hesitantly put the box cutter in my breast pocket.

Maybe she didn’t need it anymore. I hoped that was the case.

“Hey, Asada?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember how I told you there are people who don’t want anyone to know anything about them?”

I remembered. She’d said that when I came here to eat lunch with Ai.

“...Yeah, I do.”

She smiled dryly and muttered to herself, “I used to think I was one of those people. But I guess I was just lying to myself.” She looked at me. “You and Andou both tried so hard to draw out my feelings. And in the end, you saved me.”

Her words were so sincere I could only blink in response.

“Thanks,” she said casually. “And tell Andou I said thank you, too.”

I stared at her blankly for a while. Then, I chuckled. “You should tell him yourself.”

“Gah,” she frowned. “He’d get way too excited. No way.”

“Well, in that case...” I scratched the tip of my nose shyly. “Maybe if you played the bass with him again, it would be like saying ‘thank you.’”

Her mouth fell open slightly. Then, she burst out laughing. “So bold!”

I snorted.

“Maybe if I feel like it,” she said with a chuckle.

I was relieved she hadn’t simply refused.

She pointed at me. “And you. Don’t you dare quit the drums after all that practice.”

I stiffened up. Come to think of it, I’d been so relieved after the performance that I hadn’t really considered whether I’d continue playing.

“If I feel like it,” I said, imitating her vague reply.

She laughed. “So bold,” she said again.

Somehow, her smile felt a lot more genuine than usual, and that made me really happy.



The sound of pages flipping felt oddly nostalgic. Though I couldn’t hear any of the sports clubs, I could hear loud voices and other noises echoing through the school. The festival was over, yet everyone was still in high spirits.

I was pretty happy too as I listened to the sounds of the school and read my book. I was mainly just following the words on the page, though. The meaning wasn’t sinking in as much as usual. But reading like this still helped calm me down.

The past two months had been a whirlwind.

Summer break had come, and we’d all gone to the beach. Then, we’d started practicing our instruments. I’d had so many new experiences, and every day had felt fulfilling. But it had all gone by in the blink of an eye.

Today, the air was cool enough that we didn’t need to turn on the air conditioning. The scorching heat of summer had quickly faded, and it was already autumn. Before I knew it, it would be winter.

Suddenly, I heard light footsteps echoing through the hallway, and I closed my paperback.

“I’m heeeere!” The door to the club room burst open and Ai stood there, slightly out of breath. “Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“No problem. Let’s head home.”

I put my book in my school bag and headed for the door. Then, I locked up and went to the staff room to return the key.

Even this routine felt nostalgic, and it put a smile on my lips.

After I was done, Ai and I walked toward the entrance together. She slipped on her loafers and then tapped the toes lightly against the ground.

“It feels like it’s been ages!” she said.

“Yeah, it does.”

We walked side by side toward the school gate. It felt weird to be doing this so early in the day. Usually, the sun was setting by the time we left.

The image of Ai lying on the ground in the schoolyard flashed through my mind, and I turned to look toward the field where I’d found her.

“It’s been four months since we reunited, Ai.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah! Time really flew by.”

“I know.”

“We’ve done so many things together.”

“We’ve had a lot of fun.”

“Yeah!” She smiled warmly, then she sighed. “I hope we can keep sharing and doing things together...” She paused, gazing into the distance. “And I hope we can graduate high school together, too...”

I nodded quietly. “Yeah, that would be nice.” I felt the same way.

After that, we talked about what had happened in each of our classes during the school festival as we boarded the train.

Even riding the train was fun when I was with Ai. She made mundane moments like this into treasures. I could feel myself smiling.

When we finally reached our stop and got off the train, Ai sighed.

“Ugh, we’re already at the station. The trip home always feels so short,” she pouted. “I wish our houses were closer together.”

“Actually... I think that would cause a whole other set of problems,” I said.

“Like what?”

“All kinds.” I dodged her innocent question and walked through the ticket gate, stuffing my train pass into my bag.

I wasn’t watching where I was going, and when I looked up, I had to stop to avoid running right into someone.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I apologized and then gasped.

The person I’d nearly bumped into was an incredibly beautiful woman. Her features were so gorgeous I was sent reeling. I’d never had anything like this happen to me before.

She smiled kindly and said, “It’s all right.”

I thought she’d keep walking, but she stayed right where she was.

I wondered what she was doing. Then, I noticed she was staring at someone behind me—at Ai.

I slowly turned to look at her and, to my surprise, she wore a completely unfamiliar expression. She almost looked...scared.

“Long time no see, Ai,” the woman said.

Do they know each other?

I looked back at Ai again, but she simply stared at the woman, speechless.

“Looks like you’re having fun at your new school,” the woman said with a gentle smile. “Is this your boyfriend?”

Ai wore a grim expression as she finally spoke. “...This is Kozue, my older sister.”

I looked at the woman again, even more shocked than before.

Kozue waved her hand with a playful expression. “That’s right. I’m her big sister.”

Now that she mentioned it, Kozue did resemble Ai. But Ai had never mentioned having a sister, so I never would've guessed.

Kozue's heels clicked against the ground as she approached Ai. "So, Ai. Have you had enough fun on Dad's little escapade, yet?"

"...!" Ai's expression faltered.

"It's about time you came back," Kozue said with a confident smile. "Mom seems pretty serious about taking you away from him this time." She gave a throaty chuckle.



Ai looked shocked but stayed silent.

I had no idea what they were talking about.

I was just thinking about how happy I was we'd found each other again and rekindled our friendship. But I still didn't know anything about her life or why she'd come back.

A cold wind blew past.

Summer was over, and a new season had begun.

And now, we found ourselves at a crossroads, facing a major decision.

AFTERWORD

Hello, I'm Shimesaba.

This marks my fourth book published by Dash X Bunko. I'm so grateful for the opportunity.

As I wrote this third volume, I thought about something. Ever since I was young, I've often been praised by adults, including my parents, for having a way with words.

I used to take pride in that, but once I became an adult, I realized that there was more meaning to it than I'd initially thought.

Nowadays, I often find that the words I can't convey to others are the most important. When you put your thoughts into words, it feels like you're trying to persuade the person you're talking to or come up with words they'll understand. But in doing so, it changes the essence of what you truly feel.

Even after those exchanges, when I'm alone, I sometimes have trouble finding the words to represent what I was truly feeling. I fall asleep worrying about it.

I'll probably keep contemplating things like this until I die.

None of that has much to do with the content of this volume, but I wanted to get it down, like a memo to myself.

Now, onto the acknowledgements.

First, to Kajiwara, my editor. Thanks for patiently waiting for me to finish this script. Thanks to you, I was able to complete it. I'll do my best to keep things on a tighter schedule next time.

Next, to Ms. Shigure, who drew such wonderful illustrations despite her busy schedule. Thank you! When I saw the designs for Ai and Kaoru's swimsuits, I felt my weary heart come back to life! Having her illustrations grace each volume's

cover makes me as happy as can be.

To the proofreaders, who probably read the text more closely than I did, and to everyone else involved in publishing this book—thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, thank you to everyone who picked up this book and read it. It's a story about words and regrets. I hope you can find something radiant amid the characters' struggles.

I'll bring this afterword to a close with the hope that we'll meet again in another of my stories.

Shimesaba

About the Author

Shimesaba An otaku who loves seafood.

I've been saying I want to go on a trip to Ise Shrine my whole life, and I checked out an illustrator from Mie prefecture's livestream to find out if there was anything else there to see, but I didn't learn anything useful.

About the Illustrator

Ui Shigure An otaku who loves high school girls.

I'm from Mie prefecture and aiming to become a tourism ambassador, but I know so little I'm beginning to think it's hopeless. When I searched "best places to see in Mie prefecture," the number one most recommended spot was Nagashima Spa Land!

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