

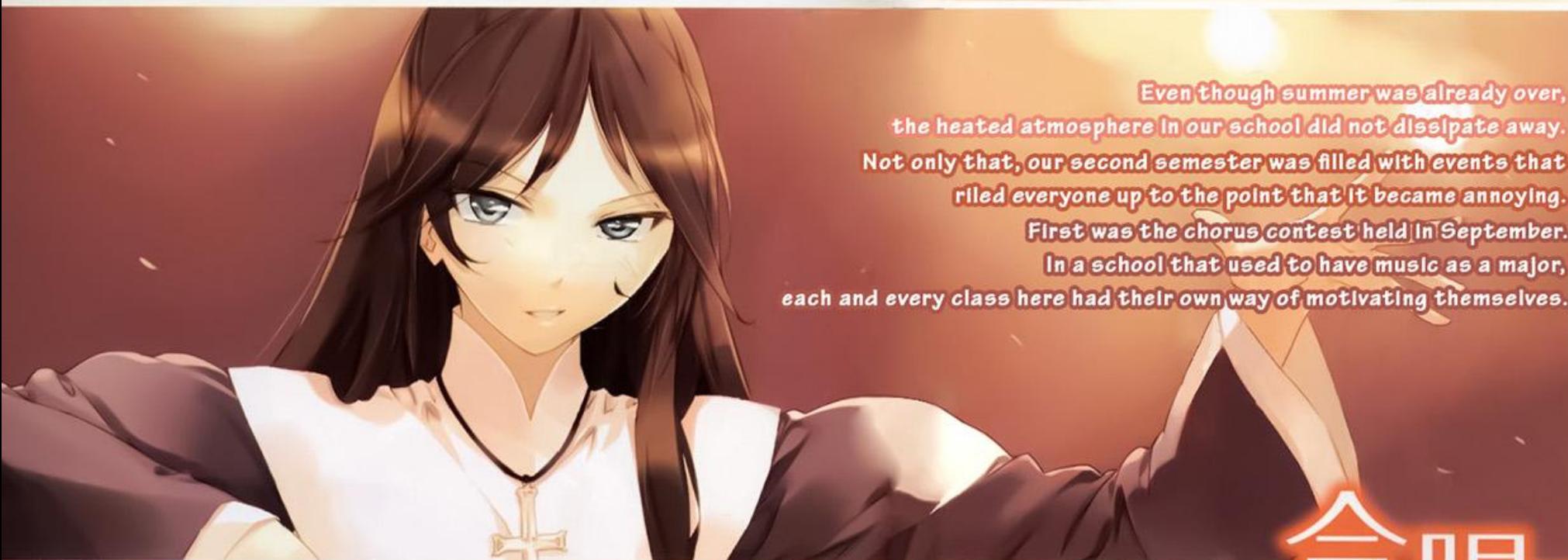


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Even though summer was already over, the heated atmosphere in our school did not dissipate away. Not only that, our second semester was filled with events that riled everyone up to the point that it became annoying.

First was the chorus contest held in September.

In a school that used to have music as a major, each and every class here had their own way of motivating themselves.

合唱コンクール

Chorus Contest



Moreover, Kagurazaka-senpai, Mafuyu and Chiaki were, for some reason, fighting it out with each other in the chorus contest, with the prize being the right to go on a date (?) with me— Our class had somehow engaged itself in intelligence warfare against Senpai's class, which was last year's winner in the chorus contest, and the sparks were flying all over the place as a result!



The heat from the chorus contest continued to burn its way into October, when the sports day was held. It has been a long standing tradition for participants to get injured one after another from the overly demanding events. There wasn't a single person who could make it all the way to the closing ceremony unscathed.

While the relay between the various school clubs was something that didn't affect the class scores, our band was somehow enrolled in a battle where our standing in the race will determine the amount of benefits we would get. It ended up with a suspicious conspiracy flying all over us, which heated things up even further!

体育祭

Sports Day



It's still too early for the flames to burn out.
The final event was the school's festival in November.

Aside from taking up the role as
the head chef for our class' goth lol cafe,

I was tasked with composing the songs for our band's performance as well.

The sheer amount of work forced upon me had
nearly caused me to go breathless from all the pressure.

However, the live performance during the school's festival
was definitely the most important event for our band.

I must not collapse!

Also, I didn't have the luxury
to focus all my attention
on the school festival alone.

Why, you ask—

School
Festival
文化祭



This guy here.
Not only is he a violin prodigy,
he's also Mafuyu's..... urm.....
what's their relationship again?

He too asked me
the same question as well.
"What is the relationship
between Naomi and Mafuyu?"

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Prologue

By pure chance, I stumbled upon the words that were carved onto the body of the guitar.

I have handled Mafuyu's Stratocaster once before, but I didn't know about the existence of these words back then. That was because the words were carved on the inside of the body, and would not be revealed unless the screws were loosened.

"I want to change the tone of my instrument too."

Mafuyu said that during one of our band practices. At that time, we were already done with our first ever live performance, and our summer holidays were coming to an end. I was having an active discussion with Kagurazaka-senpai about the topic of the effect units as well as the timbres. As she listened to our conversation, Mafuyu prodded my back with the neck of her guitar, though I had no idea why she was putting on an unhappy expression on her face.

"..... So you want to modify your guitar? Or do you mean you want to use an effects unit?"

"I don't really know these things. Just help me modify it, Naomi."

I don't quite have the guts to modify an antique guitar that is





worth three million yen, but I still removed the back cover and took a look. And it's then that I saw *that* located in a square pit behind the pickup.

"Looks like there's something carved on it."

"..... Is that Russian?"

Chiaki asked as she stuck her face in to take a look. I see, it does look like the Cyrillic alphabet. Just then, Mafuyu snatched the guitar away from my hands.

"Y-You can't see that."

"Eh? W-What?"

"Cover it up! You don't have to care about what's inside!"

Why is she so flustered? It's not like I understand the Cyrillic alphabet, yeah?

"Does Mafuyu know about the words inside your guitar?" asked Chiaki.

"I-I don't know."

"Senpai should know how to read Russian, right? And you should have read lots of books written by Russians too."

"Russia is the country of revolutions, but if you think that's enough





reason for me to know how to read nearly everything, then you are dead wrong!" was Senpai's answer.

Mafuyu snatched the screwdriver away from me. She then closed the cover and attempted to put the screws back into the place. However, as her right fingers were still unable to move much, she was finding it hard to do so. I could no longer watch her like this, so I helped her with the task.

"What's carved on it?" I tried asking her. Mafuyu took the restored guitar from my hands and hugged it tightly, as though she was trying to stuff the guitar into her body. After some deliberation, she said softly,

"It's a name. The name of the person who gave me this guitar."

The person who gave her the guitar?

"So someone gave you that guitar....." Chiaki touched the neck of the guitar gently.

"That person must be really generous to give you such a good guitar."

"He said that it's best for someone new to use a good instrument right from the beginning....."

"I thought Comrade Ebisawa learned the guitar all by herself. So you actually had someone to teach you..... how's the person like?"





"Eh? Uhh....."

In the end, Mafuyu did not explain things clearly as she was speaking in bits and pieces. I too thought that she learned the guitar on her own..... but then again, what's the reason for Mafuyu to start learning the guitar? For a professional pianist who was surrounded by classical music ever since she was born, something incredible must have happened for her to suddenly pick up the electric guitar.

"Stop asking me already!"

Mafuyu stomped me hard on my foot all of the sudden. Hey, the one asking you those questions is Senpai!

"Teach me how to use the effects unit. I hope that the tone of my playing can be as colorful as those of Kyouko's before our next live performance."

"Urm, okay....."

Actually, what I like the most is the refined sounds of Mafuyu's guitar that comes straight out of the amplifiers without the use of any effect units..... I don't think there's any need for her to compare herself to Senpai in that area, right? Moreover, it' was just not too long ago when our live performance had ended.....

"So when's our next live performance? I want to perform again as quickly as possible!"





Please, not Chiaki as well!? Senpai hugged Chiaki and Mafuyu on their shoulders, as though she was asking them not to be hasty.

"Since there's not too many bands who would invite us to play with them, our next performance will be during the school's festival."

The school's festival will be held during the later half of the second semester — and that is November, meaning that it's about three months away from now.

"That will be the first time we are performing by ourselves, so a three month preparation period should be adequate."

"I never thought I'd hear that from the same person who had suddenly arranged for us to take part in a live performance that was scheduled three weeks later!" I couldn't help but to take a dig at her.

"Have you participated in regatta before, young man?"

Senpai stretched out her finger and pressed it against my forehead. Why that sudden question?

"Nope....."

"Mmm..... at the initial stages, everyone would have to row their oars with a small but quick motion, but that changes after the boat has accelerated to a certain speed. Then, they would row their oars with a large but slow motion."





"What?"

"And it's the same for the band!"

This person here is saying some nice-sounding stuff to trick everyone again. But there is no longer any chance of a victory the moment the thought, 'Ah, so that's how it is' flashed past my mind. And so..... I could only agree to whatever she had said. Damn it!

"We are already at the stage where we are cruising at high speeds,"

Senpai took the guitar that was standing at the other corner of the classroom and carried it on her shoulder. With her back facing us, she continued,

"But it's not good for us to only accelerate. Plenty of troublesome situations may occur before the arrival of the school's festival, so what we should be doing now is getting ourselves used to the feeling of rowing, and move forward in a steadfast manner."

Senpai then turned her head around and propped up her index finger in a cute manner.

"It's not about speed, but the camaraderie between the four of us."

Chiaki nodded her head immediately. As for Mafuyu, she waited for a while before nodding her head silently.





I recalled this very scene a long time later..... and Senpai might have had some sort of premonition back then already. In actual fact, lots of troublesome things did happen. There was probably nothing more chaotic than the oncoming three months, regardless of whether it's about my own personal matters or the things that had to do with the band.

Come to think of it, all these troubles began with—

Just as the summer holidays was coming to an end, Tetsurou passed me two tickets.





Chapter 1

Chorus Contest of the Queen

Come to think of it, my father Tetsurou gives me things all the time, though it is rare for me to feel happy about the stuff I've received. Tetsurou is a music critic; that strange occupation of his allows him to get an endless amount of CDs, books and magazines without even the need to buy them. Tetsurou will always pass the excess things to me.

It would be fine if he only gives me 'things', but Tetsurou's laziness is not something to joke about.

That was something that happened on the last day of the summer holidays. When I arrived home after I was done with the band practice, Tetsurou flashed a really forced smile and said,

"Nao, I have something to give you. Something good."

"I don't want it!"

"At least ask me what that it is!"

"Say it then! I bet it's nothing good anyway!"





"What a poor attitude from you. What if it is something that Nao really wants?"

"Something I want..... for example?"

"For example..... right, how about a new mother who is young, beautiful and gentle?"

"That's something that only you want."

Speaking of which..... not only is Tetsuro past the age of forty, he has even divorced once. Our nearby neighbors still think of him as the undergrad who is forever retaking his finals. It's impossible for someone like you to get remarried, yeah? How about you face the truth? It's about time you do that!

"I do think that it's not good to let Nao do all the cooking, washing, cleaning and etc..... so that's why I have been actively participating in group dates at the hotels to get you a new mother!"

"It will all be solved if you do the housework instead!" All you do is to laze around at home, and you don't even write your articles!

"That's mean, Nao. Why are you saying that? I have been working hard all day so that I can raise you."

"Let me ask you this then - what's with you playing PS2 all day and your hero being at level 30 already?"





"Ah— Well, that's because I am doing research on Sugiyama Koichi's music today. After all, he was one of the pioneers who popularized modern music in Japan!"

I switched off the power to the PS2 immediately, and what came next was Tetsurou's shriek and his horrified face,

"I'd just leveled him up this morning! Damn you for switching it off!"

"Get your ass to work!"

I was preparing dinner when Tetsurou walked lazily into the kitchen. He was probably revived by the smell of miso soup. He said,

"Well then..... back to our topic."

There's no need for us to go back to the topic! God damn it! Why is this person so stubborn!?

"Nao, take this."

The things that were swaying in front of me while I was cooking were..... some sort of tickets. Just as I was about to brush the tickets aside, I caught a glimpse of the words 'Conductor: Ebisawa Chisato' — I then realized his motive, and my mood went down in an instant.





"This is..... your job, right.....?"

"Mmm, yeah. That's why I am giving them to Nao."

The world famous conductor — Ebisawa Chisato. The person who gave him the rude nickname 'Ebichiri' is none other than Tetsurou, who was also Ebisawa Chisato's classmate in high school and in the College of Music. People have frequently given Tetsurou jobs on critiquing Ebichiri's albums or concerts probably because they thought that both of them shared a really good relationship - however, it seems like Tetsurou was not too fond of criticizing the music of his friend. As to the course of action he would take when he encounters such a situation - you may be stunned by what you hear, but he would always shove the job to me. Also, this was the first time that he has asked me to critique a concert.

"No, I can't do it! Do it yourself."

"I don't want to as well. I took the job without asking who the conductor was. Please!"

Also..... why two tickets?

"I was thinking that I could attend the concert together with some beauty, so I asked them to give me two. These are VIP seats, you know? They cost forty thousand yen each! Man, how lucky Nao is to be able to go on an extravagant date! So please! It's not nice to leave the VIP seats empty, so make sure you bring someone along with you. I'll fork out the cash for the night at the hotel as well!"





"Oi Tetsurou! Wait!"

But all Tetsurou did was mumble nerdy things like, "Metal slime, metal slime" as he escaped back into the world of Dragon Quest.

God damn it! He won't be getting dinner tonight! But despite my anger, I still stuffed the tickets that Tetsurou gave me into my pocket.

I couldn't help it, because I kind of like Ebichiri's performances. Not only do I get to listen to one for free, I can get some royalties from the article too. Might as well.

On the next day was the school's opening ceremony. I thought it would be better to get someone to join me, so I brought the tickets along with me.

The first September of the first year of high school was a day when it felt like my classmates had undergone a complete change. For example, some were tanned, while others had their hair dyed.

"Why is Nao not tanned at all?"

"Right, didn't you go to the beach for your training camp?"

The guys whose looks did not undergo many changes came to me and asked me that.

"The purpose of the training camp was for band practice!"





That was the training camp for our Folk Music Club..... although we did swim a little.

"Rather than a change in looks, there must be changes in places where we cannot see."

"That's right. The summer holiday of the first year should be something that brings about metamorphosis - and in many different aspects!"

"And so..... who did Nao metamorphosize with?"

"We are talking about three girls and a guy that went to the training camp together. Something must have happened, right?"

The guys in my class were more or less jealous of the fact that I was the only guy out of the four members in my club. I really wish that they could at least learn what actually had happened before seething at me in their jealousy..... I was the one who did all the cooking and laundry, and not only that, lots of troublesome things had happened as well.

"That's unforgivable! Spit out the truth right now! Did you do it with Ebisawa?" "It should be Ebisawa, right?"

"Well..... Whatever you guys are imagining right now, none of that happened."

"Move. Stop blocking the way."





The voice of a girl suddenly came from behind the crowd, which caused the guys to disperse like a flock of frightened birds.

Maroon colored hair, fair skin and large blue eyes..... everything felt rather unreal. Even though it had already been four months since Mafuyu had transferred to our school, I still found it unbelievable to see her wearing our school's uniform.

"M-Morning....."

I gave a rather unnatural greeting. Mafuyu turned her head to stare at me angrily. She then nodded her head slightly and said with a voice as soft as bubbles, "..... Morning."

"W-Wow, Princess has graced him with a greeting!" "I can't believe this!"

Mafuyu shot a fierce glare at the guys who were making a ruckus before sitting down in her seat next to mine.

"Here. I have roughly memorized them all."

Mafuyu took out a few CDs from her bag. They were the albums of The Smashing Pumpkins that I had lent her yesterday. Since she is the guitarist of our band, she is doing research about the various types of rock bands.

"How are they?" Wait, she took only a single day to memorize them all?





"I don't really like them, but I can use them as a reference."

Our conversation ended like that.

But even so, that could already be considered to be a huge improvement. Back when she had just transferred here, Mafuyu acted just like an injured cat that was afraid of coming out of the hole that it was hiding in. After spring ended, we spent the summer together and conquered our very first live performance - it took all of that to shorten the distance between us by only a little.

But on the surface, it might only seem like she is finally willing to say the morning greetings. The guys who were looking from afar were having a discussion. "So how far has those two went?" "Since they are exchanging morning greetings, it means they should be bidding each other good night as well....." Shut up, you guys are irritating!

And next..... I checked to see if the tickets were still in my pocket.

I don't think that it will work, but I tried asking anyway.

"Oh right. Mafuyu, what are your favorite pieces out of all the symphonies by Dvořák?"

The classmates around us knitted their eyebrows. Can't blame them..... it's not like you'll be expecting to hear such questions in a high-school classroom in the morning.





"Why are you asking that?" Mafuyu tilted her head and asked.

"Well..... urm, just treat it as a survey."

"The third and the fifth."

The waters are deep, but there seems to be hope for me.

"How about Tchaikovsky?"

"Manfred Symphony."

"You two are indeed father and daughter. Even your tastes are alike."

"What are you talking about?"

I gently took out the tickets and placed them in front of Mafuyu — the pieces that will be performed are Tchaikovsky's <[1812 Overture](#)> and <[Manfred Symphony](#)>, as well as Dvořák's <[Symphony No. 5](#)> - and Ebichiri will be conducting. Mafuyu's expression froze when she saw that.

"..... What are you thinking?"

"Urm..... Tetsurou gave me this, and..... there's two of them, so I am trying to get someone to go with me."

"That feels so stupid. Why would I want to watch Papa's concert?"





Mafuyu turned her head towards the direction of the blackboard after she said that. She does really dislike her father a lot, so I knew it would be futile to try to invite her.

"He failed~" "He's been dumped~" "So there is really nothing going on between them!" "Nao, you've got guts to ask her out on a date in class." These live commentators are really irritating!

"So that means Nao's partner is indeed Aihara?"

"Yeah, it has got to be Aihara. She's practically no different than your wife!"

"Who's talking about me?"

The door located at our back's right suddenly opened up, and a voice came in. The classmates around me jumped up in shock.

"Morning! Hey Nao, listen. I forgot that today's the start of our second semester! We came to school at a later time during the summer holidays, so I slept till nine today as well. Why didn't you wake me up!?"

Chiaki walked past between me and Mafuyu, and sat down in the seat in front of me. As expected from the ex-Judo Club member, she had casually tied her short hair to the side with a rubber band. Her bag was stuffed with drum sticks and old magazines which were strengthened with sealing tape - she was probably practicing her drumming in the empty space on the rooftop or something.





"Oh? What's this?" The sharp-eyed Chiaki saw the tickets on my desk.

"A concert. Do you want to go? But it's a classical concert....."

"Will those around us forgive me if I sleep and talk in my dreams?"

Then don't sleep!

"Ah, so the conductor's Mafuyu's father? This is live, right? Will they be doing things like Ebichiri's cheers or Ebichiri's dance?"

I couldn't help but to give a sigh..... I really don't know what would happen if I bring Chiaki along with me.....

As today was the opening ceremony, there was a long homeroom held in the afternoon. Our class's female prime minister — Class-rep Terada walked up to the stand with brisk steps and went straight to the point,

"Next, we'll be discussing the topic for today."

Terada pushed up her glasses, and the male class representative (aka Terada's slave) began distributing the handouts.

"There will be a chorus contest at the end of the month, so we will have to select the conductor, the accompaniment as well as the rest of the staff."





Come to think of it, I do think there was something like that. Our school used to have music as a major, so it was a tradition to hold an inter-class chorus contest every year. It was a pretty grand event too. Should it be in any other ordinary school, the event would usually be held in the sports hall or something. But in our school, it will be held in a large music hall which can hold all the students and teachers.

I took a brief glance at the information about the chorus contest that was printed on the handout. The set piece is Mozart's <[Ave verum corpus](#)>. Pretty well selected. It's short and easy to memorize.

"Since we've already decided that Nao will be conducting, all we need to do now is to select the person to be the accompaniment."

"She's right....." "Nao's the only who can do it!"

"Oi, hold on a second!"

When I raised my head, I realized everyone in my class was already looking at me.

"You're not willing to do it, Nao?" Terada was speaking to me in an overbearing tone, as if she was the people's representative. "Isn't your father a music critic?"

"There's no relation between the two at all! Decide it in a more democratic manner!"





"Fine. Nao, please name three of your favorite conductors," said Terada.

"Why?"

"It's part of the democratic process."

What's with that? I don't get it. But there was no one in the class who dared to oppose Terada.....

"Hmm..... Eugene Ormandy, George Szell and Charles Munch."

"Well then—" Terada placed her two hands on the stand and scanned everyone in the class once. "If there is anyone besides Nao who can come up with the names of two or more conductors, please raise your hand now."

A silence fell upon the class, as though as it was twelve thousand years after a nuclear fallout. Forget about the raising of hands - no one moved a single inch.

"— Then it's decided. Nao shall be conducting."

I was rendered speechless by Terada's cruel declaration, and it felt like I could hear the sounds of the democracy crumbling around me.

"So next, the candidate for the accompaniment."





Just as she was done saying that, everyone in the class had carefully turned their head around to look at the seat besides me. I was originally confused at what was happening, but I soon caught on.

If we are talking about who in our class knows how to play the piano, the very first person who would come into the minds of everyone would only be..... Mafuyu. That's because she won the international piano competition held in eastern Europe at a mere age of twelve - the youngest ever girl piano prodigy.

However, she no longer wished to play the piano due to a certain reason, and it was a reason that everyone here - and not just me - knows very well. It was probably some psychological factors that resulted in her right hand's middle, ring, and little finger's inability to move normally.

Ebichiri did say this before - her hand was in a much better shape ever since she knew me. In actual fact, I had seen Mafuyu playing the piano secretly during our training camp.

Then again..... the problems of her heart are way more serious than her physical problems. It was at a concert in England - Mafuyu was just about to begin playing the first note of Chopin's sonata when her fingers became unable to move. She has not fully recovered from the damages caused by that incident. Even if this is just a school competition, she is probably unable to play the piano on the stage.....





That was the reason why no one dared to suggest that Mafuyu play the piano.

All everyone did was to quietly peek at Mafuyu's expressionless face. In the end, no one came up with a candidate for the position of the accompaniment.

"Oh? So you are the conductor for the Third Class of First Year?"

For some reason, Kagurazaka-senpai smiled really happily while she was saying that. She was actually the first person to reach the practice room - she probably attended classes in the morning. I mean, she is one of those bad students who skip classes all day and only come to school when the school's over.

"Senpai's from the Second Class of Second Year, right? Has your class already decided on the conductor?"

"Mmm, I was made the conductor right away - it was the same last year. I am already itching for the fight."

"Senpai's not singing? Why?" asked Chiaki.

I was curious about that as well. Senpai is the lead singer for our band. Wouldn't it be better for her to be singing instead of conducting?

"The pleasure you get when the audience behind you applause for





you is quite an unique experience! The only occupation in this world which allows you to experience that is the conductor. I remember..... Ebisawa Chisato said something like that during one of his interviews."

"That's because he is a narcissist."

Mafuyu mumbled while she wiped her guitar with a piece of cloth. From her tone, it sounded more like she was irritated by her father rather than hating on him.

"It feels like I can get along really well with your father. Can we invite him to see the chorus contest? He should be more than willing to come if there are no clashes with his schedule, right?"

"Definitely not!"

Mafuyu rejected Senpai's suggestion with a frightening expression on her face.

"Ah, speaking of which....." The talk about Ebichiri made me remember the matter about the concert, so I took out the tickets. "Are you interested in attending this, Senpai? Though it's a complimentary invitation ticket....."

The smile on Senpai's face disappeared as she took the ticket from me. What's wrong? Is she busy on the day of the concert? Or are the pieces too heavy for her tastes? Dvořák's <Symphony no. 5> is not really a problem, but <Manfred> may not be something for everyone.....





"There are two tickets..... meaning that you are coming along as well?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, because Tetsurou pushed his job to me yet again. Urm, well..... you don't have to force yourself if you don't want to."

"No. I'll definitely make myself free on that day! I can treat this as your invitation to a date, right?"

"Eh?" Huh? What?

"It has not even been a month since that passionate night - I had never expected young man to take the initiative and invite me. I am dying to turn my happiness into endless words and whisper them into your ears, but since there are others around us right now, let's leave it for that very night."

Please, don't go around saying such things, or else you'll be causing misunderstandings for those who are unaware of what is going on! What do you mean by a passionate night.....

"..... For that very night?"

"Because the concert will be held in Tokyo, right? It will be eight at night when the concert ends, and Ebichiri will most likely answer the audience's calls for an encore. We should be having dinner after the concert, so rather than going back home after that, it would be better to stay there for the night."





"You can't!" Mafuyu stood up all of a sudden.

"Geez— Senpai! What are you going on and on about!"

Chiaki stood up as well. I took a step back on reflex.

"I do welcome the cute jealousies of you two!"

Senpai hugged Chiaki, who was walking towards her, and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Don't be thinking that I'll forgive Senpai just like this!" Chiaki was still furious despite being hugged in Senpai's arms. I was already used to scenes like these, so I was not too surprised. Senpai do really enjoy flirting around with girls, while Chiaki joined this band all because of Senpai. She should be mad even if Senpai was saying that as a joke. But..... urm, why is Mafuyu angry as well? And she's even glancing at me angrily.

"Are you jealous of me, Comrade Ebisawa? Or perhaps..... you want to come along as well?"

Senpai proceeded to hug Mafuyu from behind, and dangled the ticket right before Mafuyu. Mafuyu quickly turned her head away as her face turned red.

"Then..... I'll be attending the concert together with young man, alright?"





"..... You can't."

"You heard what she said, young man."

Senpai threw the ticket back at me. It felt like Senpai was happily looking at the strange turn of events.

"The ticket's yours, so you should be the one to decide whom to give it to. However..... it seems like both Comrade Ebisawa and Comrade Aihara are unwilling to go?"

"Kyouko, that's just too sly of you."

Mafuyu protested as she continued to struggle in Senpai's arms. Mafuyu is the only person in the whole school to address Senpai by her name, and it's precisely because of how they are always hugging each other like this, that the misunderstandings about the Folk Music Club were becoming deeper and deeper.

Then I suddenly thought of something..... if I gave the ticket to Mafuyu and used the concert as an excuse to try to convince her once more, then maybe it would be an opportunity for her to get back on good terms with her father?

But..... with the way things are, it would be a little strange for me to give the ticket to Mafuyu now.....

"How about this? The ticket will go to the victor in some contest which we will all be participating in."





A beastly smile appeared at the corners of Senpai's mouth.

"If that's the case, then Senpai would definitely win!"

Chiaki complained, and I felt the same as she did. Senpai loves things like gambling and contests. Her ingenious schemes have ensured that she had never lost before.

"I can handicap myself! Comrade Ebisawa and Comrade Aihara can team up, while I'll be alone by myself. I grant permission for young man to be on the same side as you two. One against three. How about that?"

It's a little strange for the terms to be that good, right? Senpai must be very confident of herself if she is to come up with conditions like that. Just as I was about to say something, Mafuyu raised her head suddenly and said,

"Fine."

"I'm really happy, Comrade Ebisawa."

Senpai kissed Mafuyu lightly on her forehead. Mafuyu's face went red in an instant, and she quickly pushed Senpai's lips away.

"If Mafuyu's taking part, then I am in as well!"

Urm, you two, calm down! Don't accept the contest without even knowing what you girls will be competing in!





"So what are we competing in?"

"How about..... a sauna endurance contest where we can touch each other?"

"That's just you wanting to touch the two girls!"

"Young man can join us as well, yeah?"

"I see, I can make sure that you are not touching them..... no wait, that's not it! I am a guy here!"

This person can definitely get us a sauna where it's unisex, so that was a really scary suggestion.

"If you are against the sauna, then how about an eating contest where we can touch each other?"

"What's the reason for touching others in an eating contest? And stop being engrossed in being able to touch others!"

"Then..... if we are talking about four people, then Mahjong will be a good choice."

"I do not know the rules of Mahjong," Mafuyu admitted immediately.

"It's simple. The one with the least points will have to strip."





"Don't teach her the wrong things!"

"So your rule is that the winner has to strip? I don't really mind if you are that desperate about stripping."

"I am not stripping! And please do not forget the original intent of the contest!"

After coming up with a huge list of indecent suggestions, Senpai finally said this in a serious manner,

"How about this then. Since we have four musicians here who are fighting it out, then let's decide the winner with music!"

Senpai took a look at my, Chiaki's and Mafuyu's faces..... In retrospect, all those crazy antics were probably part of Senpai's plans to force us to grudgingly accept her suggestions.

"The winner shall be decided through the chorus contest!"

The whole class already knew the rumors of the contest by the very next day.

"I heard you guys will be competing against Kagurazaka-senpai, and Nao has to strip if he loses?"

"What's the point of you stripping? It obviously has to be Aihara or Ebisawa who does it!"





It seemed like there was something strange about the information they received. As for Terada, she was looking at me with tears in her eyes while saying,

"I am really happy to see Nao being that motivated about conducting!"

No, you're wrong. I am not the least bit motivated.

The rules of the contest were really simple. Senpai's class will be competing against our class, and the winner will be the class which gets the higher score. There's a total of twenty four classes in our school, and even though they will only announce the results of the top five rankings, but..... "It would be impossible for both classes to miss the rankings, because my class will definitely get ourselves within the top five" - that was what Senpai said confidently.

"Meaning that Kagurazaka-senpai will be stripping if we win?" One of the idiotic guys said that, which stirred up those around him.

"Everyone, lend me your strength!"

All the guys raised their fists in the air in response to Chiaki's cry. Please! What are you guys so excited about? However, I was most surprised when Mafuyu said, "I am willing to be the accompaniment during our practices".

"Princess..... is that really okay?"





Terada was on the stand when she asked that question worriedly. 'Princess' is a nickname which Terada came up for Mafuyu after much difficulty, and now the rest of the girls in class are addressing Mafuyu by that as well. It may seem like they are doing it out of respect for Mafuyu, but in reality, it's their way of teasing her.

"It's okay. I cannot sing well anyway."

Mafuyu glanced at me as she said that.

"It should be fine if it is only during the practices. I can do it if Naomi composes the accompaniment."

I nodded my head without even thinking. Mafuyu had actually said she wants to play the piano..... is she that desperate to win?

It should be easy to compose the piano accompaniment for the set piece. Mafuyu should be able to play it despite the number of mobile fingers she has if I omit a few notes. Also, she should still be way better than those without any experiences with the piano.

"Let's do just that. We'll come up with the rest of the plan after we are done selecting our choice piece."

Mafuyu agreed to Chiaki's suggestion.

On the same day after school, we sent two guys over to





Kagurazaka-senpai's class to spy on what our enemies had chosen for their choice piece, but..... only one of them came back.

"In order to let me escape, he..... ugh....."

The survivor gagged and said no more. What's with the exaggerated acting!

"But..... it should be fine! He is a really patriotic guy, so he would never reveal our class no matter what sort of torture they put him under!"

"They'll find out from his badge....."

"Ahh, I see. We're done for!"

Our spy went into a frenzy from that tsukkomi of mine. Are you retarded!? Even without the badge, there should be at least someone who could recognize him by his face!

"So did you two find out what their choice piece is?" Terada asked.

"Nope. We were arguing on the topic of the girls' uniform. That guy rejected my notion of cheerleader outfits, so I couldn't help but to protest. And we were caught like that."

"You guys are absolutely useless."

"You two don't have to come back!"





After having seen their retarded acts, my drive - which was barely there to begin with - sunk even lower.

The recordings of last year's chorus contest dealt us the critical blow. The winner was the First Class of the First Year - in other words, it was Kagurazaka-senpai's class.

The person with her hair coiled up and wearing a formal tuxedo was none other than Kagurazaka-senpai. Their choice piece was Niimi Tokuhide's ensemble piece <[Kikoeru](#)>. The different tempos of the song were clearly distinguishable, and that was coupled by a meticulous ensemble. We were enchanted by it despite us watching the video while sitting on the hard and uncomfortable chairs of the classroom. [TLNote: 聞こえる (Kikoeru), roughly translated as 'To be Heard']

"It's no wonder they got first....."

"It's said they are the first ever first-years to win the contest."

My classmates discussed quietly in the dark. Looks like we have no chance at victory. Well, I was okay with Senpai winning ever since the beginning.

In order to handicap herself, Senpai had suggested a one versus three battle. It may seem like we had three times the advantage over her, but since the contest is a fight between the classes, we did not manage to gain any actual advantage from it. The only





thing unchanged was her admirable use of sophistry which placed her in an favorable position on the battlefield.

I gave a weak sigh. At the same time, I could feel a gaze piercing through my cheeks - Mafuyu was staring hard at me from her seat besides me.

"U-Urm..... What?"

From the moment the video ended till the lights in the classroom were switched back on, Mafuyu continued to stare at me.

"Do you really think we can't win?"

Mafuyu finally spoke as our classmates began to leave the audiovisual room.

"But..... you did see the video just now, right?"

"That performance..... looks more impressive than it actually is."

"What Comrade Ebisawa said is right~"

That's what Kagurazaka-senpai said during the band practice that day.

"There are a few techniques that will help increase the chances of winning the chorus contest. For example, you can deliberately





emphasize the strength of the voices; choosing a polyphonic piece; waving the baton in exaggeration..... and so on."

"I see....."

"Also, all the judges are inexperienced in music!" Chiaki added in. So that's the reason why Mafuyu said it looked more impressive than it actually was? Because it was a performance to bluff the laymen?

"Wrong."

Mafuyu shook her head as she continued to tune her instrument.

"It's to bluff 'the laymen who were forced to become judges but are unwilling to show their lack of expertise'."

..... I see. Any amateur of the profession would be able to discern if the performance was good or bad. However, they would try to find 'reasons' to decide whether they should be awarding high or low marks to the performance. And that's where our cunning Senpai was aiming at with her tactics.

"I would have adopted a different strategy if the judging criteria was based on the polls of the student population. But since there were only four judges, it was much better to choose a piece that will cater to their tastes."

"That reminds me - considering Senpai's class, your choice piece was really conservative."





I thought they would choose rock as their choice piece, but their selected piece sounded way more like the performance of an ensemble. It was kind of disappointing.

"One of the judges last year was the social studies teacher, who advocated freedom."

I sighed. Senpai had actually considered even the tiny details..... The song <Kikoeru> which they sang was composed during the Gulf War. It is a song that advocates peace and the conservation of nature. It must have struck a chord with the social studies teacher.

"So..... what will your class be singing for this year?" asked Chiaki.

"We've decided to do rock."

"Eh? Which song?"

"It's a secret. My assistance to the enemies will end right here."

Senpai grabbed her guitar and stood up.

"Let's begin our practice! We can't just focus on the chorus contest alone - our school's festival is approaching as well."

Senpai was the only one out of the four members of Folk Music Club who cycles to school. That meant that while on our way to the





train station after our practice, we could make use of the time to discuss our battle plans.

"When's the latest we can decide on our choice piece? This weekend? Then we'll have to think harder~"

Chiaki swung her bag around as she walked in the middle of the shopping street. Her eyes were burning with the passion that is possessed only by members of the sports clubs, and that made me feel all worned out.

"Who are the judges this time?"

Mafuyu asked from the other side of me.

"The principal and Miss Maki are the fixed judges for each year. Who else is there....."

Miss Maki is the music teacher, and she's also the supervisor for our Folk Music Club. That was the reason why Chiaki asked, "That means we can bribe Miss Maki, right?"

"Problem is, Kyouko would be a step ahead of us if it can be done," replied Mafuyu. They ignored the presence of me who was in between them, and continued exchanging their opinions enthusiastically.

"Nao!"





Someone stomped on me all of the sudden, which nearly caused me to fall.

"You are always daydreaming! Can you please be more enthusiastic about this!? Is it okay for you to lose to Senpai?"

Chiaki pulled her face close to mine. As we were standing in the direct middle of a crowded street right in front of the station, the stares from the passerby felt really uncomfortable.

"Because I don't think we can win."

"So you want to go to the concert with Kyouko?"

Mafuyu came to my front and questioned me with a stinging glare from her eyes.

"No, it's not like I particularly want to....."

"Be clear about it!"

"Why is Mafuyu so concerned about all this? I can understand the reason why Chiaki's angry, but....."

"Oh? So you know why I am angry?"

Chiaki asked in a really belittling tone. I nodded my head without confidence. It's because Chiaki likes Senpai, and having heard Senpai say that she wanted to go on a date with me— she would





not feel that great even if Senpai meant it as a joke, right? Chiaki knitted her forehead and sighed when she heard my explanation.

"Mafuyu, our enemy is probably not Senpai, but the denseness of this idiot."

"I feel the same as well."

Mafuyu agreed without hesitation. For an instant, she looked at me as though she had something to say. However, she turned her head away immediately and walked quickly towards the station. Chiaki made a face at me and caught up with Mafuyu.

I remained rooted to the ground for quite a while due to my confusion. When I ran down the stairs after realizing that I have to chase them, the doors to the train was already closed.

I sat on a bench on the platform in exhaustion. A voice then suddenly came from behind me,

"Looks like it will be an easy victory for me."

I nearly fell off from the bench. I turned my head around and saw Kagurazaka-senpai standing behind me with a crafty smile on her face.

"..... Why are you here?"

Didn't she cycle back home on her bicycle already!?





"I was planning to scout out your battle plans, but it seems like it was an unnecessary move."

Senpai sighed and sat down next to me.

"In any case, Senpai had already won the moment you suggested the idea of a contest, right? The one versus three handicap is pointless. We have no chance of winning!"

Right after I was done saying that, Senpai stared at me with a slightly shocked expression on her face.

"Young man, it seems like you have some misunderstandings about me~"

"What did I misunderstand?"

"You should know very well that I will only fight battles that I will win. The other mantra of mine is..... I will never fight in a battle if it cannot even be considered as one."

Senpai placed her hand on my thigh.

"I joined this battle because I believed that young man, Comrade Ebisawa and Comrade Aihara are worthy of being my opponents. This contest is not a pointless one, and I do not want an empty victory either."





The announcement of the incoming train was broadcasted over the station. Senpai gently moved her body away and stood up.

"However..... the current you is unable to compete against me. Forget about one versus three - the three of you added together is not even on par with just half of me. What a shame."

I listened blankly to the sound of the incoming train as well as the footsteps of Senpai as she climbed up the stairs before she disappeared from my sight. However, I was unable to pry my back away from the bench for a long time.

She believed that we are her worthy opponents.

But the current me is—

The next day, it was our class' turn to use to use the music room after school. Since we had not yet decided on our choice piece, we started by practicing our set piece.

K618 <Ave verum corpus> is one of Mozart's masterpieces. It's a simple song that is easy for the different parts to practice on their own. The only thing is, it would not be easy to gather the four different, separated lines of soprano, alto, tenor and bass, and blend them together into a single song. It is difficult for a layman to grasp the techniques of the harmony - now add on the fact that the thirty plus voices before me were all singing on their own. I





was beginning to feel a loss of what to do as I held the baton in my hand.

"Nao!"

Chiaki, who was standing in the front row together with the other altos, had her eyebrows arched upwards.

"Hey! If all it takes to conduct is to stand there and swing your hands to the left and right like a metronome, then I know how to conduct too!"

"The only thing about you that is worth mentioning is your knowledge in music! So please do better than that!"

"That's right, you won't be able to be your father's successor like this!"

Oi! Don't lump me together with him! I placed the baton on the music stand. I was rather pissed off. Hey, I'll be really troubled if you pushed the blame of the disharmony onto me as well!

An awkward silence filled the music room for a short while. The person who broke the silence once more was Chiaki.

"How about this - we'll head outside."

Eh? W-What? Our classmates were stirring up quite a commotion thanks to Chiaki's words, but Chiaki turned to face the piano and continued,





"Mafuyu, please teach that idiot properly. We'll go to the corridor to practice within our own sections."

There were some who objected and said they did not want to leave the air-conditioned comfort of the music room, but Class-rep Terada agreed to the suggestion of Chiaki. And so, my classmates began walking out of the room to the corridors, leaving behind a surprised me as well as Mafuyu, who was still sitting at the piano.

What the heck is going on here? Just what is Chiaki planning?

I tried my hardest not to come into eye contact with Mafuyu, and sat myself before the music stand.

I could hear the singing of my classmates coming from outside of the heavy metal door of the music room. Not only that, but all the classes in school were practicing at this time as well. The voices of hundreds of people were all mixed up together, though it did not sound clear.

"..... Do you still want to be the conductor?"

Mafuyu asked me softly.

"I am not against it....."

It's just that everyone seemed to have some sort of weird expectations of me - it was the same for yesterday with Kagurazaka-senpai as well. I hate it. They think we can beat the





winners of last year just because I critique music? A conductor is not a magician!

"I can understand your feelings....."

As my view was blocked by the cover of the piano, I was unable to see the expression of Mafuyu while she was mumbling those words.

"I feel..... that a conductor is unnecessary for an ensemble that is made up of laymen."

"..... Mmm, you're right."

"Why?"

"Well, no one has any spare attention left to take note of my baton. They already have their hands full with the scores before them. The laymen ensemble will have depend on the accompaniment of the piano. But even the accompaniment is not—"

I stopped my sentence halfway.

Everything I had said till then was correct. Those without music background would be unable to sing along to the conductor, while an inexperienced accompaniment player will only play the piano at his own pace, so there is absolutely no need for a conductor. However—

I stepped onto the conductor's stand once more and exchanged eye contact with Mafuyu. It was as though her eyes were asking





me this — why did you think I volunteered to be the accompaniment?

That's right. Our accompaniment was not selected just because she 'happens to have learned the piano before', which is a reason that can be seen in nearly every other classes.

The accompaniment is none other than Mafuyu.

There's Mafuyu and I — a weapon which Kagurazaka-senpai's class does not possess.

I gently lifted the baton off the music stand. Mafuyu's shoulders responded sensitively to my action.

I waved the first note slowly, as though I was trying to pierce a needle in the air. The song was just forty-six bars long. Despite the solemn tune, it did not affect the liveness to each and every bar and beat—

The melody of the piano began making its steps forward. I was in total control of the tempo, and it almost felt like I could even scoop up each individual notes with my hand..... Since the tune was something I had composed specially for Mafuyu, it was made up of only the most basic triad. The delicate sounds would perfectly coordinate itself to the slightest movements of my fingertips. I thought I could even feel Mafuyu's breaths. The song began to play in my ears - the main melody switched its scale to A Major. The mood of the tune then became slightly darker, and the scale was changed to F Major.





The crystal clear voices of prayers echoed against the tall ceilings of the cathedral before being absorbed by the baton in my hand, which was pointing to a faraway place. The area around us finally returned to silence.

When the piece was over, I stared at the blackboard at the back of the music room for a long while. I could feel my strength flowing away from my body.

I slowly stepped down from the stand and made my way towards the piano. Mafuyu's face was dyed a faint red. She shifted her gaze away when she realized I was looking at her.

"I'm sorry, Mafuyu..... and thank you."

"All I did..... was to play to your conducting."

I focused my attention on Mafuyu's right hand, which was resting on the keyboard..... the hand of hers that was different from everyone else's.

Mafuyu used that hand for my sake—

"Ah! I did not do it for you!"

"Ah..... no, you obviously did not do it for me, so..... why? Because you want that ticket?"

"No! Y-You and Kyouko....."





Me and Kagurazaka-senpai? Is there something wrong with us attending the concert together? But Mafuyu's face turned red as she was halfway into her sentence, and she did not say anything else for a while.

"Geez! You idiot!"

In the end, she said that and began to slap my arms hard repeatedly. Just as I was about to grab her wrist to stop her from doing that, Mafuyu slapped my hand away with her face flushed red. She was looking past me and towards my back—

I turned around in shock. The door of the music room was opened unknowingly, forming a tiny slit, and my classmates were all peeking at us through the slit.

"Darn! It's over already?"

"The squabble between you two was really short!"

"That was so boring!"

It's not like we exist for your viewing pleasure!

Chiaki gave me a hard stomp on my ass. By the time we resumed our practice, there was not much time left for our class to use the music room. However, the practice made me feel like I had finally managed to catch a hold of the edges of Kagurazaka-senpai's tuxedo.





After the practice was over, Mafuyu and I were left alone once more as both of us went to the music library to return the baton and the scores.

"Mafuyu, can you play the accompaniment for the actual performance as well?"

I quietly asked Mafuyu that question while I was returning the scores back onto the racks in the dark storeroom. Mafuyu stared at my face before lowering her head.

She can't? Those inerasable scars of Mafuyu were something inflicted to her while she was on the stage. Even though she can play the piano during our practices, if we are talking about her playing under the spotlights—

But..... the sounds of her piano play an important role in guiding our class throughout the whole song. We will definitely have to depend on Mafuyu's accompaniment so that the chorus could coordinate themselves to my conducting much better.

It was then when I suddenly thought of something.....

"Then..... how about this. At the very least....."

Mafuyu listened to my request with a helpless expression on her face. After much deliberation, she finally said to me hoarsely,

"..... Do I have to?"





"Mmm, yes!" I nodded my head calmly.

"So that means you do not want to attend the concert with Kyouko?"

"No, that's not it." For some unknown reason, Mafuyu was particularly persistent about that. To me, it does not matter who gets the ticket. It's just—

"I want to beat Senpai. I want to show Senpai the things that you and I can do together, so I will definitely need your help."

Mafuyu bit her lips. Her gaze fell to the floor.

So it still can't do huh..... Just as I was about to apologize to Mafuyu, she suddenly lifted her head and said,

"..... I understand..... I will give it a try."

I grabbed her by her hands and swung them around emotionally.

With that, we might finally be on par against Senpai - for the set piece anyway. So what is left..... is the choice piece.

Senpai said we deserved to be her opponents. Senpai believed in me. Chiaki believed in me. And Mafuyu believed in me as well.

I will never let her have the chance to say things like 'an easy victory' again.





Prior to the band practice that day, I decided to make a trip to the music preparatory room to ask Miss Maki some questions..... meaning that I'll be investigating the judges.

"There's no point to bribing me."

Miss Maki said that to me straightaway as I stepped into the room. Her hair was rolled up and she was wearing a pure white blouse together with a tight skirt - this music teacher of ours looked just the perfect teacher who had stepped out of a guy's fantasy, but in actual fact, she was a violent lady who acted on her whims.

"Because I have to go along with the preferences of the head! And I'll even have to say things like, 'Ara, Mrs Hayase has such incredible sense of music! Ohohohoho~'. What a pain....."

What appeared in my mind was the face of another judge — Mrs. Hayase, the head teacher of the second year. She looked like an idle and rich lady, but she was actually a really strict middle-aged woman.

"Please do not reveal those complicated inside-stories to your students without any reservations!"

"But you are here for those complicated inside-stories, right? You are trying to bribe me so that you can beat Kagurazaka."

Since when did I ever say anything about bribing? Also, that means





that the details about our contest against Senpai has reached the ears of the teachers already?

"No, I am just here to check on the judges' preference in music."

"How much?"

"Eh?"

"How much are you paying me?"

Oi! Damn you! You just said you would not accept my bribes, and now you are asking me to bribe you!? I gripped hard on my knees to suppress my anger, and squeezed out the following words,

"In exchange, I'll give you the cream puffs sold at the pastry shop next to the station."

"I'll take four of those!"

Damn her for taking the opportunity to ask for a bribe.....

"You should know that our principal's a Christian, right? He was the one who chose the set piece, so you will not go wrong if you choose gospels or things like that. For the past years, it was likely for the judge who was chosen by the students to award high scores to rock and pop music. As for Mrs. Hayase, her preferences are hard to grasp. She likes movies and TV series, so you guys can try investigating along those lines?"





"How do we go about investigating it? By asking her directly? But I have never attended her lessons before, nor have I spoken with her even once."

"Who knows? Come up with something by yourself. Kagurazaka had already asked her."

Ah! So Miss Maki had said the same things to Senpai as well? Seemed like we were a step behind her.

"Mmm, I am craving some pastries already! It's all up to you now, Nao!"

As I was angry at Miss Maki's demand for bribes, I ended up buying only a single cream puff and cutting it up into quarters before giving it to her. It's obvious I was severely beaten up by her.

It was not like Miss Maki's information was totally useless though. We do at least know that we have to focus our attention on Mrs Hayase.

I subconsciously went to the staff room in an attempt to look for Mrs Hayase. However, Kagurazaka-senpai was already in the office. She was at the table of the head of second year.

I hid myself behind a compartment wall and peeked at them. Mrs Hayase was grabbing onto Kagurazaka-senpai and lecturing her. Not surprised here. Kagurazaka-senpai was a bad student who





hardly attends lessons, so it's likely for her to be summoned to the staff room occasionally and get lectured by the teachers, right? But upon listening closer, their conversation had unknowingly turned into things like, "Right, right! That's the song! I do not know the name of the song, but I had heard it in a movie's soundtracks before....." "Ah..... then it is probably....." Senpai's techniques in getting others to talk is something really scary.....

I then thought of something—

All I need to do is to stay close to Senpai and slowly piece together the information which she had gathered, right?

No, but..... that will mean we are progressing at the same pace as Senpai. We will have to overtake Senpai by a long distance if we want to defeat her.

The conversation between Kagurazaka-senpai and Mrs Hayase was already over after I was thought about all these things. How can this be!? I had actually missed the important details at the most crucial moments!

"It seems like the First Class of Second Year has already decided on their choice piece."

The news came to us the next day after school. It seemed like the First Class of Second Year was very enthusiastic about the contest as well. Not only were they putting up defenses against our spy, they even rallied together to berate him when he went to the music





room to gather intelligence. Regardless of all that..... he still managed to bring us precious information.

"I could hear them clapping to the beats. They were clapping and singing at the same time, so it should not be the set piece, right?"

"What type of song was it?"

Chiaki strangled the spy's neck in an attempt to squeeze out all information from him.

"I-I have nothing else. All I heard was just that."

"If they have decided on their choice piece, then they should have submitted it to the students' council already. We should know if we check there?"

Terada's glasses gave a gleam right after she heard the suggestion of a certain guy.

"Alright! Go!"







Terada's really scary! Our spy flew out of the classroom right after her instructions, and he was back within five minutes.

"It's crazy! The students' council room has turned into a battlefield! The killing auras of the students are getting stronger as it gets closer to the contest."

"That is of no importance. Did you manage to get your hands on any intel?"

Terada's voice was incredibly harsh. It felt like she was pressing for his answers by stepping on his head with her shoes.

"Yes Boss! There were a stack of papers piled on their table, which looks like the registration forms. I did my best and snapped a picture of them with my handphone.

They were already working so hard (in the wrong manner) for the chorus contest, so what sort of crazy stunts will our class pull when it's time for our sports day? I shuddered at the thought of that, but I still took a look at the screen of my classmate's handphone.

The first thing I saw was the messy table with papers and stationery scattered on top of it. A familiar piece of paper was clipped beneath the cover of the contest brochures..... it's the paper used to write down the selected choice pieces. I could make out the '2-1' characters written in the blank for the class, but—

"We can't see the name of the song as it is all covered up! You are really useless!"





The spy could only tremble from the cold and harsh words of Terada — the cover of the brochure had overlapped the area which was used to fill the names of the choice pieces.

"Wait. We can still see the edge."

Said Mafuyu, who was looking at the screen together with me. Our foreheads almost came into contact.

"What's written on it? The image quality is bad."

"It's probably written in shorthand."

Mafuyu turned the screen horizontally and squinted at the screen. She then said in a soft voice,

"What's written on it is — Queen."

Queen?

A strange voice escaped from my throat.

Sparks of fire bursted all over the place. The various thoughts in my mind linked themselves together into a line in an instant.

"Do you know what it is?"

I nodded my head in response to Mafuyu's question.





The band, Queen.

They are a legendary rock band from England, famous for their beautiful and catchy melodies as well as their rich chorus — if we are choosing rock for our choice piece, songs from Queen will definitely be the best choice.

I recalled Miss Maki's words once more—

The principal will like gospels. As for the students' representative, they will usually award high marks to rock or pop songs. Kagurazaka-senpai should have obtained information similar to mine. She also got some information from her conversation with Mrs Hayase, and Senpai did say earlier they will be going down the path of rock this year.

Combining all of the points above..... and assuming they had chosen a song from Queen—

"I could hear them clapping to the beats."

"..... I got it."

"Eh?"

"I know the piece Senpai chose."

Chiaki stared at me as well.





"A song from Queen, clapping to the beats, and has a gospel feel to it..... there is only one song which fulfills the above mentioned criteria and is usable for the chorus contest."

Even Chiaki realized what the song was as well. We said the name of the song together at the very same time.

"<Somebody to Love>."

"Is it okay to choose the same song as they did?"

Mafuyu popped the question as we sat on the bench on the platform while waiting for the train home.

Right after that, the Third Class of First Year immediately submitted the name of our choice piece to the student's council room, and it was none other than <Somebody to Love>. After much consideration, I decided that the only way we could win was to choose the same song as Senpai's class for our choice piece.

"They will compare us to Senpai's class if we are singing the same song as them."

Chiaki was obviously feeling uneasy about it as well. I deliberately ignored their expressions and replied,





"Senpai's class is indeed stronger than ours when it comes to singing. We will not be able to compete against them in that. However....."

I was not that confident as well, so I could not look straight at their face. I could only stare at my opened palms.

"If that's the case, it will be the same regardless of the song we choose. Therefore, we must use the weapons that only we possess."

"Weapons?"

In <Somebody to Love>, the main vocals are sung by a six-part chorus. Despite sounding like a gospel, it is still of the classical rock songs.

"We have a bassist, a guitarist and a drummer in our class."

Chiaki stared at me with her eyes opened wide.

"..... U-Us?"

I nodded.

Since Senpai said she has a one against three disadvantage, we shall make full use of our advantage without hesitation. Me, Chiaki and Mafuyu are all we need to form a rock band. That is the unique weapon of ours which Senpai's class do not have.





"But..... putting the guitars aside, the organizers will definitely not allow us to place the drum set on the stage! What should we do about that?"

"I have two sets of mini electronic drums at my house, so let's use that. The volume should be just right as long as we have a set of speakers. It's the same as how you will normally drum, so it should be easy."

The train arrived before we knew it. The noise produced as it approached the station sounded as though it was attempting to crush the surging emotions within me. I shoved the oppressive feeling aside and stood up between the two girls. I stood by the safety line and turned my head backwards to look at the surprised Chiaki as well as Mafuyu, who was giving off a vexed expression through her eyes.

"— Let's rock!"

Just as expected from a school that used to have music as its major, the atmosphere on the day of the chorus contest was really heated. The school was broadcasting Haydn's oratorios in the morning, while the canopy of the music hall was changed into those specially made for the chorus contest, which has the event's name printed on it..... If only they would direct some of the funds used in this event towards the various clubs instead.





It has been an hour since the contest began. Our classmates squeezed themselves in like a pack of sardines on at the right side of the stage, pried the curtains slightly apart and peeked at the audience through the gap. The teaching staff seated at the first row were already showing putting on irritated expressions on their faces. They must be tired from listening to <Ave verum corpus> for almost ten consecutive times already.

"Miss Maki has already fallen asleep....."

Just as I was done saying that, Mafuyu whispered into my ears.

"Then wake her up with your baton."

I'll do that even without Mafuyu saying so. I wiped the sweat off my palms on my trousers.

The sequence of performance was decided by random, so Senpai's class will be performing three spots away from ours. That's great for us - we might actually lower their morale after listening to our performance.

"Hey Nao, you saw the program guide?"

Chiaki asked after returning back from the backstage.

"The one they distributed in the morning? Nope."

I had no time to see it due to my nervousness.





"I see..... Never mind, it's nothing much. It's too late to do anything."

"..... What?"

"They are about to end soon."

I was quite concerned about what Chiaki meant, but the sparse applause and the sounds of the class before us walking off the steps shattered the uneasiness in me.

One by one, the students of Third Class of First Year began making their way onto the stage under the rays of the spotlights. I will be the last to get on stage.

While holding the baton with my hands, I suddenly thought — Ebichiri must have tasted this solitary feeling a few thousand times already, right? Being a conductor is really tough. I never want to conduct ever again.

But..... it was an exception this time.

The emcee began introducing our class, choice piece, and the names of the conductor and accompaniment. I turned my to take a look at one of the event committee members, and the thing that he was holding was..... my bass.

"We are really sorry for making such requests."





We had went through great pains to obtain permission from the organizers to use the guitars and drums. Some of the nice people in the event committee knew about our contest with Kagurazaka-senpai and helped us in secret.

"I'll be depending on you when the set piece is over."

"Do your best!"

After nodding at each other, I began walking towards the stage that was doused in the lights.

Cheers and loud applause came from my side. Wait, the performance has not even started, so why are they already that excited? The other classes did not receive the same treatment as we do. I could even hear shouts of, "Defeat Kagurazaka!". Just how far has the news of the contest spread to? As I stood at the front of the stage, I opened my hands to quell the noise from the audience.

I took a look at the direction of the piano, and could see Mafuyu's pale face behind raised cover of the black piano. She had not taken her seat yet - all she was doing is to stare at the keyboard. This was not looking good.

It was thanks to the gazes of the audience as well as the cheers that caused Mafuyu's fingers to be unable to move.

"Nao—"





Just then, Chiaki's voice came from the highest step of the terraced stage amid the gradually receding noise from the audience. She shot a gaze of reproach and plea in the direction of the Mafuyu, as though she was saying to me, "Come up with something!"

She's right. Since I was the one who asked Mafuyu to play the accompaniment, I have to do something.

I walked to the piano. Mafuyu's shoulders flinched. She then sat down.

"I'm..... okay."

Mafuyu mumbled. However, her hands were placed stiffly on the piano.

I blocked Mafuyu's view and stood next to the piano.

There was no need for her to care about the audience. The only one she needs to look at is me.

"Mmm. It will be alright." I considered my words carefully before converting them into speech. At the same time, I was careful not to let Mafuyu see me holding the baton tightly. "This is just a practice. It's the same as how Mozart would warm up before his actual performances. It's not a big deal."

After a while, Mafuyu raised her head to stare at me. She then looked beyond the curtains to the lateral side of the stage. The





Stratocaster on its stand was waiting for the crazy atmosphere that will come later.

Mafuyu looked at me once more and nodded her head. Her pair of eyes had regained their liveliness - and in them were the reflection of me alone.

In the instant when I gently lifted my baton, it felt like the everyone in the music hall had their breaths sucked away.

It felt like there was someone descending from the sky, walking on the transparent stairs with her light steps — how did she manage to play that sort of sound with the piano? I had no idea. I began making my way to the stand by walking backwards, which resulted in Mafuyu being further and further away from me. The ensemble came into my view gradually. All I did was to pinch the baton and guide them gently — their voices began to flow and gush out of the overflowing fountain.

There should be some who noticed, right? Mafuyu's piano ended off with the weakest of tones, before gradually fading away - as though it was sending off the exalted voices. Who else noticed that aside from Mafuyu and I? That was the agreement we made back when Mafuyu and I were alone. <Ave verum corpus> was originally composed for the ensemble, strings and the organ, so a piano will destroy the penetrative melody of the piece. Therefore, our decision was to make the piano fade away during the actual contest without anyone noticing it. All Mafuyu had to do was to play the opening for us — that was what I asked Mafuyu to do. There was no longer any sounds from the piano. Other than the





singing voices, all that was remaining were the sounds of the illusory strings instruments. Can everyone hear those sounds as well?







Right after my fingertips sucked away the the harmony that was dragged on till the very last moment, a loud roar of applause erupted from behind my back. The hallucinatory sounds of the strings had disappeared, and what replaced them was the heated sweat that was coming out from my back. I turned around to look at the flushed faces of my classmates — everyone was putting on an expression of disbelief. I counted the steps of the event committee member who were running towards us, while enjoying the applause coming from behind me.

Senpai said this before — the pleasure of experiencing the applause that were coming from behind one's back is a privilege that is exclusive only to the conductors. I remember she was using the words of Ebichiri? I see, it may be just as he said. Right now..... I am experiencing the pleasure for myself, but—

Tossing away the baton, I took my bass from the hands of the committee member. I then turned myself to face the audience. In the direction where the spotlights were shining towards me, I could see that the applause was slowly turning into uproar. Seems like everyone was surprised— I am indeed a rocker at heart.

I still preferred to stand in the direction of the audience.

At the corner of my eyes was Mafuyu, who had unknowingly gotten off from her seat. She picked up her guitar and began strumming it with her pick. Next, was the cheap and blaring sounds of Chiaki's electronic drums rolling along to the melody — <Somebody to Love>.





Right after I strummed my bass, I felt a vibration throughout my body. The nostalgic bass assaulted my stomach, and my singing voice began to flow out of my throat naturally. The rich chorus of over thirty people came rushing from behind my back. It's an incredibly indulgent piece of rock music. The thoughts about winning the contest was already thrown way out of my head. But it was a shame..... we are lacking the sounds of Senpai's guitar.

There was a brief moment of silence during the middle part of the song. The strange-sounding chants beneath the clapping tempos began to gush their way up by stacking themselves in layers one after another. In the end, it cascaded into the finale after a violent explosion. The only thing I could see was the glittering lights reflected by the drops of sweat flying about me. I had no idea where Senpai was. Did we manage to convey our performance into her heart?

Even after hiding myself in the restroom for fifteen minutes, I was unable to make my heated body return back to normal. When our song was over, aside from the vigorous applause, I could also hear what sounded like cursing or cheers all mixed up together. It felt like those sounds were still reverberating in my ears. The throbbing of my heart persisted for a long while.

The performance of the First Class of Year Two was about to start, but my legs were void of any strength to stand up. I asked myself: am I scared of listening to their performance? How can I not be? I do think I have performed really well, and I can be optimistic about





our chances of winning — but for some strange reason, I was unconvinced. It's Kagurazaka-senpai we are talking about here..... Even though they are performing the exact same piece as ours after us, and despite them not having the accompaniment of the bass and the drums, but do they really not possess any sort of secret weapons in their hands?

It's pointless for me to hide in here any longer! I hammered my knees with my fist, and finally stood up. What I wanted to hear was the chorus of Senpai's class. In which way will Senpai go about presenting it?

I walked down the corridor and pushed open the heavy double doors of the music hall. Their performance was at the final chorus of <Ave verum corpus> and was fading into the dark. I took a look at the stage and was surprised at what I saw. Long hair which was tied into two braids — I recognized the back of Kagurazaka-senpai in an instant. She was standing right in the middle of the stage. Facing her was the ensemble of her class, whose grey silhouettes were arranged neatly on the terraced stage.

Looking at the clothes that the girls were wearing — even without the veils, one could easily recognize their attires as the habits of nuns. So the school had actually allowed them to dress up as that. Well, I guess they were pretty lax about the restrictions.

When I got back to my seat, my classmates around me whispered, "Where have you been, conductor?"





"It would be bad if we got calls for an encore!" "I really wish I could sing once more!" "Yeah—"

After settling down on my seat, a hand reached out to me from behind me, and something appeared before my eyes. Oh, the program guide for the chorus contest. I turned my head around — it was Chiaki who passed me that.

"..... What?"

"The song Senpai's class chose was not <Somebody to Love>."

For a brief moment, I could not understand what Chiaki was saying. Just as I took the guide from her in shock, the sounds of the piano began to rang on the stage.

I turned my head back and listened to their singing.

It began with a almost silent singing that praises Virgin Mary - no accompaniment, just a simple harmony. I finally realized my mistake—

The elegant hymn was interrupted by the abrupt sounds of the piano. What came next was a passionate rhythm created by the clapping of hands and stomping of feet. The same melody from before coordinated itself to this tempo - there were times where they resonated with each other, and others where they screamed in contrast—





That's..... one of the songs which appeared in the movie <Sister Act>—

<Hail Holy Queen>.

This song was created by increasing the tempo of the hymn, then rearranging it to form the final product. In the movie, it's a song that re-lit the burning passion in the sisters, and got the younger generation to step into the church once more. And now back in reality, it had caused us to glue our sight to the stage. I could not breathe. Why didn't I notice it then? The 'Queen' which Mafuyu saw from the screen was not the name of the band, but the last word of the name of the song. Why didn't I realize it's a hymn and rock at the same time? Why? After all, it is possible to create rock with only the singing, the hands and the feet.....

Senpai's hair swung wildly like the tail feathers of a bird as she turned her body around. When she started to bring her hands up to her head to lead the audience into a clap, the whole music hall was swallowed up by the atmosphere around her. Her class' chorus and claps were overshadowed by Senpai's powerful solo performance. The song ended in an amazing round of applause and cheers that was comparable to an avalanche. Despite my chagrin, I still gave them a round of applause as hard as I could.

There was no need for the official results to show who won, and I do pity those classes who were performing after Senpai's class (and in actual fact, there were quite a few people who went home straight after that). To add on, our class came in second. Chiaki went up the stage to receive the prize in the place of me, who was





completely drained. I did not regain my strength even after Chiaki used the rolled up certificate to hit me hard on my body.

Two days after the contest had ended—

It was a Sunday night. We agreed to meet up near the ticketing gates of a busy train station in Tokyo. I was worried I could not spot her, but those worries were all for nothing. Kagurazaka-senpai appeared at the stairs while wearing a glamorous purple gown. She still stood out from the crowd despite being roughly two hundred meters away from me. Beneath the lace shawl, I could clearly see the back of her revealing gown cut deep down, and that made my heart skip a beat. Her hair was tied elegantly into a bun, which made her look just like a celebrity who is invited to some grand party. In contrast, I was wearing a mediocre suit, so it was a little embarrassing.

And that was not the end of the surprises. "Sorry, I'm late. Let's go," just as Senpai was done saying that, she wrapped her arm around mine, and that caused me to nearly fall.

"You seemed nervous. This should not be your first time attending a classical music concert, right?"

"You're not wrong....." But this is the first time I am attending it together with a girl.

"Then again, I was way more surprised than you are!"





Senpai began talking about the contest as we made our way to the concert hall. But since the event ended in what I felt was an embarrassing note, I was hoping that no one would talk about it.

"Are you that dissatisfied with the results? Your choice of song and the performance were both pretty good. I never thought you guys can pull off Queen's song at the chorus contest."

"No, you see..... there's a lot of things to it."

I never told Senpai why we chose to perform <Somebody to Love>, because it was a really embarrassing misunderstanding.

According to one of the committee members, there was a huge gap between the scores of the winners and the runners-up. It's not just because the principal had awarded really high marks for the hymn - it was obvious from the reactions and atmosphere of the audience that the victory belonged to Senpai's class. We lost to them thoroughly.

"Ah, you see—"

Senpai tightened her grip on my arm and said,

"I think there's a much simpler reason for our win. It has nothing to do with how good or bad the performances was. The time signature of <Somebody to Love> was in the 6/8 beats, right? It is a pretty dynamic song, but the time signature makes it hard for the audiences to move their bodies left and right to the beats while





sitting on the chairs! I had actually considered using that song for the contest as well."

I took a glance at Senpai's face and sighed.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"No, nothing."

So my train of thought was not comprehensive enough..... how long will it take before I can finally catch up to this person here?

Just as we could barely see the roof of the concert hall from among the buildings, Senpai suddenly said,

"But you guys are really strong opponents! I am proud to be able to compete against you."

Senpai stopped in her tracks for a moment and stared at my face with a suspicious smile on her face.

"And also, my mood tonight is excellent due to my victory over you guys. You can do whatever you like, so have you booked a room at the hotel?"

"No no no no....."

When was she serious, and when was she not?





All the seats in the concert hall were occupied. Just as expected from the world renowned Ebichiri, the audience was generally made up of slightly older fans who are all well dressed up. I could not find any young people around. While breathing in the smell of the summer night and the scent of perfume, I remembered I was here to critique on the concert, so I fished out my notebook. I then lead the search for the numbers of our VIP front-row seats by pulling Senpai along by her arms.

I finally found the two empty seats, but I was surprised by what I saw next.

To the left of the two empty seats, was Mafuyu in a pale pink one-piece dress; to the right was Chiaki, who actually wore her school uniform here without even giving any consideration to the event which she was attending.

..... W-Why? Why are both of them here?

"Oh my, what a coincidence!" said Senpai. Coincidence my ass! This is way beyond coincidence!

"Hurry up and take a seat. The concert is about to begin."

Mafuyu said softly with a hint of unhappiness in her voice. After forcing me onto the seat next to Mafuyu, Senpai sat down elegantly beside Chiaki.





"Mafuyu was the one who demanded the tickets! She actually managed to get them!"

I could feel my head aching. I see..... She must have means to do so since she is the daughter of Ebichiri. But to deliberately get the tickets to the seats located on both sides of ours..... just how unreasonable was she!? Did you really have to do that?

"She probably doesn't want us to be by ourselves."

Senpai looked past me at Mafuyu's face with a huge smile on her face, and the silent Mafuyu nodded her head with a flushed face. Just what was going on here? I don't get it at all! Considering all the trouble we had went through during the contest and stuff, wouldn't it be much easier for her to just do this right from the beginning?

"Isn't this perfect, young man?" Senpai nudged me with her shoulders. "Everyone ends up as winners. How nice it would be if all the wars were to end up like this!"

Though I had the feeling that Senpai's the only real winner here, but — ahhh, whatever!

"Speaking of which, is it too late for us to call up the hotel and request for a change of rooms to a four-person suite?"

"Did Nao really book a room at the hotel!?" Chiaki jumped up.





"W-Wait, don't lie, Senpai! Ah, oww oww oww, stop that Mafuyu! It hurts! You can't bend the human fingers like that!"

Just as we were stirring up a ruckus, the orchestra was already done with the tuning. Ebisawa Chisato finally appeared on the stage amid a thunderous applause.





Chapter 2

To the Memory of an Angel

We resumed with the third piece of the night after a brief intermission — <Manfred Symphony>. It is the longest symphony ever composed by Tchaikovsky. And while there may be a slight difference in the length of the piece depending on the conductor, it is typical for it to last for about an hour. The first movement is incredibly gloomy and starts off really slowly. Now couple that with Ebichiri's calm and sturdy style in conducting, it's a piece that is really tiring to listen to. Two seats away from me, Chiaki was already sleeping on Kagurazaka-senpai's shoulders.

In the beginning, I was thinking to myself: why are they playing the piece so slowly? That may caused them to be harshly criticized by the audience, no? But at the third movement, the atmosphere actually became even more suffocating, where I was forcefully pulled into the meditative sounds. When we entered the last movement which had a rigorous military feel to it, I actually straightened my sitting posture.

Ebichiri waved his arms and lifted the orchestra to an incredibly high level. With a swing of the baton, he ended the most rousing part with a climax.





After a moment of blankness which felt like I was looking downwards from the top of a dangerous cliff—

A ray of light descended from the sky — it was an elegant chorale played by the organ. I could feel a jolt of electricity running up my spine. Goosebumps appeared all over my body.

I used to think that <Manfred Symphony> is a boring piece of music..... but everything's different now. It's because I had never listened to an interpretation like this before — one where the conductor brings the whole piece to its climax in such a saddening and theatrical fashion.

The piece ended as if it was sucked into the air. But for quite a long while, there were no clapping or even the sound of coughing to be heard. It was only after Ebichiri let go of his baton when the audiences finally jolt back to their senses. It started with a sparse applause scattered about here and there. Next, the whole music hall was engulfed by the whirlpool of applause which grew larger and larger. I was already up on my feet and clapping before I realized it.

I shot a glance at my side. Mafuyu was clapping with an unhappy expression while still sitting on her chair.

"That's really impressive."

I could faintly hear the voice of Kagurazaka-senpai.





"I have never heard a <Manfred Symphony> that goes along so well with organ. The tempo felt like it was barely containing something within it..... so it was all for the final moment?"

The applause were still going on even after Ebichiri had stepped down the stage. The orchestra continued with their tuning as well. The special thing about Ebichiri's concerts are the encores — it will always turn out to be an interesting and unique performance. I wanted to sort out my thoughts, so I took out my notebook and my pen.

After returning back on stage, Ebisawa spread his arms as a signal, and the noise from the audience died down gradually.

"I am thankful to have the honor of meeting everyone here tonight."

Ebichiri said that with a stern face. It's a line which he will always say prior to the encore. "Narcissist," said Mafuyu beside me softly. I do agree with her slightly.

"We have invited a special guest here, a soloist. He should not be appearing here tonight, so for those who are from the music industry, please try not to publicize this as much as possible, or else I will be in for some trouble from the records company."

A few guffaws came from beneath the stage. A soloist who only shows up during the encore? I have never heard of something like that before.





"I believe everyone should know him as well, but I think it is only proper for me to introduce him. Please welcome Julien Flaubert."

That caused a huge commotion in the audience. I do remember hearing that name somewhere before, so I searched through my memories frantically. I ended up not noticing what Mafuyu was saying beside me.

Julien. Julien Flaubert.....

The commotion in the hall turned into a warm round of applause once more. I quickly lifted my head in shock.

At the side of the stage appeared a small silhouette of someone clipping onto a violin beneath his arm. He walked through the members of the orchestra and made his way to the conductor's stand in the middle of the stage.

In the beginning, I thought the person is a girl as I could only see the upper body — the person has shiny golden hair which was glittering under the spotlights, huge eyes, and fiery red lips.

However, the petite violinist who was standing beside Ebichiri was wearing a tuxedo. "Yuri?" mumbled Mafuyu. I finally remembered who he is.

Julien Flaubert.





The violinist is more widely known by his nickname "Yuri" rather than his actual name. It was his nickname back when he was pursuing his studies in Moscow Conservatory, a fact that is well known even in Japan. He is always praised to possess 'the looks of an angel' or 'sublime techniques just as if he is Yehudi Menuhin reborn', and etc. He is a celebrity violinist with crazed fans all over the globe. It is said that the sales of magazines will increase by many folds whenever they publish his pictures, and since he frequently appears on the covers of the classical music magazines, that is how I got to know him. He is always putting on a serious and stern expression on the pictures, but he actually holds an innocent air around him that is similar to that of a typical middle school girl (though he is a guy), and he is roughly of Mafuyu's height as well. I think he is one year younger than me?

Julien stood at the conductor's stand and bowed elegantly. That movement of his silenced everyone in the hall.

Nothing was said — Julien lifted his bow, but I could see almost no movements of Ebichiri as he conducted. The clarinets and oboes made a serious inquiry, and Julien's violin replied with it's solo performance. Then, the background accompaniment of the orchestra began to spread its wings slowly.

This song is—

Alban Berg's Violin Concerto.

The concerto dedicated <To the Memory of an Angel> was composed in remembrance of a deceased young girl, and it was





Berg's final piece before dying to blood poisoning. The violin solo and the orchestra interwove together to create a sorrowful fricative. The melody sounded like it was sobbing softly.

I did not even notice the notebook had slipped off from my hands.

It felt like there was really the wails of someone coming from a place high above.

The intense allegro of the second movement tells the story of a girl and her pains as she struggled against her sickness. An intense chromatic phrase which felt like it was shaved off from Julien's slender body was finally surrounded by death which purifies everything. It then merged itself into the calm adagio.

The solo violin began playing its highest note, while at the same time absorbing all the sounds from the orchestra — when the piece was finally over and the music had faded away silently, there was barely a hint of liveliness left in the music hall. The mood was different from that of <Manfred Symphony>.

Even so, the young boy in the middle of the stage placed his bow and violin down. After showing the audience a gentle smile akin to that from an angel, the atmosphere in the hall melted immediately.

The applause from the audience was like an endless avalanche.

I was clapping in a daze. I then realized his smile was not offered to everyone in the audience, but only at a specific person.





Is it me? No wait—

I realized the shocking truth, and looked at the seat beside me — Mafuyu sank herself deep into her seat with an absent-minded expression on her face.

Tetsurou actually took a great deal of effort to prepare a bouquet for me to offer to Ebichiri. It's sad to be saying this though — not only had he chosen narcissus which is out of season, he also said this: "Listen to this properly. Narcissus means 'conceited' in the language of flowers! Be sure to tell him that when you offer him the bouquet!" What an idiot.

After the concert was over, I told the girls to wait for me at the lobby. Just as I was about to visit the lounge which was located at the backstage, Mafuyu grabbed me by my suit's helm and gave me a tug.

"Yes?"

"..... I'm coming along."

Why? I mean, Ebichiri will be at the lounge too, yeah? It's not possible for Mafuyu to specially go there to see him, right? I think thought of Julien right away. (It looked like) Flaubert was staring at Mafuyu back then.....





There should be a reason to that, right? Perhaps they knew each other?

The corridor leading to the lounge was filled with orchestra members as well as the large instruments. Since the performing band was Boston Symphony Orchestra, I could hear conversations in English all around me. I was at a loss of what to do.

Just then, one of the orchestra members saw Mafuyu hiding behind my back, and walked towards us after exclaiming what sounds like "Oh!". We were then quickly surrounded by the orchestra. That's proof that Mafuyu is famous in the professional world as well.

"Urm, well....."

Mafuyu pushed me aside when I tried to communicate with them in Japanese. She then began to converse with the middle-age French horn player with an incredibly authentic sounding American English. She then turned around to look at me, pointed to the end of the corridor with an unhappy expression on her face, and said,

"He said Papa finds the interviewers irritating, so he is hiding in that room."

I see..... as expected from someone who came back from America not too long ago, her English is really impressive. For some reason, I am finding myself to be more and more useless.

The orchestra member took us into a smaller lounge located deep into the corridor. Just as I was about to grab the doorknob and





open the door, it was suddenly opened quickly from the inside. "Mafuyu!" A small person along with a voice filled with excitement squeezed through the opening and hugged me all of the sudden.

"..... Whoaaaa!?"

"Mafuyu, I miss you so much!"

My nose came into contact with soft golden hair. Right after I realized the person was Julien Flaubert, I was hugged tight by his slender arms, and his face was buried deep into my chest. There was a faint scent of roses coming from his hair— no wait! I became flustered all of the sudden, and hurriedly pushed his body away.

"W-What are you doing?"

"Ah, sorry. I was mistaken."

Julien looked at my face and said that in a nonchalant manner, before tip-toeing slightly to kiss me lightly on my cheek. He then turned his attention to Mafuyu as I remained rooted on the spot.

"I miss you so much, ma cherie!"

What surprised me even more was how Mafuyu never hit him or yelled at him despite him hugging onto her tightly. She was only putting on a slightly unhappy expression as she silently allowed her cheeks to be kissed lightly by him. The French are really impressive — that was all I could think with only the remaining half of my brain functioning properly.







Mafuyu noticed my gaze and her face turned red. She pushed Julien away.

"..... W-When did you come to Japan?"

"Yesterday. I am planning to stay in Japan for a while, so we can see each other everyday. Before today's encore, I heard from Maestro Ebisawa that Mafuyu will be coming to listen to the concert as well, so I requested—"

There was a sudden cough. I finally saw Ebichiri sitting before the dressing table located deep within the room.

"You are here in Hikawa's place, right? So that means you will be writing the critique? Mmm..... I am looking forward to it."

Ebichiri said that to me with a serious expression. You are scaring me with your expectations.....

The four of us sat down face to face on the sofa in the lounge. I was sitting right in front of Ebichiri, while Mafuyu was sitting by my side. For some unknown reason, Julien sat himself on the sofa-back behind Mafuyu and I. Please, can you sit yourself properly? You are making me feel really uncomfortable?

"Critique? He's writing it?"





Julien grabbed my hair suddenly and stuck his body over my head to look at my face, which caused me to nearly overturn. He still looked like a girl even at that close distance. His peach-red lips was right before my eyes, which reminded me of what happened earlier. I do hope he can keep a distance away from me.

"That is rude of you, Flaubert. Sit down properly! The person whose hair is messed up by you may look young, but he is a music critic. He is our competitor."

Julien disappeared from my sight all of the sudden. I see, he had stood up beside the sofa and stared at Ebichiri with his eyes opened wide, before turning around to continue staring at me. It's only at such a close distance that I realized he is really skinny and small. He may actually be of a smaller build than Mafuyu.

I thought he will be sitting beside Ebichiri, but he unexpectedly sat himself down next to me. Since the sofa was a two-seater, Mafuyu, Julien and I had no choice but to stick to each other. What's with this? Is he making fun of me?

"Is that so? Then I am really sorry! Nice to meet you for the first time, Mr.Critic. Just as you have already knew, I am a violinist. I will be happy if you can address me as 'Yuri'."

I stretched out his hand while introducing himself. The content's a little strange, but his is quite fluent in his Japanese..... he learned it from Ebichiri? There was a strange expression coming from Julien's eyes which I didn't quite know what it was. Hostility? Enmity? A sense of wariness? Or perhaps curiosity? His expression





looked like it was a mix of everything, but at the same time, did not seem like any one of above as well.

I hesitated for a while before shaking his hand stiffly. I could feel a sense of incongruity. What's the reason for that?

"My enemy, what is your name?"

"..... Eh? A-Ah. My name is Hikawa. Hikawa Naomi." Even though he is younger than me, he spoke to me in a tone as though he is conversing with someone of his own age. I unconsciously spoke to him in a very polite manner.

"Can I call you 'Naomi'?"

I was stunned. Mafuyu, who was beside me, looked like she wanted to say something as well. Aside from my mother whom I meet once a month after her divorce, the only other person to address me directly by my real name is Mafuyu.

However, the way which Julien pronounces my name is quite different from the way Mafuyu does it — it's probably because there's the name 'Naomi' in the English language as well? It just didn't sound like my own name.

"Yuri....." Mafuyu, who was sitting on the other side of the sofa, suddenly spoke. "You can't."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Julien, as he propped over my shoulder to look at Mafuyu.





"You cannot call him by that."

"Why?"

"You just can't."

Why? I was at a lost of what was happening around me. Then again, why was Ebichiri looking that angry as well?

"Urm, well..... Everyone calls me 'Nao'. If you can, please address me as that."

"So what instrument does Naomi plays?"

"Listen to what I'm saying here, okay!?" "Stupid Yuri!"

"But I don't think it's good to shorten the names of others, or address them by another name!"

"Didn't you ask me to address you as 'Yuri' when you were introducing yourself!?"

Julien stood up from the sofa with teary eyes and hid himself behind Ebichiri's back. He hung his two hands on the sofa like a cat and said,

"Maestro, why is he so fierce with his tsukkomi?"





"That's nothing. Compared to that, it's much more tiring to speak to his father. He became like this because he is surrounded by many such people around him." And you are one of them, Ebichiri!

"So he fits the mold of a critic very well?" Julien replied. Just what exactly are critics in the eyes of both of you? Being a critic is not just about having to tsukkomi musicians who are hard to communicate with, you know?

"However, the skin of your left fingers are very tough, so you should be playing some sort of instruments, right?"

I was shocked. Julien walked to my side and lifted my left hand.

"Well....."

"Naomi is the bassist of our band," said Mafuyu. Julien and I were both slightly surprised by that, so we both stared at Mafuyu's face. From the edges of my eyes, I could see an unhappy expression on Ebichiri's face.

"Mmm? So you are a companion of Mafuyu?" Julien began to play around with my fingers as he said that. I found it a little strange. He's not the least bit surprised at how Mafuyu's in a band? Or does he know about it already? Just what is the relationship between the two of them? However, I don't think it's the right time for me to ask him that.....

"Are you good with your bass?"





"No, not at all." "He's horribly bad at it."

The Ebisawa father-and-daughter pair answered at the same time, and that caused me to sink into the abyss of depression. Why did you two have answer at the same time!? I know I suck at playing the bass!

"I knew it. These fingers are not used to create music. Instead, they exist to distort the truth."

I quickly waved Julien's hands away. What's with that!? Why are all his words filled with animosity? It's the first time we met each other, and I don't think I've done anything to piss him off.

"..... Do you hate music critics?" I tried asking him. There are a lot of musicians who are like that.

"Mmm. I do."

Like the sun which reappears after a heavy downpour, a bright smile appeared on Julien's face as he answered me in a straightforward manner. I see. So you hate them huh— I almost said those words with a smile in order to show my approval of his reply.

"Oh, you mean you have not heard about the things those people have done to my precious Mafuyu?"

"Ah....."





I was at a lost of words.

"Yuri, stop that."

Mafuyu actually shielded me physically and said that in a very stern manner.

"But Mafuyu, you said before you hate those people as well?"

"But there is no need for you to say those things to Naomi."

"You used to talk about tying up all the critics and drying them under the sun so that you can use them as fertilizers for the grapes. Back then, I thought that the Japanese are a bunch of really scary people....."

"I never said that!" Mafuyu stood up with her face red.

"Flaubert's the one who said those things."

Ebichiri sighed. The French are a bunch of really scary people.....

"Ah, is that so? I remember Mafuyu talking about how that will make the grapes taste bad, so it's a bad idea after all."

"Yuri's the one who said those things as well! Geez! You idiot!"

Mafuyu stood up, stretched past my shoulders and proceeded to slap hard on Yuri's head. Ebichiri and I exchanged a look of





helplessness between us. Do what you two like, but can you please don't sandwich me in the middle of your quarrels?

In order to prevent myself from falling victim to Mafuyu's slaps, I shielded my head with my arms and ran away from the sofa. At the same time, just as Mafuyu was about to hit him with her right hand, Julien grabbed it quickly and entwined his fingers with hers.

"..... You should remember how those people have written all that nonsense ever since you could not play the piano, right? And recently, after the issue about your fingers was leaked, those people criticized you unfairly about your lack of professionalism, or how you are running away from the stage."

I stood up in shock and looked at them. I am in no position to be saying much, but — I never thought the critics will be that brazen in discussing the issue about Mafuyu's fingers.

"Are you still continuing with your rehabilitation? Though they do seem to be in a much better shape....."

However, Mafuyu was not angry, and neither did she fling Julien's hand away. All she did was to give a light nod and murmured,

"You don't have to worry. I will do something about it by myself."

I stared helplessly at Mafuyu's profile.

I had indirectly asked her about her fingers many times ever since I know her. The reason for the immobility of her fingers is mainly





due to her psychological issues. As for whether she wants to continue playing the piano, I have never heard anything concrete coming from her.

I will do something about it by myself— that's what Mafuyu said, and it was my first time hearing her say that.

Does that mean that she will try to do something 'in order to play the piano once more'?

If that is really the case, then— why didn't she tell me?

Was it because it was Julien who asked? Because they are both living in the same world? Basking under the same brilliance, the same cheers and the same criticisms? Having tasted the same loneliness? So that's why she could say those words to him? If that's the case, then—

It seemed like Ebichiri said something to me, and Julien did the same while staring at my face. However, I could not remember what I said in reply. Why the heck am I here? I pondered on that question repeatedly with my half-blanked mind.

"Really? So he is really a guy..... What a shame."

There were only a few people left in the lobby. Kagurazaka-senpai said that as she pressed her hands on her forehead and shook her head. Senpai kept hounding me about the sex of Julien the





moment I talked about how I met him. What the heck is this person normally thinking?

"What will you do if he is a girl?"

Chiaki, who was all sleepy from waiting for me, prodded Senpai's waist gently as she asked that question.

"Hmm? I guess I'll start by learning how to speak French....."

"Yuri can speak Japanese, and he is much more fluent at it than I am."

Mafuyu said softly behind me. Indeed, he is incredibly fluent with his Japanese.

A brief silence engulfed the scene. Chiaki kept staring at me.

"..... Urm, what's wrong?"

"You are not going to tsukkomi her?" Chiaki asked while pointing to Senpai.

"..... It's not like I exist in this world solely to tsukkomi the retarded lines that were said around me."

"I don't live in this world purely for romance as well - I have never forgotten about my revolution, you know. France is a country of revolution as well, so it will definitely be beneficial for me to learn more about them."





"That's something you've only thought of a second ago, right?"

"Oh! Nao's revived!" Chiaki said with approval. Don't be that happy. I only said it by accident!

I will forget the contents of the concert if I continue on with this stupid conversation. I began walking towards the exit of the concert hall. I better get home quickly to work on my draft.

"Hold on, wait! Nao, you are really mean! Senpai and I have waited for you for so long, and you are planning to head home already?"

Chiaki caught up to me with her yells and her footsteps. Then, I heard two more pairs of footsteps as well - Mafuyu caught up to me as well with Kagurazaka-senpai by her side. In the end, the four of us walked out of the main entrance together.

After walking past a row of tall trees that encircles the huge concert hall, I could see the rows of streetlights that were installed on the soundproof walls of the Tokyo highways. It was already late. I did not realize it during the piece, but the encore was actually really long as they had played the whole concerto.

Despite it being a hard to understand piece due to its complex tones, I was deeply attracted to it. That caused me to lost track of time.

"Naomi—"





Mafuyu called me. I turned my head around to look at her.

"Are you angry?"

"..... Why are you asking me that?" Angry? Who me?

I asked Mafuyu that question in response. She immediately showed a troubled expression.

"I will also like to know the relationship between Julien Flaubert and Comrade Mafuyu! It's the same for young man as well, right?"

"I'm also curious about—"

Mafuyu's face went red from the bombardment of questions coming from all around her. She remained rooted on the spot and looked a little overwhelmed. I turned my head around and found her looking at me with a cry for help.

"Urm, well....." I am curious as well. "Is he your father's friend?"

Mafuyu mumbled something before nodding her head lightly.

"I remember seeing him on the cover of some fashion magazines. He and Ebichiri had went on a tour in America too, right?"

So even Chiaki knew of the existence of Julien? I never expect the fashion magazines to write articles about him as well.





"..... That was a long time ago, when Papa was not the main conductor of Boston."

And that means— he used to go on a tour with Mafuyu as well? And I do remember him saying things like "I'll be depending on the Ebisawa family during my stay in Japan".....

Mafuyu kept staring at my face. She waved her hands hard when I noticed her gaze.

"H-He's not with me that often..... and I was very busy."

"But you two had taken the same plane and stayed in the same hotel, right?" Chiaki said.

"Mmm, yes....."

"Does he enter the male's bath or the female's bath?"

"There's no such things at the hotels of America, right?"

"Oh right, have you and Yuri performed together before? There are some pieces which are performed only with the piano and violin, right?"

"There were plans for that, but none of them materialize....."

"So that boy is here specially to see Comrade Ebisawa, right? You two share a really good relationship with each other."





"Eh? U-Uhh....."







Mafuyu was getting more and more restless as the other two girls pelted her with all sorts of questions. I was following them a few steps behind, and as I stared at Mafuyu's long hair while walking, I suddenly thought of Julien's violin. I then recalled his clear eyes and skin, his pale red lips, as well as those cold slender fingers which he used to grab my hands with.

Ahh— yes. The fingers.

Something felt really out of place back then. Just like how Julien had noticed my left hand, the skin on his left fingers were hard as well. Of course, that is nothing strange considering the fact that he is a violinist. But somehow, it feels like his fingertips are not as slender as those of a violinist.

Why is that so?

"U-Urm....."

Mafuyu suddenly stopped in her track and turned around, which caused me to nearly bump into her.

"You know, there is really nothing special going on with Yuri and I. We are just normal friends..... There r-really is nothing between us."

I was stunned. Why is she telling me that?





Mafuyu's face was so red, it looked like steam was about to come out of her skin. She turned her head away and walked quickly towards the direction of the train station.

As for Kagurazaka-senpai, she gave a snicker before grabbing Chiaki and me by our arms and ran towards Mafuyu.

It was already past ten when Chiaki and I reached our train station. Tokyo's really far away.

I remained sitting on my seat with a blank expression even after the door of the train had opened. It was only after a hard stomp on the foot from Chiaki that I realized we had already arrived. I got off the train in a hurry.

"What are you spacing out for? Still thinking about Mafuyu and Yuri?"

Chiaki asked me with a sinister expression on her face as we walked past the ticket gates.

"Urm..... Yeah, kind of."

It was the first time I saw someone speaking with Mafuyu like that. Come to think of it, Mafuyu was the one who looked for him (and to add on, she did it despite knowing Ebichiri will be around as well). Even though my intentions were quite different from Senpai,





I was still very curious about the relationship between the two of them.

"Didn't Mafuyu say they are just friends?"

"Mmm..... That's true, but....."

Somehow, it feels like Mafuyu was acting really strange back then. She's incredibly flustered. She kept emphasizing that Julien is just a friend of hers - did she do so out of embarrassment?

"What do you mean by embarrassment?"

"You're not around, so you wouldn't know, but Mafuyu was okay with Julien hugging her or kissing her..... They may actually be a couple."

No wait, they were not old enough back then, right? And Julien hugged me as well.

Chiaki stopped in her track at the nearly empty bus rotary and stared at me with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

"..... What?"

"Do you really mean..... what you had just said?"

Wait, the expression of your eyes are really scary! Why are they shining brightly like that of a cat?





"Urm..... yeah."

Back when Chiaki was still practicing Judo, I attended one of the competitions which she took part in, and everyone at then said she 'will definitely get into the district finals'. When she closed in towards me with lightning quick speed and seized me, I was reminded of those perfect steps of hers during the competition. Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, the night sky streaked past my sight in a flash. My back was slammed hard on the asphalt road. I could feel all the air in my lungs being squeezed out of my mouth, followed by a sharp numbing pain that ran through my spine.

"That..... hurts....."

What are you doing!? I frowned. Chiaki's foot then grazed past my hair just as I was about to get myself up — it looked like she was trying to crush my head.

"Are you trying to kill me!?"

"You're unbelievable! Stupid Nao! You might as well die!"

I hid myself into the bushes by the road side in fright. W-Why is she so angry?

"I can't take it anymore! I have to punch you! Or else it's too sad for Mafuyu!"

"Why? Sorry, I'll apologize first, but what's wrong with Mafuyu?"





"What do you mean by you'll apologize first!? Come out right now! That throw was for Mafuyu, and now this body sweep will be for me!"

There's no way I'll be that obedient and listen. I continued to hide in the bushes while hugging my head. I suddenly heard the steps of someone walking on the grass. Next, I was hoisted up from behind my neck. I raised my head and saw Chiaki's pair of eyes that were burning with anger.

"Listen up really carefully. Should you ever say what you said just now to Mafuyu directly, then you better be prepared for my cross armlock!"

"Y-Yes ma'am....."

I had no choice but to sit in seiza on the soil and reply her politely.

After venting her anger out on me without reservation, Chiaki stomped away with steps of a dinosaur. Damn, tonight's a really crazy night. Why the hell is everyone acting strange tonight?

On Monday of the following week, I was forced to face the rather unpleasant daily life in school. Mafuyu would turn her gaze away whenever our eyes met, while Chiaki would stare at me all the time. As for Senpai, she was incredibly happy to see us acting the way we were. On a side note, my classmates were incredibly pumped





up ever since our decent result in the chorus contest. Instead of cooling themselves down from the hype, they began to focus their attention on the sports day, and were preparing themselves for it. To be honest, it was already tiring for me to be in the classroom; to add to that, I still have to practice hard for the live performance during the school festival as well, and that drained me out even more.

That thing happened on Wednesday. Tetsurou came flying out from the living room just as I returned home after our band practice. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Nao, Nao! Did you get yourself acquainted with someone from the music industry? It can't be, right?"

"..... What are you talking about?"

"Company M sent you a letter!"

I took a look at the aqua-blue envelope which Tetsurou stuffed in my hands. It's from the company that Tetsurou is under the care of. But it the name 'Hikawa Naomi' is written on the letter..... Why?"

"Listen to me, Nao— to put it bluntly, the music world is the nests of the vagrants, misers and perverts. It's for the best if you do not associate yourself with those people!"

"Those are all referring to you, yeah?"

"I-I am not a pervert! I did create you properly, no!?"





"Ah, enough! Shut up, you vagrant miser!" And also, apologize to all the people of the industry right now! "Wait, why is the envelope already opened?"

I snatched the envelope from Tetsurou's hand.

"Well..... I always write in my articles on how delicious Nao's cooking are, so there may be some OL at the prime age of twenty-eight who wrote you a letter of admiration. I have to check."

Consider this as me begging you - next time, just pass me the damn letter straight away.....

I sat on the living room's sofa to check the contents of the envelope. There's only a ticket in it, as well as a simple invitation card without the name of the sender. I thought it is some sort of classical music event, but it seemed to be a live rock performance instead. Taking a glance at the address of the event, the place does not seem to be spacious.

"I thought they sent the letter wrongly to you instead of me." Tetsurou stuck out his head from above me and said, "But it seems like it is really something for you."

"Uhh, mmm..... But....."

I had no idea who sent it to me. The performers are a famous band that even I know despite my lack of knowledge in J-pop. It's





written on the ticket that it is an exclusive concert for their fan club — so why will the company sent me something like that?

"Shall I call the editor to ask?"

"I asked already. He said a member of that band asked them to deliver it to you."

"Ehh? But I can't think of anyone who will do that."

The only professional pop musicians I know are Hiroshi and Furukawa, both whom I met when we performed together during summer. We do meet up occasionally at the livehouse as well. Could it be that someone came to know of me indirectly through them..... No, that's not quite possible, right?

"Whatever, just go and take a look, yeah? Doesn't seem like a prank to me. Just run away if someone throws a job to you."

Tetsuro said that irresponsibly before scooting back to the sound systems. I thought to myself: a typical parent would have said this: "This looks really suspicious, so reject them!". Am I wrong?

However, they are one of the few recent bands of Japan whose live performances were well received, and that did provoke an interest in me. And since it is hard to get a ticket to a fan club performance, I guess I'll just take a look? Though it will be slightly lonely to go alone as I have only one ticket, but if having two means I'll have to go through another crazy fight for the ticket..... I'll pass on that.





I went to Yoyogi on the Saturday night. Ever since the performance at the livehouse, the idea of coming to places like these by myself late at night is getting less and less repulsive. I found this to be a little frightening.

Located on both sides of the street are rows of fashion shops which are in the decline. As I head down the street, I saw a crowd gathering beneath a new building located at the corner. That should be it? Speaking of which, the small livehouse is not done taking in all those people who were still standing at the entrance and around the staircases? Wouldn't that be obstructive for the pedestrians?

There was no signboards and stuff placed outside as it is not a live concert that is opened to the public. I crosschecked the name of the building with that written on my ticket before making my way down the stairs to the basement. Upon seeing my ticket, the ticketing lady at the entrance flashed a slight smile and pinned a blue artificial flower above my chest pocket. What's this? All the audiences for this concert will need to get one of these pinned on their shirts? But I don't see anyone else receiving the same treatment as me. I made my way to the end of the stairs in confusion.

I will never get used to the feeling of pushing open the heavy soundproof doors.





It felt like the air in the livehouse was electrified. A set of drums were placed on the jet black stage in a way where we could only see its faint blue outline. The audiences were packed like a can of sardines, waiting for the performance to start. I still think I am not really suitable for places like these. I took a glass of ginger ale from the bar and sat myself on a round chair located at the back of the audience seats.

A large number of people began to squeeze me towards the stage from my back, and in the process increasing the thickness of the human wall. Then again, what sort of band is this? Who's the one who got me here, and for what purpose? I hugged my knees half in anticipation and half in unease.

The lights dimmed—

A loud roar which nearly ripped the hair off my head rang through the place. I could see the silhouette of a few people on stage. What came to my ears was a series of high-pitched feedback from the guitars. I knelt on the chair so as to get a better view of what was going on at the stage.

The spotlights on the stage lit up simultaneously at the same time. The cheers exploded right after that. My face was then assaulted by a series of vigorous tempo.

The lead vocalist sang with a high-pitched voice that was loud and clear, which was interrupted occasionally by a deafening scream. I remember seeing that person on the television or somewhere before. The band are deserving of their reputation as one of the





leading bands of J-pop — the tight, undulated melody created a sense of rhythm which caused me to leave my chair unknowingly so that I could get closer to the stage by a step or two.

The appearances of the members were all of a black theme. Their stylish and intricate costumes were perfect for them, and made them really eye-catching on the stage. Despite that, they did not hold back on their words. The lead singer peppered his sentences with lewd words without any hesitation, which I found to be really crass.

"The very first name we thought of for the band was <HoleBrothers>, 'cause all the members have slept with the manager before!"

"Oi, I never heard that before!" replied the bassist. Damn, that feels really atrocious. However, the audiences enjoyed that exchange. I guess they could only talk about these stuff during a non-official concert.

Their live performance was pretty impressive. When it was time for the encore, I was already satisfied to the point where it does not matter who invited me here anymore.

But—

"We have a special guest for today. The guest will be appearing on stage as the guitarist! But since our guest should not be in a place like this, we'll be keeping the person's identity a secret!"





Feels like I had heard that somewhere before? Just as I was wreaking my brain in search for the answer, the spotlights flashed about randomly for a while before focusing all the rays on the left side of the stage. A short silhouette appeared.

Seems like a middle-school or high-school girl — that's my impression from my very first look at the person. That person's dressed in a black goth lolita fashion, probably to fit the style of the band. The fluffy skirt was incredibly short, which was coupled with a top which revealed the shoulders. In the person's hands was an aged Stratocaster filled with scars. Even though the face was shielded with a veil from the hat, the champagne gold hair looked like it was burning when the spotlights shown their rays on them.....

Damn, wait!

"Julien.....?"

The unexpected costume of the special guest caused the excited crowd to go into a thunderous frenzy, which swallowed my subconscious mumbling. I was sure that the person is Julien. But why is Julien here? And why is he crossdressing? Wait, is the person on stage really him?

The drummer raised his drumsticks in the air and rapped it as he counted down from 4.





A series of heavy metal beats from the drums shook me. The lead vocalist screamed a series of intensive twisting pitch as though he was trying to chew away the microphones.

The melody of the main guitar cleaved open the burning chaos and pierced its way into the darkness of the livehouse with a sharpness of lightning — and that's Julien. Those slender fingers slid up and down the strings with an incredible speed as if Julien was actually plucking the nerves of the audiences instead, and that resulted in a series of very distinct timbres. My knees were trembling non-stop, and I could barely straighten my body.

Till then, I had never really paid any attention to the so called death metal rock. The idea of 'using the voice as an accompaniment' and giving the guitar the freedom to run crazy with its main melody was a form of rock that I could never imagine. However, that was the sort of music with surrounds me. And despite being washed about by the torrential music, the sound of Julien's guitar remained crystal clear to my ears.

There are really times when the music can convey the truth which would otherwise be difficult to do so via words.

I knew straight away. It's similar to the timbre which shook me back then.

That's right. It's the sound of Mafuyu's guitar.





Upon seeing the artificial flower on my chest, the young and pretty female manager nodded her head and led me to the lounge. I see, so the flower is actually a backstage pass.

"Urm..... You can tell Julien I am fine with meeting him here....."

"It's okay, don't worry."

With that said, she pushed me into the opened room.

Rather than a lounge, it's more like a cramped storeroom filled with amplifiers, drums and lighting, and refurbished with a few tables and folding chairs. The room reeks of sweat, metallic smell and some other messy odor. Julien was still wearing the black leather sleeveless top. He sat in the middle of the four other members who had already changed out of their concert costumes and into their regular clothes. Somehow, it feels like..... though it's strange for me to be thinking of this, but..... it feels like he is a girl who was surrounded by four scary, burly men who stripped her away of her clothes. He looked very out of place.

"Naomi!"

Julien sprang off his chair and ran towards me.

"You're here! That's great!"

Seeing that he was about to hug me tightly again, I shoved his face away. Calm down, French.





"Is he the one whom Yuri invited?"

"Who is he?"

One by one, the band members came next to me. Feels really scary, since everyone of them look incredibly strong.

"Well, he is my precious' precious," said Julien as he turned his head to face me.

"So that means he's my precious' precious' precious?"

"Then..... that makes him my precious' precious' precious' precious!"

"Since when am I your precious, you homo!?"

"You're a homo as well, no!? Yuri's a guy!"

"You go outside and settle things with me right now!"

"Just as I wanted!"

And with that, the lead vocalist and the guitarist grabbed each other by their collars and made their way to the corridor as they stared at each other. What the hell is going on with the band.....? The drummer, who looked like someone who is easily worried about others, pushed a chair to me and urged me to sit down, "Don't mind them, those two are idiots." The problem is, I could





faintly hear loud noises and furious roars coming from the corridor — there's no way I could chat idly in a situation like this!

"Sorry, Yuri. You guys better leave for now. It seems like they are really brawling it out."

The bassist who was observing the situation of the corridor said that with a frown.

"I'm sorry, Naomi. Let's go outside."

"Huh? Eh?"

Julien grabbed me by my arm and ran out of the room via the door that is linked to the stage. I could hear shouts of "I'm gonna kill you!" and "I'm gonna impregnate you!" from behind me.

"I met everyone at the hotel which we were all staying at during the my performance in LA."

Julien sat on the round chair next to me and said that while sipping the drink from the paper cup. The noise of the crowded McDonald's as well as the ambient J-pop music sounded much quieter in contrast to the earlier ruckus.

"The vocalist, whose name is Gata, barged into my room when he was drunk. He probably got into the wrong room, I think? He then took my violin out of the blue and strummed it as though it was a





guitar. I punched him onto the floor in a fit of an anger, but that caused us to become friends."

I gave a hard sigh. I had no idea what to think about these people.

The whole thing about me being in a such a place feels really unbelievable as well. There must be something that went wrong somewhere to result in me sitting next to the prodigy violinist who frequently appears on the covers of magazines, and listen to him saying these retarding things while I am chewing on the fries.

Why did Julien want to meet me? And why did he specially invite me to see the concert?

"Right, I have a lot of questions to ask you, but first—"

"Mmm, yes?"

"Why are you still crossdressing?"

He went to the bathroom to change out of his clothes before we left the livehouse. I originally thought he will change into a set of ordinary clothes, so I never did expect to see him coming out in the short jeans and T-shirt combo which Kagurazaka-senpai usually wears. He was wearing a pair of orange sunglasses and sporting golden hair as well. People will probably believe me if I tell them he is the newest uprising member of Hello! Project. It feels really embarrassing to sit with him. [TLNote: Wiki link of Hello! Project here. Main point is, it's a female idol collective]





"Oh..... you mean this? It's safer for me to disguise myself."

I see. I guess he is a famous person after all..... but there should be other ways of doing it, right?

"Don't you have other questions you want to ask?" asked Julien as he lowered his sunglasses slightly and tilt his head while doing so.

I'll probably go crazy if I am to continue talking with this person here. The feeling's just like how you dropped something without knowing and had walked a far distance away from it already, but you are somehow very concerned about what's behind you.

Then again, I do have lots of questions for him.

And the one which I am most curious about is—

"..... Did you learn the guitar together with Mafuyu?"

"Nope....."

For some reason, Julien said that with pride. He shook his head and continued,

"I am the one who taught Mafuyu how to play. And also, I gave Mafuyu the guitar which she is using now."

I was speechless for a while. I never considered that.

And so..... this guy here is Mafuyu's..... teacher? Is that it?





I suddenly recalled the name that was carved inside Mafuyu's Stratocaster. Oh right. 'Yuri' was Julien's nickname back when he was studying at Moscow Conservatory, so it's spelled in Russian.

Despite the fact that there was no one among us who could read the name, Mafuyu was still intent on hiding it. So that means that she was unwilling to let anyone else know about her relationship with Julien.....?

"Mafuyu's relationship with Maestro Ebisawa has always been bad..... and she was frustrated about how she could not play the piano. I went through a similar phase back when I was a child, and that was the reason why I learned to play the guitar in secret. I thought that Mafuyu could use the same method to find a place where she can escape to."

Julien suddenly moved his gaze away from me.

"Though Mafuyu still did not manage to find it....." murmured Julien as he gently swirl the orange juice in the paper cup.

"— It's not a place for her to escape to!"

Julien raised his head in shock. I was surprised by what I said as well.

Whatever I was saying is real though, so I repeated it once more—

"Mafuyu did not escape to the world of guitars."





"..... Why do you say so?"

Why? Because— it's obvious upon hearing it. I knew it instantly, and so should Ebichiri when he listened to the recording back then. However, there was no way I could express that with words.

"So what's the role you have been playing, Naomi?"

"..... Huh?"

"That's the reason for inviting you to the concert — so that I can ask you this question. You are a critic, so why are you staying by Mafuyu's side?"

"Don't call me a critic!"

"But Maestro Ebisawa showed me the stuff that you had written!"

That was unnecessary, Ebichiri.....

"Your articles are critiques through and through."

"Thanks for your praise." Though he's probably not praising me.

"Not only are you looking down on us, you grouped our work into different categories and wrote what's good and bad about them so that you can earn money through it. How can someone like you stay by Mafuyu's side?"





"Hold on....." What are critics to you? And my articles were not really well written, you know? "Look, why do you care?"

"Because Mafuyu is my precious!"

Julien said that emphatically as he looked into me with a faint smile at the corners of his lip.

His..... precious.

So the two of you are indeed a couple, huh? Both of them used to be the topics of conversations because they are prodigies. Both have experienced the same excruciating and burning pain due to their loneliness on stage. And if the two of them meet each other at America under those situations—

All I need to do is to ask. But for some unknown reason, I could not bring myself to do it. Instead, Julien was the one who asked me the question in my heart.

"Naomi, what is your relationship with Mafuyu?"

Julien's question pierced straight into my heart.

What's the relationship..... between Mafuyu and I? I never thought about that question before. We came to meet by chance, and then we ran away together and sought our dreams together. And before I realized, Mafuyu is already by my side. I can't really explain even if you ask.....





Julien tilted his head slightly.

"Is it such a difficult question to answer?"

"..... It is."

"You can't say you two are just companions who are in the same band! Because I have already heard that from Mafuyu."

"Uhh....."

I rolled the hamburger wrapping into a ball. I could not come up with anything.

"You cannot answer me even though you are someone who earns money by weaving lies?"

And Julien said that in a straightforward manner with an angelic smile on his face. Well, if I am to go into the details, I am not a critic, just a high-school student who had written a few articles so that I could earn some pocket money. I won't get angry even if there's someone who belittles the critics. Moreover, the only music critic whom I know is actually someone who is much more useless than Julien can possibly imagine.

So all I did is to answer by nodding my head silently. Just go ahead and look down on me if you want.

However, Julien suddenly looked at me with tears in his eyes and said,





"..... I am actually filled with regret."

What are you regretting?

"I really want to create and record lots and lots of music with Mafuyu. I wish I can go on an American and Europe tour with her forever. However, I am not by Mafuyu's side when she is in the most pain. The one who she needs is not me either."

Julien's gaze floated towards the middle of the air, as though he was looking past the ocean towards the gloomy faraway skies of North America. His feeble voice was just like the sound of the angel spreading his wings as he was about to vanish into the air. I was reminded of the ending of Alban Berg's Violin Concerto.

"The timbre of Mafuyu is really, really special, but I cannot protect her. But I don't get it. Why? Why can you do it?"

Julien suddenly grabbed me by my wrists and pulled his face close to mine.

"Why can Naomi play the bass by Mafuyu's side....."

His slender and fair hand landed weakly on the table with a *pa*. His long eyelashes were dropping downwards slowly. He then lowered his head and said not a single word. I thought to myself..... is he crying?

I finally understood what's in Julien's head.





I am in a position that is supposed to be his. The melody of the violin concerto appeared clearly in my mind all of the sudden. If Mafuyu and Julien were not hurt by music, they would have already recorded those pieces a long time ago.....

A dream which did not manage to get past the oceans, and was swallowed up by the waves instead.

"I'm sorry....."

Julien lifted his head and showed an embarrassed smile.

"Nothing can be done even if I am to say such words to you, isn't it?"

Because you are nothing more but a critic— it somehow feels like Julien will continue on with that line. However, that was just my auditory hallucination due to my sense of inferiority.

"Have Maestro Ebisawa told you this already? It seems like Mafuyu is playing the piano once more."

"Eh....."

That took my by surprise, and caused me to nearly forget about everything Julien had said up till now. Mafuyu's playing the piano once more? For real? I did remember talking about it a little after the concert, but..... are her fingers really okay?





"She's slowly recovering. Thanks to the rehabilitation, she's able to practice on the piano almost everyday."

"B-But she....." Mafuyu said nothing about it to me. Why? She told me some time ago her immobile fingers are caused by her psychological issues, and she was still unable to use both of her hands to play the piano during the chorus contest. So that means something happened after that? Something happened which resulted in the turn of events?

I stared at the young boy in front of me - the boy who is so unbelievably pretty.

Is it because — she saw Julien?

"And so we've decided to record a new album."

I was speechless.

Not only is she playing the piano once more, she's actually returning back to the music industry? She's returning back to the world which had harmed her brutally?

"The plans for her comeback is to perform a duet with me. Mafuyu has already agreed to it as well."

"Together with you.....?"

I see— so that's how it is.





Ebichiri once said that Mafuyu's fingers may recover if she can find the will to pick up the piano again. The reason for Mafuyu to take up the piano again — is it because she has reunited with Julien once more?

"That's why..... I am really frustrated about it."

Julien mumbled. I stared at him and asked,

"..... Why? Isn't it your wish to play your violin together with Mafuyu once more? And she will be performing with you....."

He then put on a faint smile.

"That's the reason why I am feeling so frustrated! You won't understand, Naomi."

That lonely smile of his looked just like a painting that gives the illusion of the frozen time.

"Thank you. I had fun today."

Once we were out of McDonald's, Julien thanked me with a brilliant smile on his face. That should be his true feelings, and not something said out of courtesy, right?

"And also..... I have said things to Naomi that are extremely mean, have I not?"





I jumped in shock and froze on the busy street which leads to the train station. I could feel someone bumping into my back.

"So you do realized it as well.....?"

"Mmm. But..... I don't think I've done anything wrong to you, so I will not be apologizing."

With that said, Julien stretched out his hand towards me, but I ignored it. It's a little childish, but I couldn't help it. I am just a high-school student, so there's no way I will not be angry after listening to the things he had said.

"There's still no way I can allow Naomi to be by Mafuyu's side."

"You know..... It's pointless telling me that....."

"I won't allow it! How can someone as dense as you be by her side?"

"Urm....."

"I can say how much I love Mafuyu for a hundred times, or play a hundred songs to show my feelings for her. But what about you?"

"Wait..... even if you put it that way....."

"Will you listen to me if I ask you to leave Mafuyu's side?"





Why are you taking the conversation in that direction!?! Please spare me from that already!

"..... Well..... Mafuyu's the guitarist of our band, and there's no one else aside from her who can play the timbres like hers."

"I can!"

I was rendered speechless by that straightforward line from Julien.

"I am better than her in terms of the guitar techniques as well. You heard it just now, right?"

"Uhh..... yeah."

He's right. The timbre of Julien's guitar do sound similar to that of Mafuyu's before she joined the Folk Music Club — the same timbre which I dislike back when she claimed the practice room for herself. However, his tone is much more polished in comparison.

Therefore, despite my dislike towards Julien, I had no choice but to agree that his guitar techniques are indeed a level above Mafuyu's.

"Hey, can you give up on Mafuyu if I say I am willing to play the guitar for you?"

"What are you thinking..... and you won't have the spare time to do so, right?"

"That's nothing if it can make you stay away from Mafuyu."





I was dumbfounded, and stood motionlessly on the middle of the sidewalk. The pedestrian behind me knocked into my shoulder, which nearly caused me to fall. Is he for real?

"That's what it is like when you truly fall in love with someone."

Really..... so that's how it is like when you fall in love with somebody?

"I'll be by Naomi's side in place of Mafuyu. How's that?"

Julien grabbed me tightly by my wrist as he said that. I was confused by him.

"Urm..... that's impossible." In many different aspects.

"And that means you are unwilling to let Mafuyu go?"

What's with the 'and that means'..... Julien was putting on a wide smile on his face, an obvious proof that he had misunderstood my words. Well, it's not like I had any strength left in me to correct him.

"You are a critic, no? Why are you not speaking up when it's time for you to do so?"

Damn that bastard. Whatever. Just say whatever you like.

"Mmm. I get it. Well then, goodbye, my enemy."





Julien tilted his body to the side deliberately in a cute manner and waved his hand.

"Thank you for listening to our performance today. We will still be performing a few more times in Japan, so can I send you the tickets? I do wish to see you again."

I nodded with a stiff expression on my face.

As his guitar and personal belongings were left at the livehouse, Julien turned around and walked away in the opposite direction of the station. That small and undependable back of his gradually blended itself within the pedestrians beneath the streetlights before disappearing from my sight.

I sat on the road barriers by the side and sighed. That's really tiring.

Honestly speaking, he is a really inconceivable person. The anger in me did come close to bursting, but instead of blaming that on Julien, it's more of me being angry at myself because I was a worthless person who was unable to refute his words.

But he said he still wish to see me.

Actually, it's not like I really dislike him, and if I can, I do wish to see him again. However, I was just schooled really hard by him just now, so how should I go about facing him the next time we meet?





Back home, I found Tetsurou lying on the sofa with his legs resting against the back of the sofa in a 'V' shape. He was opening and shutting them to the rhythm of <Radetzky March>. Upon seeing me, he said to me weakly, "Nao, I'm hungry." I remembered telling you that I'll be late today and that you should settle your dinner by yourself.....

But I already knew something like this will happen, so I tossed him the McDonald's paper bag which I bought earlier.

"..... This is my dinner?"

"Yeah. I bought it from Yoyogi, so it's really good." Though it tastes the same throughout the country.

There's probably no one in this world who is more pathetic than a middle-aged man with a freelance job stuffing cold fries into his mouth while his tears slide down his face. Even I felt like crying when I saw that. Tetsurou stuffed the food into his mouth like a squirrel and mumbled,

"I worked hard for sixteen years and put in an endless amount of love to raise Nao to the person he is today..... Tell me, Misako, where have I gone wrong....."

"It all probably started with that marriage — That's what Misako said."





I meet up with my mother about once a month for lunch, and half of our conversation would be us badmouthing Tetsurou.

"It's not like I could do anything!"

Tetsurou suddenly threw a tantrum and flung the bag of fries onto the floor.

"I can't earn much just by writing critiques! I was poor, and Misako was nagging at me after she started her own career, so I had no choice but to marry her!"

What's with you being angry all of the sudden? That marriage did last for eight years, okay? And also, what do you mean by you can't earn much as a critic? You can afford a house, and it's not like you can't afford to eat decently or anything. I think you should apologize to those people who are actually slogging it out in their work!

"Fu fu. Well, I earned that cash outside of what I get from my critiques! To put it nicely, I am the industry's ruffian."

"That's not even nice to begin with!" And to put it badly, it means you're a criminal, okay? "Look—"

I was about to speak, but I swallowed my words back straight away. Is it okay to ask Tetsurou this? And will he answer me seriously after I asked?





The problem is, I have no one else to talk about it.

"— Tetsurou, why does one want to be a critic?"

Tetsurou blinked and stared hard at me. He then washed down the fries in his mouth with a glass of whiskey.

"What's wrong? Why are you suddenly asking me this?"

"Someone asked me that question, and I couldn't come up with an answer."

"Misako asked me the same question before, but it was a long time ago."

Tetsurou finished the glass of whiskey within two gulps.

"And what's your answer?"

"Hmm? Oh."

Tetsurou's gaze dropped to the floor—

"I'll tell you this. Ultimately, the reason for everyone doing their job is so that 'they can make someone happy'. If you can't make someone other than yourself happy, then you won't be able to earn any cash. Am I right?"

"..... Mmm."





"But even after I graduated from the university, I had no idea how to make someone happy. Since I studied music history, I guess I was left with becoming a teacher. However, I had no intention of teaching the children of others. Therefore, I asked my professor in a really honest manner, 'How can I make others happy?'. The reply from the professor was, 'The only talent you have is fooling others, so work hard in that direction, Hikawa'. And so I was hit by a sudden inspiration: if everyone is to read articles written by me with the intention of fooling his readers, then those who are not fooled by me will get some happiness in comparison to those who are fooled. I'll be able to earn from that, no?"

I was dumbfounded. I interrupted him subconsciously with,

"You said these things to Misako as well?"

"Mmm. It's those words which made Misako go - 'this guy is hopeless. He won't be able to live by himself'. And she did tell me before it was those words which made her realized we have no other option but to get married."

"And if I ever feel like there's no other option for me but to leave this house, it's also because I have heard these words from you....."

"Nao, that won't do..... You're voicing your inner monologue."

Ah, it's true..... And even though it was something I thought of only a second ago, I couldn't help myself but to think about it again.





I long knew that I had asked the wrong person. I cannot complain a single bit even if Tetsurou is beaten to death by Julien and Mafuyu.

It's a new week yet again. An incredibly rare thing happened when I entered my classroom on Monday — Mafuyu actually came to talk to me.

"I heard you and Yuri met each other."

"E-Eh? Y-Yeah, that's right..... But how did you know?"

"Well....."

Mafuyu's gaze wandered about. She seemed to be hiding something. Our classmates gathered around us out of curiosity.

"Ahh, right. I remember him saying he'll be staying at Mafuyu's home for a while?"

"Eh, ah, well..... he decided not to, so he's staying at a hotel for now," for some unknown reason, Mafuyu said that to me in a fluster. "I-It's true! But..... we meet up sometimes due to some reasons."





The reason for Mafuyu to meet Julien. Ah, I got it. Julien said there are plans for him to release an album together with Mafuyu. She should be referring to that, right?

"Urm, well..... are the two of you practicing together?" I tried asking her. Mafuyu's face turned red all of the sudden.

"Y-You knew about that as well?"

"Eh? Mmm, yeah. You should have told me your fingers are healed—"

"S-Stop talking about that! Enough! I-I am the one who's asking the questions right now!" Mafuyu slammed on her desk. Even her ears were going red. Those around us were shocked by that sudden action as well.

"Why did you meet Julien? D-Did both of you have something important to do?"

"Urm, well....."

I had no idea how I should reply to that. Or rather, I was not in the mood to do so. It seems like everything Julien said is true. Mafuyu has the will to pick up the piano once more — and in a commercial sense as well.

I never noticed her fingers have already recovered to the point where she can practice with someone else.





No wait, isn't this something worth celebrating? It's been a long-running wish of mine to hear Mafuyu play the piano once more. But why couldn't I say anything when Mafuyu is staring at me and asking what had happened between me and Julien?

"Give me a proper answer, Naomi."

Mafuyu suddenly pulled her face close to mine, which caused me to push my chair backwards in surprise with my heart beating wildly. The chair tripped onto something, and that nearly caused me to fall on my back.

"The couple are quarreling again?" "They are quarreling." "Looks like our dear Princess is serious this time." "Just die already, Nao!"

I had no time to listen to what my classmates were whispering.

"Was Yuri the one who invited you? Or—"

"Eh? Ah, yeah."

After regulating my breaths, I sat back on my chair and tried to convert my thoughts into words.

"A few days ago, I received a ticket to the livehouse from some unknown person. I had no idea who the sender was, and it's only when I watched the concert that I knew....."

"You heard Yuri's guitar?"





"Mmm." I hesitating on whether I should say it, but I did anyway. "The timbre of his guitar is similar to yours. It's just like..... the timbre of your guitar before you joined the Folk Music Club."

An awkward expression appeared on Mafuyu's face. She crossed her arms before her chest and turned her face away with a "Hmph".

"And then he told me lots of things..... like how you used to learn guitar from him..... and you playing the piano and stuff....."

"..... What else?"

"Urm....." I think the rest of the things are all dangerous ones.

"Things that you cannot say?"

Don't put it like that! Everyone will misunderstand us! See? The guys are all getting excited for some unknown reason!

Just then, Chiaki pulled open the door hard and yelled "Good morning!" as she stepped into the classroom. I was never as thankful towards her as I am now.

"Oho, what's going on? Are you two busy with something?"

With that, Chiaki squeezed herself between me and Mafuyu (though she will not be able to get to her seat if she didn't), and the bell rang right after that. Thank god, I'm saved.





"Hmmm..... Even after being schooled that hard by him, all you did is to head home in a listless state without even striking back? That's pathetic. You know, I have always thought I had already fixed that born-loser personality of yours, young man."

It's after school at the Folk Music Club's practice room, Senpai was sitting on the round chair with her legs crossed. For some unknown reason, I was forced to sit in seiza before Senpai and explain to her what happened on that Saturday. To add on, Chiaki and Mafuyu were listening from the sides as well. Why? Why am I spilling it? I never mentioned anything about Mafuyu, but I told them everything about how Julien assaulted me verbally.

"Let's forget for now the stuff like the critics, or young man being a born loser, or other things like that. There's something that I can never forgive you!"

"..... What?"

"Why didn't you take some pictures of him when he was crossdressing?"

"Who gives a damn about that!?"

I can't possibly cater to each and every taste of yours!

"Dressing up in goth loli sounds pretty good! Senpai, let us all wear goth loli costumes for our school's festival!"





And that ended up with Chiaki talking about the insignificant stuff.

"I see, and we can make young man crossdress as well! That's something I have never thought of before!"

"And Nao's real name is pretty feminine too!"

Wait a second..... what are you girls talking about now? I was about to stand up and tsukkomi them, but I suddenly noticed Mafuyu sitting in a corner unhappily and not saying anything. She quickly turned her gaze away upon noticing mine.

Just like how Mafuyu was curious about what Julien and I talked about, I was curious about what she heard from him as well. Moreover, I had no clue what that person would say to her.

"Hey..... what did he say about me?"

I couldn't help but to ask. However, Mafuyu turned her head away and began tuning her guitar. Weird. Did I make her angry again? Why?

"But isn't Nao the least bit irritated by him? He said such harsh things about you and your dad's occupation. You should have showed your anger and said, 'Don't you dare look down on us critics!', or things like that!"

Chiaki suddenly went back on topic.





"You are still my pride even if you didn't do that, young man! Can you still remember? I managed to find you just by the brilliance of your articles from the vast sea of words!"

And Senpai went back to condemning me as well. All I could do was to shrink my neck.

"Hey critic. The name of Hikawa Naomi is already tarnished. Are you still planning to remain silent despite that?"

"But I am not a critic....."

"But you are a critic, no? That was what you told me....." Mafuyu murmured. "You are only good at coming up with all sorts of weird and twisted logic, and yet you were made speechless by Yuri's words."

"E-Eh? When was that?"

Mafuyu stood up all of the sudden.

"Y-You forgot!?"

Her face turned red in an instant. I raised up my arms to shield my face subconsciously. Don't hold your guitar with a reverse grip, because it's really scary! I told her before that I am a critic? When was that? When did I say such things to her?

"It was back when..... I was here by myself—"





Mafuyu noticed Chiaki and Senpai staring at her as she said those words with a grimace. Her gaze fell to the floor. She then leaned her guitar against the wall before walking past me and out of the room.

The two of them immediately directed their cold gazes towards me. Chiaki's eyes were teary and filled with reproach; as for Senpai, she was looking at me with a mocking laughter in her eyes as she spectated at what was going on.

What does she mean with "Y-You forgot!?"? I can't remember. Back when she was here alone — that means it's something unknown to both Senpai and Chiaki. Was it something that happened when we staked the ownership of the room for our showdown?

"..... Ah."

I turned my head to look at the soundproof door which was already shut. Mafuyu was no longer in sight, so I rushed out of the room. I remembered! Damn it, how can I forget this!?

Even though it was something said by me.

I caught up to her the maroon colored hair on her back at the corner of the staircase.

"W-Wait, Mafuyu! I'm sorry, I remembered. I'm really sorry!"





There was a tremble from Mafuyu's long hair. She stopped next to the wall, but she did not turn around to face me. It's just like how it was back in May — there was not enough time for us to talk, so we had no idea what was going on in each other's minds.

Back then, I accidentally talked about how Mafuyu was harshly criticized by the critics in America, which caused her to run out of the room in a fit of anger. Just like how it is now, I rushed out of the room to chase her and apologize to her profusely. Back then, she said, "There is no reason for you to apologize". To which I replied—

I said, it's because I am a critic — that's why I have the right to apologize.

Even though I was the one who said those words.

Mafuyu pressed her hand against the wall and slowly turned her head around. There was still a hint of anger in her eyes, but that was toned down a lot due to the embarrassed expression on her face.

"..... You have to take responsibility for what you had said."

"I am reflecting on it already....."

But..... why is she so angry? Is the ramblings of a half-assed critic really that important to her?





"T-That's not it!"

Mafuyu hammered me on my chest with her tightly clenched fists. I thought to myself, "Whoa, so it's true!" Mafuyu can really clench her right hand tightly into a fist. I was so happy I wanted to encase her fists with both of my hands. However, I was unable to move due to the pain in my chest from her hammerings.

"Y-You went back home meekly without making a single rebuttal despite the harsh dressing-down Yuri gave you. Isn't that so?"

"Yeah....."

"Yuri..... he wants me to g-give up on you....." Mafuyu could not continue her sentence. Instead, she began to hammer my chest once more. Just what exactly did that guy said to Mafuyu? Mafuyu shook her head hard. She had no intention of continuing on from there.

"Despite the fact that there's nothing else you can win Yuri at other than your critiques, you were actually looked down by him in that area as well. And then you ran away from him when you could not beat him in a war of words!"

Those are some really stinging words..... but Mafuyu was spot on. "Well, my bad, but..... even if I had lost to him in a war of words, why are you so frustrated about it?"

"Of course I will be! You have to pull yourself back together, because you are my—"





..... I am Mafuyu's...?

She swallowed her words once more.

It can't be, right? I mean — if Julien had told her about how he wanted me to give up on Mafuyu — b-but..... wait, that's not possible, right? If that is really the case—

I sighed in confusion.

But Mafuyu's right. I was really useless on Saturday. Even though the job was forced onto me by Tetsurou, I still treat the job very seriously — while typing away on the keyboard, I would think on how I should go about writing the article so that my words will touch the readers.

But even so, I could not come up with anything in rebuttal against Julien.

Utilizing his cute and innocent face and words, it was as if that person was emphasizing this: a useless person like you has no rights to stay by Mafuyu's side.

I clenched my fists subconsciously.

"Mafuyu, can you contact Julien?"

Despite her slightly uneasy expression, Mafuyu nodded her head.





Then I shall give it a try! As a person whose only talent is in the game of wordplay, and as someone who has spent more than half of his life listening to the music created by others, the thing which I can do is—

I'll show that innocent and almost miracle-like violinist what I am made of.

Livehouse <Bright> is the place where our band had our very first live performance, and is located in a nearby town where I can reach in an hour by my bicycle. It is located some distance away from the station in a quiet residential district, but since its name is well known with the insiders, the number of customers is increasing with each passing day.

It was the same for today as well. When I reached the place, there was already a huge crowd gathering around the entrance of the staircase which leads to the basement of the building. Most of the amateur bands will share the stage by pooling their money together. After paying the rental fees for the whole day, they will then allocate how much time each band gets to perform. Therefore, the customers will kill time outside until it is time for their favorite bands to play before going in (but personally, I always feel that it's better to listen to every single performance, since the entrance fee is the same).

There's an event called 'Club Bright' which was held today. The livehouse had invited many disco musicians down for the event,





and it had been playing dance music non-stop. That was the reason for hip-hop fashion to dominate the fashion scene here, which is something that I do not usually wear. Amid the dreadlocks and the baggy pants, I noticed an eye-catching figure of a short person, and hurriedly made my way there.

"Naomi!"

Julien's face brightened up in an instant. He pushed away the guys around him who were trying to strike a conversation.

"Sorry, the person whom I am waiting for is here," he apologized as he ran towards me. I couldn't help but to press my hand against my forehead and sighed.

"Look, why are you crossdressing again.....?"

Julien was wearing a cream-colored short ruffled blouse paired with a skirt. He had even dolled himself up with hairpins and earrings. It's no wonder why the guys were hitting on him.

"I said it before already. It's called a disguise."

Please do not twirl around and model in your clothes while you are saying that.

"Sorry for making you wait. Did you have a hard time getting here?"





"Not at all. I had someone to drive me here." Julien answered me with a smile.

"You should be busy, so thanks for making your way here."

They do not organize disco parties often, so I was lucky Julien had the time to spare to make it down here. If not, he would not be able to accept my invitation.

"I never thought Naomi would invite me to an event. I'm really happy."

"No, well..... actually, I am here to have my revenge."

I mumbled as I passed a ticket to Julien and made my way down the stairs.

"Revenge?"

Despite the narrow flight of stairs, Julien insisted on walking by my side.

"Mmm, because I was schooled hard by you a few days ago."

"Uhh..... and that means you will be bringing me to a dark basement where I'll be left at your mercy?"

"That'll never happen!"

I really wish he can put his words in a nicer manner.





After opening the heavy door, we squeezed ourselves within the hot air that was filled with rhythmic beats. The cocktail lights danced around us. Under the guidance of the faint lights, we could gradually see the outlines of the stage. In place of the drum set stood a mixing console. What came to our attention next was a rapper who was rapping in his coarse voice.

"Waa. This is my first time listening to disco."

Julien whispered into my ears, though I could not hear him too clearly. The men and women were all exposing their skin to the heated atmosphere and dancing wildly in the darkness which obscured the lower half of our sight.

"Nao, you brought another girl here?"

I turned around to see the fat middle-aged man with bandanna. The <Bright>'s staff T-shirt on his body was close to bursting apart thanks to his whale belly.

"G-Good evening."

He's the in-charge for the audio equipment. After coming to here a few times, we gradually got close to each other. As he stared at Julien, he said this bluntly,

"What's this? You've changed to another girl again? There's gotta be a limit to this..... You've already made so many girls cry, so when are you planning to stop?"





"It's not like this. You see....."

I was that close to blurting "This person here's a guy". Julien was looking at me with great interest.

"So you had made someone else other than me cry?"

"Since when did I make you cry!?"

"It will be a while before Tomo's turn on stage. You requested him to do something for you, right? What do you have up your sleeves again? Whatever. I'll be looking forward to it."

"Ah, t-thanks."

The middle-aged man dragged his colossal body towards the bar. Oh right, due to the event, all the DJs will mix their own music when they perform. So that's the reason why he is so free.

"Who's the Tomo guy whom he talked about earlier?" Julien shouted in my ears. We would not be able to hear each other if we did not do that.

"He's a DJ whom I met recently at here. He'll be next soon."

"So you are planning to show me his stuff?"





I nodded. Tomo's one of Kagurazaka-senpai's old friends. We have known each other for only about two months, but he still accepted my unreasonable request. What a great help he is.

I'll be teaching Julien a really good lesson with that.

Just as we took the drinks and sat ourselves down by the table, the emcee began rattling some stuff which I could not get into my ears. The audience gathered beneath the stage and burst into cheers. The spotlights were flashing about wildly, and suddenly, a tanned guy with a slanted cap on his head appeared on stage. He was sitting behind the mixing console — that's Tomo.

I waved my hands at Tomo, but he probably did not see me. That's because he was focusing his attention on the turntables.

A 6/8 beats began its course. The rapper mumbled a series of murmurs in sextuplets into the microphone, and that monotonous harmony continued on for quite some time. I shot a glance towards my side at Julien's face — he was slowly leaning towards the stage with his eyes fixed onto the performance. After a lengthy series of tempo which sounded like it was repeating on and on again, Tomo began adding in the beats of the timpani. Next, he slipped in the pizzicato of the bass stringed instruments. It's just as expected from him. I am in full admiration of Tomo's arrangements.

And then—

Amid the clear monophony of the piano, an ear-piercing rhythm of the electronic drums began to overflow from beneath. I knew





Julien should be breathless in his surprise from the clear piano monophony. He should have noticed it already. Not only was it the rondo from the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Concert No. 5 - <Emperor Concerto>; it was actually played by Mafuyu.

Julien looked at me with his glittering eyes. I shook my head silently and pointed towards the stage. That's not the only surprise I had in store for him — my retaliation had just begun. At the last bar of the main rondo theme played by the piano, the glamorous melody of the violin came barging in suddenly on the off-beats. That made Julien stood up from his chair and nearly let out a cry. I don't think there is anyone else in this world who knows that melody more than he does.

"That's my—"

Julien's weak murmurs was swallowed by the gradually increasing volumes of the performance by the orchestra. That's the rondo from the third movement of Beethoven's <Violin Concerto in D major>, and the person playing the solo was none other than Julien himself. I could clearly see the fingers of his left hand fumbling in confirmation before grabbing tightly onto his beloved instrument which was no where near him. After a brief sampling of Mafuyu's piano and Julien's violin, the two instruments began to weave to and fro the tempo of the disco beats. At times, they would chase each other; other times, they would overlap together. The two melody galloped in the livehouse filled with darkness, rays of lights and a heated atmosphere.





I had the illusion that Mafuyu was right next to me. Actually, I never thought of helping Julien fulfill his unrealized dream. All I was thinking was I'll have to teach him a good lesson in music, just like how I did to Mafuyu. But at the very moment, the sound of Julien and Mafuyu were right around us. I could see something shiny glittering at the corners of his eyes.

He's the only one who can make Mafuyu take up the piano once more.

That made me feel very frustrated. Yes, I am frustrated. It's my heartfelt wish to listen to Mafuyu's piano once more, but all I could do is to convert those feelings of mine into some twisted words. That is the only thing I can do even though I am by her side all these while. However, Julien's right here — the person who has tasted the same loneliness and glammers as Mafuyu did. I actually helped him touch the thing that is buried deep in the heart of Mafuyu — and that made me feel really bitter inside.

What the heck am I doing? My intention of using this piece is so that I can teach Julien a lesson, but I was the one who is taught a lesson instead. What an idiot I am.

Still, everything was perfect to the point where it can evoke tears from its listeners — from the two Beethoven pieces played by Mafuyu and Julien to Tomo's mixing. So even when the rondo was engulfed by the familiar-sounding disco music, there was a period of time where I could not bring myself to look in the direction of Julien. I had no idea what he was saying to me despite hearing his emotional speech.





It was time for a break with some relaxing music when Tomo's performance was over.

"Hey you guys, why are both of you looking so restless? You're not enjoying yourselves properly!"

When he saw Julien and I lying our heads on the table, Tomo showed an irritated expression on his face as he walked towards us with a whiskey bottle in one of his hands.

"No, it's because the music is just too incredible. I am drained just from listening to it," replied Julien.

"Ahahaha. We're only halfway into the event! There's four more people going up on stage, so you two better listen to everything, yeah? Hey Nao, how was it? This was your request for me, yeah? Geez, you suddenly came to me with that record a week ago and asked me to mix this for you. The tune was off by half a key, and the rhythm was unstable too. Think about how hard it was for me."

"Yeah..... I am really thankful. Your work has way exceeded my expectations."

I remained lying on the table even as I said that. Tomo gave me a few kicks on my thighs in response.





"Why are you so lacking in your youthfulness despite being a high-school student? Since you've brought your girlfriend here, go dance with her or something!"

"Nah, this person's a guy. Also, he's the one who played the piece of music which I lent you."

Tomo's mouth dropped open and remained motionless for quite a while. Julien got up quickly and said,

"I never thought my concerto can become something like that! It was amazing!"

He grabbed Tomo's hand and swung it up and down.

"Eh, ah, yeah....."

Tomo shrunk his body and was about to escape.

"Why are you running away? Did I do something—"

"No..... but you're not angry?"

"Angry? Why?"

"You are a classical musician, no? Aren't you angry that your record was messed up by me in that manner?"

"Why would I? It was a great performance! There's no reason for me to be angry."





Tomo forcefully swallowed the words that he was about to say. I could sort of understand his feelings. Still, the veteran DJ was put into a state of embarrassment due to Julien's innocent and destructive smile.

Julien wanted to ask him more on the things about DJ, so Tomo sat down with us to chat.

"My room's only six tatami-sized wide, but the floor is nearly destroyed by the weight of the records. I spent nearly all of my wages on records as well. Whenever I have time to spare, I will listen to the records or surf around the internet to look for materials which I can use for my music. However, only a small portion will be usable for my performance. Probably ninety out of a hundred records will be unusable on stage. And for those which can be used, I can usually extract only a few seconds of the whole thing. How should I put it? There are times when I feel really apologetic towards the creators of all these music and sounds."

"So my music was one of the usable ones out of the hundred records?"

Julien looked at Tomo's face ecstatically.

"..... But I messed it up really badly, yeah? I snipped out a few parts, put them on repeat and cranked up the tempo. Also, while the original piece was a really long one, the parts which I ended up using was no more than thirty seconds in total."





"That's okay," Julien placed his hands on Tomo's as he replied him. Tomo was visibly at a loss of what to do. Damn, that French is overly liberal with the skinship!

Tomo's stiff expression was melted away by Julien's following line.

"Because I can sense the respect in your music!"

"Y-Yeah....."

"I knew it straight away when I heard it. The reason you used my music is because you really like my violin, do you not?"

Tomo turned his head away in embarrassment and emptied the whiskey in a single gulp. Anyone would have done the same in his shoes.....

Tomo stood up. He said he'll be going up on stage to perform again, and he hoped we can continue to listen to his performance.

"I'll be doing Jimi Hendrix for my next performance. Oh yeah, I am using that worn-out synthesizer which you are envious of. If it's not broken by the end of the performance, I am planning to give it to Kyouko. You can then borrow it from her to play around with it."

"Eh!? For real!?"

Tomo's synthesizer is of an older model, and it is already very worn-out. However, he had amassed a huge collection of sound





effects in it, and since he kept talking about replacing it..... I had been secretly wondering if he will be willing to give it to me.

"See you later!"

Julien waved his hands as he sent Tomo off.

The slow-tempo music was still playing. Great, looks like we can chat a while longer. Julien sat down on the chair besides me and sighed at his ignorance.

"I never knew that there was music like this."

That's right. The world is huge. The streams of music had flowed through the whole continent before gathering here at this very place.

"Naomi, is this the reason why you got me here? So that I can listen to these music?"

"Mmm."

Julien seemed a little surprised. Actually, that was not the only reason I got him here. I relieved my parched throat with the Oolong tea with its ice close to melting away completely.

"..... That's not all though. This is my revenge for the previous time we met."

"Revenge?"





"Yeah. A rebuttal from the untalented critic in response to the violinist."

I could finally look straight into Julien's eyes — the pair of eyes that was glittering in anticipation and curiosity. Well then, how should I start? I took a deep breath and heaved it out.







I went straight to the point.

"To me, critics are something like the DJs."

Julien was a little shaken by my words. I took another deep breath before continuing,

"A composer composes a song, and the performers will convey it to the audience. On the other hand, a DJ will snip, connect, rearrange and overlap the original piece to create a totally different product. You never knew that such music exists, right? It's the same for the role of a critic."

I looked at my opened palms.

"A critic belongs to the literary group. Ultimately speaking, even if he is to put on a front of a scholar, a critic is just someone who writes for the readers to read; to make the readers happy, and at the same time, he can earn some cash from it. We—"

I am still a little hesitant to lump myself with the other music critics, because I have not written anything impressive. Still, allow me to finish what I wanted to say—

"With the pieces composed by the composers as the basis of our articles, we snip, connect, rearrange the pieces. Next, we add in our praises and criticisms, before finally producing an article that is interesting for the readers. This is probably a territory of music which Julien does not understand, yeah? However, there's no way we can write anything if we do not respect our materials."





I took another look at Julien's face. He returned my gaze with a confused expression in his eyes.

Did he understand what I have said?

"At the very least, that is something that applies to me. There may be some bastards out there who hold no respect for the pieces, treating them like records which they crush with their feet. I do think it's for the best if they disappear off the face of the world. You can easily see if the critic has respect for the pieces that he is criticizing. Perhaps you may think that lies are cheap and we can weave as many lies as we want, but that's not the case at all."

My words ended abruptly.

He should be able to understand, right? Do our words really possess that sort of power? If all I had just said were nothing but a bunch of lies in Julien's ears, I might actually punch him in his face.

"—I know that."

Julien said that all of the sudden.

I lifted my head. Julien was narrowing his eyes as if he was looking at me against the bright lights.

"I know Naomi is not lying to me."





He gently placed his hands on my fists which I had clenched unknowingly.

"Because you have put in so much effort to reply to the words which I have said in jest. I am actually really nervous right now. I could not look at you directly due to how guilty I am."

But you have been looking at me all the while.

"What should I do? I must have said some really mean things to you, right? And I said I will never apologize..... what should I do? What must I do for you to forgive me?"

"Urm, well....." I pushed away Julien's icy hands. "It's fine. I am not doing all these to get an apology from you. Also, it's not like I am angry or anything. Just....."

I could not remain silent due to how bitter I was. After much provocation from her, Mafuyu had finally managed to get the flame going — the tiny and insignificant pride which resides in my heart.

Therefore, it's okay as long as I can convey my words to Julien.

No, actually, that's not what I am really concerned about—

Perhaps..... I just want to listen to that piece of music.

I want to listen to the part where Julien and Mafuyu play together.





I will become strangely uneasy just from imagining the actual scene of them playing together. However, the song of Beethoven which had resulted in the resonances from their performance was still reverberating in my ears.

The atmosphere of the livehouse heated up all of the sudden, and the music was changed to a fast-paced one. The fast-talking of the emcee was picking up speed. I could see someone with a baseball cap beneath the crisscrossing spotlights — it's Tomo. Not only was he taking the role of a DJ, he's actually smashing on the keyboard with his fists. From the endless beats of the tempo came the roar of a jet engine, the sound of a downpour and the wail of an incendiary. Purple lights were shone throughout the basement, and that caused the place to be lit in a sea of fire. Julien gave an occasional shriek and even shielded his face with his arms. Tomo actually managed to replicate such realistic sounds of the battlefield with only a single synthesizer.....

Next came the sounds of the spinning rotors of the helicopters which shattered the cries of the birds, followed by an intense fanfare from the horns. That's the national anthem of America. The blaring of the cars' horns seemed to be mocking the simple tunes of <The Star-Spangled Banner> which sounded like it was coming out from an old radio. So that's what he was referring to when he said he's performing Jimi Hendrix.....?

The ecstatic Tomo jumped barefoot onto the synthesizer and began banging on the keyboard of the synthesizer as though he was tap dancing. I never expected that from a disco event. However, his act got the crowd to break into a loud cheer, and Julien was yelling





excitedly besides me as well. I was the only person praying for the synthesizer to survive to the end.

"It's already dark. Want me to send you to the station?" I asked Julien. However, his reply was, "I've called a car over, so it's okay." Then again..... I think I cycled my way here, yeah?

We made our way to the carpark where my bicycle was via the gravel path. The remaining heat from the ground rose its way up from beneath us. There was a constant stream of people from the audience that were walking out of the livehouse, and all of them were exhausted from their intense enjoyment of the concert.

"Naomi, do you listen to such music frequently?"

"Hmm..... occasionally."

"I'm so jealous. I want to visit more places like the livehouse."

As a famous violinist, it must be difficult for him to go to places he wants to. I never did expect him to cater himself to my timing though.

"I will try my best to make myself free whenever Naomi invites me."

With that said, Julien flashed a sly smile.





"You made me speechless today, so it will be my turn next. Just you wait!"

It's better if you don't..... why don't we just end our feud here and now?

"But I can't stay in Japan for too long. That's why..... I am really jealous."

"You're jealous?"

"I am jealous of Naomi, and at the same time, I am jealous of Mafuyu as well. It will be great if we can be together forever....."

"Look..... my feelings for her is not what you are imagining," I was grasping for words. "Mafuyu..... she's a really impressive guitarist. I liked the sounds of her guitar, so that's the reason why I wanted to start a band with her....."

"Hmmm? Really?"

Julien tilted his head and narrowed his eyes as he looked at me with a mischievous expression. That pissed me off. I had already said the truth!

"Oh well, whatever. I'll just take it as the truth for today. However, I still can't allow you to stay by Mafuyu's side."

"This again? Can we just stop talking about it....."





"But I want to. That's why..... I've said this before, right? That I will take the place of Mafuyu and stay by Naomi's side. I am serious about that. What do you think?"

I shook my hands hard. There's too many problems with that suggestion of yours. With a slightly depressed expression on his face, Julien muttered, "I see....." But he reverted back to his cheerful smile within seconds.

"I think I finally understand the reason for Mafuyu and Naomi to be together."

"..... Really?"

I don't understand at all — just as I was done saying that, Julien burst into a loud laughter.

"Mafuyu and I are really alike. We can talk to each other easily, and we have been in the musical world since we were young. Our ways of thought are very similar, and it applies to our preferences as well. Bach, Beethoven and Mendelssohn. To go on further, there's Prokofiev, Scriabin, and even Schoenberg....."

Julien listed the music which Mafuyu liked. With that said, it seems like Julien had chosen lots of Bach's pieces for his solo performance as well?

"That's why I understand. Because Mafuyu and I will fall in love with the same person as well."





"Hmm?"

Indeed, there must be some striking similarities between the two of them if they like Scriabin and Schoenberg. Upon seeing me nodding my head repeatedly, Julien laughed so hard that his shoulders were trembling, and he was close to rolling about on the floor — that's how ridiculous his laughter was. What's wrong? What's so funny?

Just then, I could see the two headlamps of a car approaching us from the other end of the narrow road.

Julien waved at the incoming car. He then suddenly turned his head around to look at me.

"Oh. I have a request, Naomi."

"Yes?"

"I did ask you to address me as 'Yuri', right? It feels really embarrassing if you are to call me 'Julien'."

"Ah, mmm. Sure....."

No wait, hold on. Who are you to be telling me that?

"It's embarrassing for me as well, yeah? Stop calling me Naomi already."





"No way." He stuck out his tongue. "It's too unfair if Mafuyu is the only one who can call you by your real name."

How's that unfair? He was already kicking at the pebbles and running towards the car before I could retort. The blurred outlines of his body disappeared behind the tightly shut door of the co-driver's seat.

I guess..... it's my victory for today? As I listened to the exhausts of the leaving car, I suddenly thought: when will he strike back? I had no idea what he would do to me.

I then realized that I was actually looking forward to my next meeting with him. I was surprised by that feeling of mine.

I was in a really solemn mood when I realized that I have to report to my fellow band members about my duel with Julien. Senpai must be really interested in it, and Mafuyu's gaze would be incredibly painful if I do not say anything.....

But that was just me thinking too much into things. That incident became the root of my headaches when I went to school the following day.

"Look here, everyone. This is the picture of Julien in drag. He was sticking himself so intimately next to young man, and they were happily chatting away in whispers too. And this picture — they were actually holding hands....."





"What are you doing!?"

When I reached the practice room after school, I was infuriated by the scene of Senpai proudly spreading out the photos on the table one piece at a time. Chiaki was looking at the pictures excitedly, while Mafuyu was in an angry mood as she stared at the pictures intensely — and the stars of the pictures are none other than Julien and me when we were both at <Bright>.

"This..... H-How did you get your hands on these photos? Senpai was there as well?"

"Why must I do something that is fitting of a stalker? I am not that free. I know lots of people at the livehouse, and after knowing when you will bring him there, I got them to take the pictures for me."

"You criminal!"

"Indeed. He's so incredibly adorable despite being a guy. That's really criminal of him."

"Stop trying to change the topic!"

"Oh yeah, I heard from DJ Tomo about how you had subdued Julien. It looks like you have put in a great deal of effort into it, right? You've stolen my heart yet again, young man!"





Senpai placed her hands on my shoulders and flashed a light smile at the infuriated me — and that caused my anger to vanish instantly. Forget it. It's pointless to talk to her anyway.

"Senpai, senpai. I want this, this and this."

"Sure. Feel free to print as many photos as you like."

"No!"

Mafuyu snatched the photos off the hands of Chiaki, but they were snatched back by Chiaki just as Mafuyu was about to crush it. Senpai intervened by hugging the both of them tightly. I pressed my hand on my head as it began to ache. I decided to leave the girls alone, so I grabbed my bass and left the classroom quietly.

I'll have to practice even harder — so that I can fight against Julien's retaliation as a musician.





Chapter 3

Rhythm Section

Just as I mentioned before, we have a large music hall in our school that is capable of holding more than a thousand people at once.

The size of the music hall is huge. We even have bands from our town borrowing the venue for their concerts. It has become a facility which our school is proud of.

However, Kagurazaka said this as she sat down on the last row of seats while looking downwards with her hands crossed before her chest,

"This won't do. This venue is not suitable."

"Why?"

The first year male student and I asked at the same time. He is one of the first-year committee members of the school's festival who followed us here.

"Because we're a rock band!" Chiaki answered before Kagurazaka-senpai could by sticking her head out from behind. "Think about





the scene back at the chorus contest. The audience will not be able to stand up and enjoy themselves, can they?"

I faced the stage and scanned through the the audience's seats that are slanted like a bowl. It's just as she had said. Should the people in the audience engross themselves to the beats of the rock by shaking their heads about, a slight carelessness may result in the unfortunate accident of the viewer falling over, resulting in injuries or even death.

"Well, since most of the stage lightings are located in the sports hall, I think it's much better to hold our performance there."

One month had passed, and we were getting close to our school's festival.

There's still this music hall available other than the sports hall, so there is need not worry about the lack of venues for both the musical performances and the stage performances.

Well, that is if Senpai and Chiaki do not make any unreasonable requests.

"Urm..... but the sports hall is already taken up by the performances of the Drama Club and the class performances. Moreover, the Karate Club has forced themselves into the schedule just yesterday as they wanted to do some martial arts performances, so the schedule for that venue is full. Can't we just have all the musical performances perform here?"





The committee member had on him a timid look as he observed the expression of Senpai, and he did all that while speaking to her in a polite manner. He was probably stuck with the task of following us around until everything is over because he knew the Folks Music Club will definitely create some sort of problem. Sorry — I apologized in my heart by slapping my palms together.

"To put it more explicitly, the stage is the furnace of our passion, so that's something out of my control. The audience will definitely jump about in their excitement, and they may even rush up to the front of the stage! It will be a problem for the committee should anyone get hurt, isn't that so?"

The committee member could only answer with an unintelligible "Ah, u-uhh....." as Kagurazaka-senpai pressed on. From the way she spoke, instead of it being the situation where we were making a request to the committee member, it's more like forcing him to take measures against an unavoidable disaster. Senpai is as cunning as ever.

"I-I'll discuss it with the rest of the committee."

The committee member ended up running away from us. As I looked at his back, I prayed that he will be luckier in the future.

"Oh right, I'll be going to the student council's office for a while," said Senpai with her arms crossed before her chest.

"What for?"





"Obviously to check on the clubs that will be using the sports hall. From now on, we'll have to be on the lookout on where we can cut into the queue."

The hair of Senpai swayed about like the tail-feathers of a cuckoo as she ran away. I gave a sigh as I watched her disappear. She may look like someone who does things sloppily, but she will get serious if she is hatching a ploy or something. I wonder how she will be like when she steps into the society in the future.

"Things will get busy!"

Chiaki was enjoying it. There was no time for me to catch my breath after school these days. Though the chorus contest had concluded only recently, we still have the sports day coming up next, followed by the school's festival. The days at our high school will be surrounded by all sorts of activities nonstop until November.

Chiaki and I walked towards the music preparation room which is located at the other end of the corridor. Mafuyu was revising the pieces that will be used during the school's festival. It was all because of Kagurazaka-senpai's willful words: "I do not wish to perform the same item twice on stage. We've gathered ourselves a group of interesting people, and that makes me want to try dabbling in classical music."

However, someone who was walking towards us from the other side stopped us from moving ahead by stretching out both of her





arms. The person's actually the music teacher who wears the shortest skirt — Miss Maki.

"It's best..... to leave Mafuyu alone for now."

"Something happened?"

"Mmm—"

Miss Maki jerked her thumb towards the door of the preparation room. Looks like there was no need for her to explain any further.

Sounds of piano were coming out from the room endlessly.

The three of us stood at the middle of the corridor for a long time as we listened to the music that swirled around our ears after it had passed through the wooden door. The gentle stampedes of the passage sounded just like the footsteps amid the crowd.

"..... I've heard this piece of music somewhere."

Chiaki mumbled.

"It's <Limoges>."

It's the twelfth movement of <Pictures at an Exhibition> composed by Modest Mussorgsky. This is a piano suite consisting of diverse contents which were inspired by the paintings of a deceased friend.





Rimsky-Korsakov brought about a renaissance of the piece which stimulated the the imagination of musicians around the world, and that gave birth to all sorts of transcriptions for the orchestra pieces. I never quite liked this music since the original version sounded very crude, and I had never once bought it — however, my opinion of the piece changed when I heard the sounds of the piano coming from the other side of the door.

But Mafuyu should not have recorded this piece before. I walked next to the wooden door unknowingly and pressed my forehead against it to listen attentively to the sounds from inside. The tempo of the tune from the room was much slower compared to the <Limoges> typically played by the other pianists. A slightly depressing atmosphere was mixed into the light and skillful tune.

It feels as if I could see my destination before me after walking up the path in the marketplace.

The rapid steps were suddenly interrupted by a thick and heavy chord. I was shocked motionless in front of the dark entrance.

That was the thirteenth movement — <Catacombæ>.

The sounds of my heartbeats and breathing were reverberating in the cold air.

The sense of emptiness brought about by the weakening sounds of the piano.





That was just unbelievable. I could not believe it even after hearing it with my own ears.

Mafuyu was playing the piano, and she did not get any single one of the notes wrong.

Mafuyu's fingers have really.....

Before long, the rays of the sunset were faintly penetrating through the lingering smell of mildew, bones, death and dust. It's the Promenade, the fourteenth movement—

Just then, the music from the piano suddenly stopped. I pulled my face away from the door in shock. Next, I could hear the tapping of footsteps. The door was then opened hard by someone.

Mafuyu's face turned red the moment her eyes came into contact with mine. She said furiously,

"S-Stop listening while standing there!"

"Eh, oh, sorry..... so that means we can go in and listen?"

"..... N-No!"

So we can't go in and we can't stay outside? What do you want us to do then? Mafuyu slammed the door shut after she stepped back into the room, and this time around we could hear the sounds of her locking it up. Eh? Hey!





"Why are you locking yourself up in the room?" I knocked on the door immediately. "Let us in! I need to get all sorts of musical scores from there!"

"You can't!"

Why? Is there a need for her to be that angry just because her playing the piano was heard by someone? Just as I was about to yell at the door, someone suddenly pulled me on the back of my collar.

"Guee!" I let out a strange noise unknowingly.

"You are not to cause a ruckus here. Just leave her alone for now."

With that said, Miss Maki began walking towards the stairs while dragging me along. My limbs were thrashing about wildly since I was about to asphyxiate. Chiaki stared bitterly at the door of the preparation room for a while before following in our steps.

"Actually, Mafuyu has been practicing on the piano in the preparatory room for a few days already. It's the same for just now. It looked like she was set ablaze after looking at the various scores. Before I knew it, she was already playing the piano without even noticing my existence next to her."

Miss Maki said that in a low voice at the corner of the stairs. Chiaki and I exchanged looks with each other.





"Have her fingers..... really recovered? Is that true?" asked Chiaki.

"You two have heard about it already?"

I nodded my head slightly. What a perfect performance it was! I have always thought I will never get to hear Mafuyu's piano ever again. I was surprised when I heard the news from Julien, but the impact was much greater when I listened to her performance earlier.

"So it is something caused by her psychological issues..... I guess? That's the reason why I feel it is still too early to be happy about the recovery of her fingers. In any case, it looks like the girl is planning to return to the embrace of the piano once more. However, Maestro Ebisawa will probably kick up a fuss out of happiness if she is to practice at home, so that's the reason why she is doing it at school."

That's because there are still some knots between her and Ebichiri. Moreover, Mafuyu is a really stubborn girl.

Then again, I never thought she will recover to such a state.

"Since this is quite a pickle, please do not disturb her for now."

"W-When did Mafuyu start practicing on the piano?"

"Hmm? Last month, I think?"





So she really did start practicing on the piano after her reunion with Julien, huh? Everything makes sense if that was the cause.

Even the doctors said we could only wait — and Julien's the one we're waiting for.

Before walking down the stairs, Miss Maki instructed us sternly that we are not to get close to the preparatory room as long as the sounds of piano are coming from the inside. She left Chiaki and I at the corners. I slumped against the stairs.

"Mafuyu..... that's just great."

Chiaki murmured as she looked up the stairs. We could no longer hear the music from above us.

"Are you not happy about it, Nao? Mafuyu can play the piano again, you know?"

"No, I am happy. But even though I am happy....."

"Speak your mind. Come on?"

Chiaki grabbed me by my collar and rattled me about. I revealed my true feelings.

"It feels frustrating. Even I find myself to be a huge idiot."

"What do you mean?"





Today's a day where I was pulled about by the scruff of my neck..... When Chiaki questioned me further, I told her everything in my heart. Like how Mafuyu had changed because of her reunion with Julien, and yet I could do nothing.

When I was done saying that, Chiaki released me and stared in the direction of the window.

"..... Is that so?"

Her restless voice landed at her feet.

"So Nao is feeling frustrated because he could not do anything for Mafuyu?"

"Mmm..... yeah."

What's wrong with Chiaki? Chiaki's back looked very small.

It was as though she will cry the moment I touch her hands.

"That's right — it feels painful precisely because the person is right next to us."

It seemed like Chiaki was mumbling to herself. I thought about it for a while, and just when I was about to say something to her back, she quickly turned her head around.

"Well then, what would you have done back then?"





The usual determined gaze had returned to Chiaki's eyes once more. She then greeted my stomach with a solid punch, which landed squarely with a thud. Ouch! I staggered a few steps back as I pressed my hands against my stomach.

"..... I would have went back home and listened to <London Calling> beneath my blanket."

"You idiot. Listen to it yourself."

This time round, she rewarded my head with a slap. What do you want me to do then?

"Do I even have to say it? Practice."

The term 'rhythm section' is originally a jazz terminology, and it refers to the piano, bass and drums. These instruments need not perform solo; instead, they only have to ensure that the tempo of the song goes on without a hitch. For our band, that encompasses me and Chiaki.

The general opinion is that the quality of a band is not determined by the striking vocalists or the guitarists, but the standards of the rhythm section. The most notable examples will be bands like Green Day.

"..... So..... why am I doing push-ups here?"





"Because you lack physical strength! Hey, no resting!"

As Chiaki stepped on the pedals of the bass drum, my sweat was dripping on to the floor of what should be the air-conditioned practice room of Folks Music Club. I'm not bragging here, but the limit of the amount of push-ups I can do is ten.

"Listen up. Nao's drained at the end of that live performance, no? Mafuyu will always rush ahead of us when we play as a band, so we will have to bark up."

"Now that you've mentioned it..... I am really weak."

"You should at least train till you can lift the guitar amplifiers with a single hand."

"How can I possibly lift that up?"

"I can."

Whoa! She actually showed it to me. Put that down, it's really dangerous.

"No rest. Your target is thirty push-ups."

Chiaki pressed me against the floor once more. Please, just spare me from that already.

"It somehow feels like your perseverance is lacking. I'll be sitting on your back now."





"No way, you're heavy! I'll get squashed!"

I struggled non-stop as Chiaki squashed me with her butt. The door opened to reveal a small slit, and a pair of sapphire eyes were peeking into the room timidly. Chiaki stood up immediately when she noticed that.

"Mafuyu, what are you doing?"

"W-Well....."

Chiaki grabbed Mafuyu's hands and pulled her into the room. I'm saved. I stood up to pat away the dust on my knees.

"..... S-Sorry..... for just now."

"Mmm, I'll spare you this time since you're honest." Why is Chiaki putting on a stuck-up look? "Someone was still engrossed with her piano even though we have something important going on in the band. The camaraderie of the band was wrecked by Mafu-Mafu in an instant."

"I was not engrossed in it!" Mafuyu tried her hardest to lie.

"Well then, I will entrust Mafuyu with a task related to our band."

"..... Which is?"

"Sit on Nao's back."





"Why?" "What's with that!?"

"Because you can practice on your guitar even when you're sitting on Nao's back! I have to drum, you know."

"That's not the point."

With her eyes narrowed into a line, Chiaki thrust her drum stick to my throat.

"Alright, there's still thirty more to go, so persevere on. Give me some clean push-ups while going along to the beats of my drum."

That's scary! I dropped onto the floor without second thoughts. Having suffered from the same dominating air of that sports-oriented girl, Mafuyu did just as Chiaki instructed and sat down gingerly on my back.

"Min! On! Fight!!! Min! On! Fight!!!" [TLNote: Min-on's short for their band, as mentioned in chapter 4 vol 2]

Chiaki began drumming in beats of four as she did some sort of strange cheer. What's with this? Is she a school bully? Moreover, Mafuyu's pressing me down on my back with her weight—

Eh? It's not as heavy as I thought. Or rather, she is inconceivably light. Is her body that slender? Come to think of it, did I not climb up the hills together with Mafuyu while carrying our luggage? Push-ups are nothing compared to that.





The beats of the drum suddenly came to a stop.

"I'm so pissed! Why is Nao doing those push-ups with an indifferent expression on your face!?"

It's because you asked me to!

"You looked so painful when it was me who was sitting on you. Ah, darn. What's your weight, Mafuyu?"

"Eh, urm....." I could not catch her muffled answer.

"Unforgivable! I'll be sitting on you as well!"

"Why!? Don't, I'll die!" "It will be fine, so stop moving!" "W-We are falling!"

I was breathless from the combined weight of the two girls, and the door just so happened to open at a time like this. Kagurazaka-senpai's eyes opened wide when she saw the plight that I was in.

"H-Help me—"

Upon hearing the pitiful plea from me, a sinister smile appeared immediately on Senpai's face.

"Where should I sit? On your head?"

"No, wait, don't do that!" Why are things turning out like this!?





I did not catch any glimpse of Tetsurou when I reached home. His shoes were not in the shoe cabinet when I took a look inside. That means there is a high possibility that he went for a drink with his friends (Tetsurou usually goes out in sandals). Thank god, I do not have to prepare dinner tonight. I did not have much of an appetite after going through that strange form of torture. Not to mention, my back is still aching.....

I took out my bass after I was done changing in my bedroom on the second floor. The words said by Chiaki during the day was still echoing in my mind.

"So Nao is feeling frustrated because he could not do anything for Mafuyu?"

Mafuyu, Kagurazaka-senpai, and Furukawa whom we performed with together on the same stage last month—

And more than anyone else, there's Julien.

After coming into contact with quite a few outstanding musicians and listening to their music with my very own ears, I was always left with a complicated feeling within me. I understood how immature I am, and that was mixed in together with a sense of helplessness.





Should this continue, I will just become someone who happens to be in the band by chance. I will even drag the band down. Furukawa had once said this straight out: "You should quit the band". My reply to that was nothing more than just a farce.

What should I do? What step should I take next? I have no idea at all.

It was until I met Julien that I finally saw it.

I understood the question which I have to answer.

Am I able to become Mafuyu's greatest pillar of support?

Not just to the guitarist Mafuyu, but also to the pianist Mafuyu — can I continue to stay by her side by taking on the role of the heart who pumps her blood and life?

The timbre of Mafuyu's piano is bright and clear, and its tempo is forceful and dynamic. Some of the conductors who performed with her before had commented that her piano is 'as forceful as the river that corrodes the fjords continuously'. The reason for the harsh criticisms of Mafuyu's playing is because there are very few orchestras capable of accepting the force of her playing. And so Mafuyu's fingers were frozen, and the sounds of her piano had disappeared before she could locate her true place of belonging.

I used to think that she will not be returning back to the embrace of the piano. That was not the case however. Perhaps Mafuyu was just searching for that place.





Someone who can be next to or close to her while support her playing — a place that exists forever.

Do I..... have the right to be there?

Perhaps Yuri is the only person who can reach that place for now.

But how much further do I have to walk before I can reach that place as well?

I switched on the stereo and inserted the CD. My fingers were searching for the simple overlapping bass lines accompanying along with Mafuyu's solo of Rachmaninoff's <Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini>. Mafuyu's piano led the orchestra methodically as she changed the tempo of the variation rapidly .

I gradually lost hold of the sounds of my bass. I could not keep up with her pace at all.

In my mind was the image of Mafuyu sitting before the piano as she appeared on feketerigó's stage. Before the raised wings that were giving off a black luster, I could see the drums that were giving off a faint glow, as well as Chiaki's brown colored hair. When I turned my head, I saw the back of Kagurazaka-senpai standing there, grabbing onto the microphone on its stand tightly as she faced the passionate audience.

It began with the piano chorale that was rising from silence, followed by the careful integration of the drums via fill-ins. Next is





the inclusion of the overlapping clean tones of the guitar, and finally the coarse vocals of Senpai which can seep into the deepest areas of the body. [TLNote: Fill-in is a sort of drumming technique or something, not sure if named similarly in English]

But where do I stand?

How should I go about carving my rhythm on the stage?

I had no idea. That place is just too far, too high and too dazzling for me.

Rachmaninoff's piece had ended, and the stereo at the head of my bed was no longer playing. I was pulled back to reality, back into my room. I realized that I was deep in thought while sitting on my bed with my bass in my arms.

What should I do?

That was replied to with Chiaki's voice in my head: "Do I even have to say it? Practice". She's right.

I really want to plug my bass into the amplifiers and practice at the loudest volume possible! There's a limit to the time I can spend in the school's practice room, and I'll be distracted by Senpai and Mafuyu's timbres anyway. Tetsurou's not at home, but it's not like I can use the speakers in the living room either, since I'll be disturbing the neighbors if I do that.

If so—





I checked the time on the clock. It's still not eight, so I should be able to make it. After packing the bass into its casing, I jumped onto the bike and left my house.

The southern entrance of the sizable train station is about twenty minutes away from my house by bicycle. The building where Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store is in is located a few steps away from the overhead bridge, at the boundary between the shopping street and the residential area.

It's Senpai's working place, and I've been under their care for numerous occasions. There are three studios on the third story, though they are rather small and cramped. However, since Senpai holds the weaknesses of the store manager (though she calls it the privileges of the employees), the store manager said the members of feketerigó can use the studios for free as long as they are not occupied.

I do pity the store manager, but as a poor student, I am grateful for the privilege as well.

"Eh? Nao?"

When I walked into the store where even the walking space are filled with guitars, the store manager revealed his face from behind a music magazine. Looks like he is manning the store by himself. With his hair tied up roughly behind his head, it seemed like he





was a hippie. However, that look of his made this store look even more like one that is on the brink of collapse. There was no customer around for today as well.

"Did you guys agree to meet up beforehand? She went up already," said the store manager while pointing towards the ceiling.

"..... Eh? Are you referring to..... Senpai?"

"Nope. Chi-chan."

Upon opening the ridiculously heavy soundproof door, I was greeted by a series of intense drumming at the corridor. However, the beats stopped all of the sudden.

"..... Nao?"

Chiaki was sitting between the drums with her forehead glistening in sweat. She froze with her mouth opened wide when she saw me. Though that applies to me as well. Why is Chiaki here? Were all that practicing we had earlier still not enough for her?

"Hey? What's going on here?"

Chiaki walked towards my direction. Her face was giving off a radiant glow. She was only wearing a T-shirt and short pants even though it was already October. It was very much like what she wore during our summer training camp though. Then again, it is indeed hot and stuffy in the studio.





"Eh? Are you actually here to practice?" She asked when she saw my bass casing.

"Y-Yeah..... I want to practice with the amplifiers on."

"You'll have to end the practice if there are any customers here," with that said, the store manager pushed me into the studio and closed the door. The smell of tobacco from the walls was mixed with the sweet scent of sweat. For some unknown reason, Chiaki was happily setting up the bass' amplifiers for me.

"What a coincidence. I am very surprised. I was feeling very uneasy due to the lack of practice today. Did Nao come here because you find the amount of push-ups lacking as well?"

"Nope, I have had enough of push ups. Also, am I bothering you here?"

"Not at all, because we are the rhythm section. It will be better for us to play together."

But if possible, I hope to practice on my bass alone.....

"Oh well, let's start! Just treat me as a metronome and play your bass!"

After starting on our practice, I realized it's just like what Chiaki said — the bass and drums are no enemies. Just like the sounds of heartbeats and footsteps, the instruments resonate with each other





in order to move forward. The quavers, semiquavers and triplets — Chiaki was supporting my stiff wobbles with her steady steps.

What an inconceivable feeling. Come to think of it, this may be my first time playing together with Chiaki alone. There would always be the sound of Kagurazaka-senpai's guitar (which is like the scattering rays of the sun) or that of Mafuyu's guitar (akin to the crystallization of the cold air in the night bathed in the moon's light) mixed in between us.

It's mind-boggling. Compared to when Chiaki was drumming alone by herself, the sounds the drums made were much brighter than before — I could clearly hear each and every beat from her. Each time I pumped blood into my bass via my fingers, I will be reciprocated by the comfortable sound of a footstep. I could almost grasp the glimmer of the two hi-hat cymbals with my hands.







"..... Wait, Chiaki. Let's rest for a while."

We had been practicing nonstop for god knows how long. Thanks to my sore wrists, it took me much difficulty to pull my fingers away from the strings in order to request Chiaki to stop. Drops of sweat were trickling down from my hair.

"Mafuyu can still continue playing, you know?"

The red-faced Chiaki said that provocatively as she swerved her knees and shoulders happily.

"Nope, sorry. I can't do that."

I took a gulp of bottled water. I finally can kind of understand the reason for Mafuyu to play together with Chiaki nonstop, as if she was bitten by a tarantula or something.

Because the 'legs' will move on their own. There is no way we can stop.

With a smile on her face, Chiaki stood up from her chair to snatch away the bottled water from my hands before chugging it down. Water seeped out from the sides of her mouth and flowed to her collars along her neck.

"Phew!"





After the sigh, Chiaki took off her hair clip and shook her head. Some of her hair were stuck to her wet lips. I quickly diverted my gaze for some strange reason.

"It has been a while since I had so much fun with drumming."

"..... Aren't you having fun all the time?"

"Hmm?"

Chiaki gave me a puzzled look as she stretched her wrists while holding onto the drum sticks.

"That's not the case. I am actually very nervous whenever Senpai or Mafuyu is around."

I looked at Chiaki's face in shock.

"Those two girls..... it's not nice to be saying this, but they are practically monsters. I'll feel very uneasy whenever I am drumming behind them. There will be times where I think to myself: can I really sit here?"

I slowly sat myself down on a round chair with uneven legs and stared blankly at Chiaki's face. It looked like her gaze was on a place far away.

So she does experience such feelings..... as well, huh?





"I know, Senpai invited me into the band without any having expectations of me as a drummer, but there is nothing I can do about that. I just hope she can say this to me, that 'we cannot do without you'."

There was nothing else I could say. Chiaki was around Senpai much earlier than I have, and she was deeply attracted by Senpai's tone. However, she too knows she lacks the abilities to respond to Senpai's timbre. And she is following closely by Senpai's side precisely because she knows that.

- That's just like the way I am now. However, she did not turn her eyes away; neither did she run away from anything. She did not remain stagnant due to her sense of helplessness. She was not defeated by it.

And that's how impressive Chiaki is.

"..... Chiaki is already our indispensable drummer."

I tried to say it to her truthfully.

A brief look of loneliness flashed in Chiaki's eyes. She then smiled shyly and said,

"Thanks. I hope that there will be a day when Senpai says that to me as well."





"Senpai must have felt so all along, yeah? You're already very impressive, Chiaki. To think that you can make it till now just because of your love for Senpai—"

Chiaki suddenly stretched out her hands and pressed the tip of her drum stick against my collarbone.

"W-What?"

"Nao, you've just said something really rude."

"Eh, why?"

"I do not only like Senpai. I am not so simple as to bind myself tightly to the band just for that reason alone."

"U-Urm..... S-Sorry."

Yeah..... her relationship with Mafuyu has improved as well. She did like hard rock all this while, and she never backs down whenever we have some disagreements on the arrangements of the songs.

"..... But my biggest misfortune is probably the fact that the person who I like is in the band together with me right from the beginning."

Chiaki suddenly leaned weakly against the wall and murmured,





"I am very satisfied with the way things are right now. Even if there are no improvements in our relationship..... but isn't it great for us to be together like this for now? And I have no idea what I should do. Moreover, our relationship may become irreparable if I am to force our relationship to the next step, and we will never be able to revert to the way things were. If that is the case, then I might as well keep things the way they are....."

I have no idea why, but I can more or less understand her feelings. If we are talking about Senpai, it is impossible for things to end well regardless of what they do, since they are both girls. No, Senpai will probably think that things will work out by themselves or something. I really can't tell if she is serious about the things she says. But at the very least, they can be together at the same place for now.

But that will not do. Things will go nowhere if she is content with the status quo. There will be a day when Senpai finally dumps her, and by then Chiaki will never be able to catch up with Senpai again.

It's the same for me as well.

I am by Mafuyu's side, and at a much closer distance than Julien is.

But that status quo is only something that happened by chance.

Just then, Chiaki began drumming me on my shoulders, forehead and chest with her sticks. Owowow! I lifted my arms in an attempt to shield myself, but that ended up with them being rapped by her mercilessly as well.





"H-Hold on, Chiaki, it really hurts! Why are you hitting me? What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Hey, rest time's over, so let's get going! We'll never catch up to them if all we do is rest."

Chiaki roared at me all of the sudden. She then tossed the bottled water towards me and returned to her seat between the drums. What the heck's with that?

"Didn't Senpai say this already? We'll be performing multiple suites during the school's festival! There will be no time for both of us to rest, so we have to practice more on the variations that we can use during the buffer."

"M-Mmm."

When she returned back from the student council's office, Senpai told us that she had managed to obtain permission to use the sports hall. However, that means they will have to reschedule the timetable all over again, so we do not know how much time we will be allocated. Because of that, Senpai suggested that in order for us to fully utilize the limited amount of time given to us, we should work on pieces that take up a longer duration. While the vocals and guitar solos would be separated by different phases, there would be no time for the rhythm section to pause and rest. There is a high possibility that we will be depended on to maintain the heated atmosphere of the performance.





"There is no charm in Nao's bass at all!"

"Mmm....."

I do kind of realize it as well. However, that is one of the most truthful and harshest criticism that I've received from others. I see, so it lacks any charm.....

"You know, you are over-coordinating yourself to me. It may be safer for you to play along to the bass drums, but you will never get to be in the spotlight like that. You are to add in a phrase whenever I pause. Understand?"

"..... Got it."

"Let's start from the intro!"

After twirling around Chiaki's right palm once, the stick landed straight on the floor tom. I squeezed in a series of low notes from behind the beats which sounded like they were digging against the ground. The cramped stage was once again engulfed by the passionate heartbeats.

So when people say that one will 'forget the time', they do really mean that.

With that, we continued playing despite being drenched with sweat. We did not even have time to catch our breaths. When I regained my senses, I could hear someone singing. I was wondering to myself where have I heard that voice before, and then I realized





the singer was none other than me. The bass and drum forms the 'shape' of a band, of which we can use to expand on our imagination of all the notes. I could not bring myself not to sing. We did not even notice the lighting up of the red light which signaled the end of our time. It was only when the store manager came in gingerly to stop us by switching off the power supply that we realized we were exhausted — we slumped onto the floor in exhaustion.

I could still faintly feel the vibration of the strings on my fingers. That feels just great.

From the next day onward, Chiaki and I decided to head to Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store everyday after school. Since Senpai cycles to and from school, and Mafuyu lives in the opposite direction as us, we are the only ones to take the train home.

"Let's practice in secret and surprise them!"

Chiaki said that to me excitedly. However—

"You and young man have been frequenting the studio lately."

"Eh? W-What do you mean?"





Chiaki feigned ignorance when she was questioned by Senpai. Then again, Senpai's an employee there, so it's natural for her to know that.

"Then again, to think that both of you were hiding it from Comrade Ebisawa and me. That's very cold of you two."

"Because we were planning to surprise the hell out of you two during the actual performance after we have undergone a series of intensive training in secret!"

"Whatever. I shall make use of the time to deepen the friendship between Comrade Ebisawa and I."

"E-Eh?"

Mafuyu, who was strumming her guitar in the corner of the room while sneaking peeks at us, suddenly jumped up in shock. Her hair rose upwards for an instant.

"You guys probably don't know this, but Comrade Ebisawa recently came to me crying. As she hugged me, she complained about how young man has been ignoring her. I have no choice but to console her."

Eh? Me?

"Stupid Kyouko! I did not do that!"





Mafuyu stood up with her face flushed red. Quit staring at me! Don't you worry, I did not believe a single word of Kyouko.

Senpai ended the topic frivolously by hugging Mafuyu tightly and tapping her gently on her shoulders. She then turned to face me and said,

"I am glad to see that everyone's fired up."

But something happened that poured cold water over us.

It was after school on a Friday. Since the sports day is coming close, Chiaki and Mafuyu were required to join in the practice for our fight against the other classes, so they will only be coming for club activities later. Since I had nothing to do on my hands, I decided to take a trip to the music preparation room to find some classical music scores that we can use for the performance.

Everyone had already gathered at the practice room after I returned there with a bundle of sloppily picked music scores. It seemed that Chiaki and Mafuyu had rushed down to our place straight after from their practice — they were still wearing the blue and yellowish-green cheerleading outfit. However, the atmosphere in the room was incredibly heavy. It was as though the colors of their costume were dulled due to that. Just what is happening here?





"It seems like we are allocated only twenty minutes for our performance....."

Said Chiaki in a distressed mood.

"W-What?"

"I am talking about the amount of time we can use the sports hall for during the school's festival. They said that the schedule is filled up by performances by the Drama Club and Karate Club, so they can only spare us a maximum of twenty minutes."

"Twen....."

I was at a loss for words. It would be okay if we can perform four to five songs within twenty minutes. However, fifty minutes went by in a flash when we were performing live back in summer.

There is no way Chiaki and I can showoff the results of our special training should we be allocated such a short amount of time. No one was done with the preparation of their instruments, perhaps because of how depressed everyone was from the bad news.

"There's nothing much we can do within only twenty minutes. It would be over when we are just done with heating up the atmosphere."

"..... Kyouko, is there nothing we can do?"





Mafuyu looked at Kagurazaka-senpai, who was hugging one of her knees as she sat on the long table in the room.

There was no response from Senpai, however. Nothing was said; all she did was to press her forehead against her knee.

"Kyouko?"

"Mmm? Ah, nothing. Sorry. I was just..... thinking about something."

Senpai must have suffered a huge blow from the the way the committee members dealt with this. However, knowing Senpai, she should be thinking of a way to break the deadlock.....

"My eyes are drawn by their cheerleading outfit. What do you think, young man? Let's wear that when we get on stage."

"Please be more serious about this!"

I slammed my fist into the wall without even thinking. Senpai said unhappily,

"I am thinking about it seriously. I think they should be here soon."

"Who are you referring to?"

"Our enemies."





When the school bell rang at five (a nominal indication of the end of school), the door of our practice room was suddenly rapped hard by someone. We were practicing on our ensemble, so the room was filled with the sound of rock. We would not have realized there was someone knocking on the door if I was not leaning against it.

And so I raised my hand to stop our playing. That is my responsibility as part of the rhythm section. The music will come to a stop very quickly should the sounds of either the bass or drums be missing.

"..... Someone's here?"

Asked Senpai as she wiped her sweat. I nodded my head and opened the door.

"Hello, sorry for interrupting—"

The first person who stepped into the room as he greeted us with a stupid-sounding voice was a tall second-year student with a funny face. I've seen him a few times in the student council's office, and he is indeed one of its members. Another two to four people came in after him, and the room of Folk Music Club was cramped as a result.

"Well then, Kagurazaka. As per our agreement, I have brought them here. You can discuss your things over there."





And with that, the students council member waved his hand irresponsibly. The scary thing was, two of the people behind him consisted of stocky guys in their karate gear. There was also two..... girls(?) dressed in kinagashi with a pair of daisho hanging around their waists. I had no idea what was going on around here. Mafuyu hid herself behind Chiaki in fear. [TLNote: Daisho wiki link here. Google for the image of kinagashi]

"What, why are we discussing at a place like this?"

One of the girls in the vagabond garb asked unhappily.

"Didn't I explain it already?"

The student council member answered in a irritatingly relaxed tone.

"Because the timing for the classes' performances are untouchable! There's the masquerade contest, after which we have to split up the two hours between the Drama Club, Karate Club and Folk Music Club. Negotiate among yourselves should you have any problem with the allocation decided by us."

Oh, those two samurai are from the Drama Club — so they came here in their costumes. I was shocked by their appearances earlier on.....

"See ya, Kagurazaka."

The student council member waved his hand gently and walked out of the practice room after he pushed the samurai and the karate





duo aside. Meaning to say, the student council and the committee members have shoved the problematic scheduling away from themselves. How could they be so irresponsible?

"The Folk Music Club should perform at the music hall!"

Said one of the tall black-belt irritatingly as he sat on the bass amplifiers.

"That will solve everything. Things are so complicated because of you guys cutting in from behind."

"It's the Karate Club who cut into the queue in the first place....."

One of the Drama Club members said that softly, and she was greeted with a fierce stare from the orange-belt. It felt like he shot a glance at me as well. Fear began to swell up in my heart.

However, Kagurazaka-senpai pushed me aside and stood herself before the black-belt.

"Will the Karate Club be responsible for any injuries that may happen during our performance?"

"What does that have to do with us? We've already decided to perform more than a hundred variations of moves, followed by a talk given by a master. If the Folk Music Club must join in the fray, then you guys will have to end your performance in ten minutes."





"Hold on, don't decide that by yourselves. We are already done choosing our script!"

The vagabond interrupted.

"The Folk Music Club and Drama Club will have to finish everything in forty minutes! And even with that, we are still running very tight on time for our preparation!"

"What? You've got to be kidding me!"

"You should have told us earlier that you want to use the sports hall! We have been preparing for this since last year!"

"Why don't you guys perform at the music hall as well? They can fit in more audiences there."

"The stage is not designed for plays! Stop talking if you know nothing! Also, why don't you guys perform at the combative sports center instead?"

"Where the hell are we going to get our audiences from!?"

"It's not like anyone will be interested anyway."

"What did you just say!? Are you asking for a fight?"

Why the hell are you people quarreling in our practice room!? I have no chance of interrupting them, so I scanned around the room once to see if there is anyone who could save us. Just then, I





saw Kagurazaka-senpai beside me lick her round her lips once. Oh god, this person here is actually enjoying the atmosphere.

Just as Senpai was about to join the battle, the cymbals behind us gave a sudden clash.

I reacted a second slower than the karate guy and the vagabond who were about to brawl it out. We turned our head backwards in shock.

"Stop stirring up a ruckus in our practice room! Now is not the time for us to be quarreling. We should at least know how much time each club needs!"

Chiaki stood up furiously behind the drums.

The members from Drama Club finally sat themselves down after being pointed at by Chiaki's drum stick.

"We definitely need eighty minutes. However, that is just the performance. We'll require ten minutes for the preparation of the large props."

Chiaki then directed her sight on to the black-belt.

"We need forty minutes for our performance."

There is really no time to spare even after we've excluded the Folk Music Club. And we did not even factor in the time needed for preparation and packing-up.





"How much time does the Folk Music Club want?" the Drama Club member asked exasperatedly as she crossed her arms before her chest.

"There will never be enough, even if we multiple forever by itself. But conservatively speaking, we need at least an hour."

Kagurazaka-senpai made yet another provocative line of hers. The two Karate Club members put on a haughty expression and grunted.

"That is definitely unacceptable. Darn, one of you two should just give up already."

"It's the sports hall we are talking about here, so the cultural clubs should scam already!"

"What? I don't understand a single word of what you've said!"

Another round of meaningless squabble. I stole another glance at the profile of Senpai. Her face was filled with energy. My intuition told me: ah, it's about time for her to say it.

"How about this then....."

Even though she did not yell, her voice was penetrating. Everyone that was quarreling stopped and looked at her silently. Senpai then said,





"Let's decide via a competition."

Club activities can generally be split into two genres: sports and arts. To take them a step further, there are people who differentiate the personality of others via those two genres as well.

However, the most disputed thing about this is the categorization of the Drama Club and the music clubs. Obviously, the two belong to the arts group rather than sports group. However, thanks to their club activities, their members are required to undergo physical training that was comparable to that of sports clubs. It was not something to be underestimated.

It was not surprising for the Karate Club to do this, but the Drama Club too had accepted Senpai's proposal as well. In a sense, it was something to be expected.

"Let's settle it all on the sports day. It just so happens that there is a very appropriate event known as the inter-club relay race. Based on the results, the higher-ranked clubs can take away a relative amount of time from the lower-ranked ones. Simple?"

Oi, hold on.....

"You guys are from the arts clubs, right? The relay-race will be held separately for the arts and the sports clubs, won't it?"

The Karate Club member shrugged questioningly.





"Don't you worry. Comrade Aihara is a sports committee member."

Senpai patted Chiaki, who was standing at her side.

"We are very flexible at things like this. The other clubs will complain should the Karate Club participates in the race of the arts clubs. No one will say anything if the Drama Club and us are to participate in the race of the sports clubs."

"You guys may be fine with that, but do not decide on behalf of the Drama Club."

"We are OK with that as well."

The vagabond lady said that calmly. Back-belt, orange-belt and I were all surprised by her statement.

"You people are underestimating the training of the Drama Club! A karate match lasts for only about three minutes or so, am I right? Each of our performance on stage is a battle which lasts for an hour!"

That was quite the provocation from her, and enough for everyone to reach a consensus.

After those guys left, Mafuyu, who had been hiding behind Chiaki all these while, tugged Senpai by her sleeves.

"How many people do we need for the relay-race?"





"Exactly four. Because it is a 1600m relay-race!"

"..... I-I'm participating as well?"

Mafuyu has been watching from the sides during our physical education lessons. She was obviously taken by surprise.

"Comrade Ebisawa is the reason why they had accepted my suggestion that quickly."

Senpai patted Mafuyu's head lovingly as well.

"But I..... will be pulling everyone down."

There's also me who runs very slowly as well.....

"Didn't I always say this? The battle was already over before it has even started."

Senpai placed her hands on Chiaki and Mafuyu's shoulders before looking in my direction with a slight smile on her face.

"Don't worry. They've already lost the moment they agreed to the competition."

After bidding Senpai goodbye on our way home, the three of us made our way towards the train station. I asked Chiaki,





"You jog in the morning, right?"

"Eh? Yeah, about six kilometers. But I used to do twelve."

You're a monster, I thought to myself. I then followed up with,

"How early do you start?"

"Six-thirty..... Wait, why? Is Nao joining in too? Really?"

"Mmm. I may not be able to complete the full course together with you, but I'll try my best to wake up early."

"Whoa! It will be Nao's fault if it rains tomorrow!"

Shut up. Whatever you say.

Just then, Mafuyu tugged on my sleeve from the other side.

"..... Is it because of the relay-race?"

"That's one of the reasons."

More importantly, it will be shameful if Mafuyu and I are to suffer from breathing difficulties while we are on the stage. But that is just too embarrassing for me to say it out loud. Mafuyu stared at the bass's casing that was hanging from my back and mumbled with an almost inaudible voice,





"Together..... with Chiaki....."

And the day ended like that. I was surprised I actually managed to wake up early on the Monday of the following week.

Six-thirty in the morning. I went to school together with Chiaki for our morning practice. We ran to the staff room to pick up the key of the practice room in order to place our instruments in it before we run. However, the key was not in the key box. Eh?

Chiaki and I then witnessed something unbelievable in the practice room.

"Morning....."

Mafuyu was stretching herself shyly behind the drums. That was the first time I had seen her in her sports attire. Though it was strange for me to be saying this since I had already seen her in her swimwear, but her legs are really slender to the point where it's worrying.

"W-What's going on here?"

"I am joining the run."

E-Eh?

"Because I can't lose!"





Mafuyu stood up with her face flushed red. She was looking at Chiaki when she said that.

Indeed, this was a fight which we cannot lose. Our performance time would be reduced to naught if we lose. I never expected Mafuyu to be that motivated though.

"I wonder if you can keep up with us?" Chiaki moved her face close to Mafuyu's as she said that teasingly.

"..... I'll do my best."

As we began our run, Chiaki went into her devil-trainer mode yet again — perhaps because her hot-blooded sporty personality was boiling. Those eyes of hers looked really scary when she was encouraging the panting Mafuyu loudly. Also, that "Min-on! Fight!!" cheer of yours is really embarrassing, so can you please stop shouting that already? It's still in the early morning for now, but we're within the school's vicinity and there are people walking around us!

Before long, Mafuyu was close to the limit from her fatigue. She was left so far behind to the point where she could not even see Chiaki's back. If you are wondering why I knew, it was because I was left far behind as well. Embarrassing, I know.

"You can..... g-go on ahead, I'll be..... alright after..... a rest....."





Mafuyu said that choppily as she squatted down by the roadside. Her back heaved up and down intensely each time she took a breath. I was quite worried when I saw that.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm..... fine."

This girl here was simply just a weak and fragile girl before the incident that happened to her fingers. I recalled the time when she ran away from home.

"How about I piggyback you while I run?"

"You idiot, that will be pointless, wouldn't it?"

"Not at all. I mean, Mafuyu is really light, so I am thinking — will it be better for my training if I am to piggyback you while I run?"

However, I quickly decided against it after projecting the image in my mind. That's just too embarrassing. Mafuyu finally got herself up by grabbing onto my arm tightly.

"Are you serious? Why are you willing to do even that? Is it because you have seen how hardworking Chiaki is?"

"Not just that."

I allowed Mafuyu to lean against my back before I resumed my steps. She was so light, it was worrying.





"Chiaki said she will be satisfied as long as she can be in the same band together with the person whom she loves. But that will not do."

It may be easier to maintain the status quo.

However, I wish to turn the room into a place filled with passion and pulsation; a place that can support the music played by Mafuyu. But it will be embarrassing to voice out my thoughts, so all I did is to walk silently as I carried Mafuyu on my back.

"..... Did Chiaki really say those things to you?"

Came the voice of Mafuyu next to my ear.

"..... Mmm. But she was probably referring to Senpai."

"Idiot."

Mafuyu's weight disappeared off my back all of the sudden. She left my side.

"Hey, start running! Chiaki will be further and further ahead of us if you do not hurry."

And with that, she began sprinting. That back of hers with her maroon colored hair fluttering in the air became smaller and smaller. What was going on here? What was up with her? I followed in her tracks.





Obviously, Mafuyu was breathless before long, thus allowing me to catch up from behind. This time, she pressed her palms against the asphalt and panted, "Don't worry about me, go! You have to catch up to Chiaki!"

In the end, Mafuyu was harshly scolded by Chiaki, who actually led us by a lap. Not only so, she was made to run despite her wobbly steps. I guess no one would ever know which club we are from just by looking at the commotion.

After our lessons, Kagurazaka-senpai abandoned all intentions of a band practice and began discussing our battle plan happily.

"I've already decided on the running order. The first runner will be Comrade Aihara — that's because it's the leg where the chances of contact between the runners will be at its highest. Putting the Drama Club aside, the Karate Club may pull something on us. It will be even better if we can retaliate by making them fall without any body contact, such as using moves like the 'phantom throw'." [TLNote: SF2 Guile's glitch.]

"Senpai, judo is not magic, so there are no such moves."

"Next will be Comrade Ebisawa. You should try your best to be as cute as you can be so that those from the Karate Club will not lay their hands on you. That should allow us to maintain the lead. Then young man is up next..... Mmm, all you need to do is to run. The last runner will be me. Our lead will probably be gone when race





gets to that stage, but since I do not have to worry about my back, that also means it will be easier for me to catch up from behind."

Hey, that's a totally crazy plan! How can she be that optimistic? It was like she did not even consider the possibility of us losing. I was speechless as usual.

"Also, we have already decided on the details of the competition."

Senpai spread out a copy of a pledge letter in front of us, and on it was a incredibly exaggerated content: {The Drama Club (henceforth referred to as "Party A"), Karate Club (henceforth referred to as "Party B") and Folk Music Research Club (henceforth referred to as "Party C") shall abide to the following conditions—} and etc. It was filled with lots of technical terms, complete with the stamps from the student council committee and the school's festival committee at the very end.

"Why the formalities....."

"We can't be sloppy about this. It would be problematic if we are to argue on the legitimacy of the terms and conditions. I have left the original copy with the student council. Just as written in the agreement, the winner can take away ten minutes of the performing time for every difference in the rankings. For example, if we come in fourth and the Drama Club sixth, our time will increase by twenty minutes, while theirs will be reduced by the same amount. We have also agreed that the other conditions will remain as per what is determined initially, and nothing is to be changed."





"H-Hold on. As per what is determined initially? How much time are we allocated?"

"Hmm? It's written very clearly in here as well, yeah? According to the timetable planned by the school's festival committee, the Drama Club will begin their performance from 3pm for an hour; next, we will take over at 4pm and perform until 4.20pm. Lastly, the Karate Club will start from 4.20pm all the way till 5pm."

"We'll be out of the running if we're ranked lower than the two clubs....."

"There's no need for you to dwell on what may happen if we lose. We have nothing to lose right from the start."

With that said, Senpai gave me a hard slap on my back.

"To be honest, we're in the most disadvantageous position for the current allocation. The Drama Club starts first, so they can begin with their preparations during the masquerade contest. Since a play cannot be interrupted halfway, they should be very confident of eating up our twenty minutes. The Karate Club is the last, meaning to say there will be no complaints regardless of how long they extend their performance. However, as we are a band, it will be easier for them to negotiate on the length of our performance. They will definitely ask us to perform our songs within the restricted amount of time."

"That's just mean," Chiaki smashed the cymbals as she said that.





"So you see? It's impossible for us to lose. We can only win. Isn't that so?"

But Kagurazaka-senpai did not explain any further. From the following day onward, Senpai would always be late for the band. She was also frequently seen around the teachers and school's festival committee members at places like the staff room, student council room and audiovisual room. Perhaps she's hatching something in secret.

We've decided to ignore that. Chiaki, Mafuyu and I will gather at the practice room everyday at 6.30am before going on our morning run, after which will be the morning practice.

Why did Mafuyu wish to join in the run as well? Probably because she wants to catch up to a certain someone?

As for me, my answer is crystal clear. I want to catch up to Mafuyu.

Because I wish to stand on a stage that is unaffected by time and allow Mafuyu to listen to my music. I want her to know that a dependable rhythm section that is worthy of her trust will be by her side always, pulsating endlessly.

And that is my reason for running.

As I welcomed the cold autumn breeze that brushed against my face as I ran, a tune flowed in my mind.





The stretch of road was filled with heroes who had their dreams broken. They gambled their everything into the final reckless dash—

Though everyone was planning to escape tonight, there was not a single place to hide.

May we try our best to live on with those sorrows in our hearts.....

Multiple gunshots rang through out the school's sports grounds that was bathed under the glaring sun.

The sun which was high in the air was beginning its descent into the western horizon. Beneath it were five sports committee members redrawing the white lines of the tracks. I could almost smell the odors of their sweat that had seeped its way into the soil.

Thirteenth October, sports day.

The afternoon marks the end of an intense cheerleading competition. What's coming up next is a war of attrition. You heard it right. A war of attrition.

"Is there anyone who can take over the people for the four-hundred meters race? Four people were injured during the cavalry battle."

"We still have the long distance race after this, so not us!"





"Stop with those excuses and get going! You can run as long as you've got two legs on you!"

Terada, the lady boss of Third Class of First Year, handed down those orders coldly. No one dared to oppose her.

"Boss, we're lacking in manpower for defense for the boutaoshi event!" [TLNote: 棒倒し]

"Head to the infirmary and bring back those people who are suffering from only minor injuries!"

That's quite inconsiderate and forceful of her. I remember Senpai saying that this was the same for the school's sports day for each and every year. The cavalry battle and boutaoshi will be held twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon (female and male contests), so it was a death march where we will definitely end up with casualties. What the hell were the sports committee thinking?

The fuzzy speakers were broadcasting an announcement, requesting the participants of the inter-club relay race to assemble. I gingerly sneaked out of the allocated area of Third Class of First Year.

Kagurazaka-senpai, Chiaki and Mafuyu were already waiting at the southern corner of the participants area; both Chiaki and Mafuyu had changed out of their cheerleading outfits. The three of them were not wearing their sports attire, but the feketerigó T-shirt made by Chiaki earlier on.





That's right. Senpai was already carrying out her plans in secret, just like how it has always been.

And then came a roar from the speakers,

"I am Inoue from the the Broadcasting Club—" "and I am Oota from the Track and Field team. We are your live commentators who will be analyzing the events for today."

Why do we have live commentary and analysis for a high school's sports day? Who is your target audience? The sports committee members were already getting carried away with the commentary by the afternoon.

"Oota, what's coming up next is the inter-club relay race. First up is the race between the sports clubs. However, it seems like two of the participating clubs are not really sports related."

"That's right. Well, since the Drama Club will be performing a drama which involves sword-fighting scenes, they can be considered to be a relative of the Kendo Club. As for the Folk Music Club, I am not really sure, but I think the musicians will slam their guitars at people during the rock performances, so you can think it as a sort of martial arts."

Please do not say whatever comes to your mind, Commentator





Oota.

"And new rules will be incorporated into the inter-club relay races from this year onward: the clubs will have to wear their respective attires during the race."

That's the secret weapon of Kagurazaka-senpai. I looked at the participants who were gradually gathering at the participants area; in particular, I was looking for the members from the Drama Club and Karate Club.

Obviously, the Karate Club members were wearing their karategi. Barefooted.

It was even worse for the Drama Club. Since they've no set attire, they have to follow the rules set by the sports committee — which is to wear the attires that they will be wearing for the performance. That means the kinagashi as well as the daisho hanging by their waists.

Honestly speaking, both parties are wearing attires that were not exactly suitable for running. Whoa, one of the Karate Club members was staring fiercely in our direction. They must be pretty pissed. Standing in line next to us, the samurai lady from the Drama Club shot a glance at Kagurazaka-senpai while muttering clearly, "How very despicable of you. You sure know how to create trouble for us." Senpai feigned an air of innocence.





The sports committee members were around when Senpai suggested that idea, and within them are those from the Karate Club as well. They objected against it vehemently. However, sports day can be considered as a festival of sorts, and since it has no effect on the standings of scores of the inter-class competition, priority is given to the idea which can heat up the atmosphere. Just to add on, the other clubs that were participating in this event were sport clubs like Football, Baseball and Track and Field — needless to say, they will be unaffected by the proposed idea, so they agreed to it readily.

Senpai knew that would happen—

"But the second runner of Folk Music is her. You know, the sheltered Princess who had never once attended any of the physical education lessons—"

I was surprised. Mafuyu's nickname actually made it that far? Also, stop talking about things that would bring down our morale even before the race has begun!

Then again, it was true that Mafuyu is the obstacle that will totally eliminate all the advantages that Senpai had forcefully obtained for us. The Karate Club and Drama Club will probably send their fastest runners, but we only have four people in our club.

Mafuyu had her maroon colored hair tied up into a ponytail and was standing before me with her back facing me. She then turned her head around. Her navy blue eyes were filled with sincere determination.





"I will definitely pass the baton to you."

Said Mafuyu as she stared at me.

"I will definitely pass it to you."

I gulped and nodded my head. I was slightly overwhelmed by her determination.

That's right. Now's not the time to be complaining. The only thing left to do is to run.

"And. Here. Comes. The. PARTICIPAAAAANTS!"

Inoue screamed as he commented on what was happening. For some unknown reason, we ran onto the track in eight rows of fours despite the lack of background music. My nasal cavity was burnt by the smell of dust and lime. Cheerleading banners fluttered before our eyes, while the wind carried the sound of the cheers.

The 1600m relay-race was split into four laps, and it was held on the unbelievably huge 400m running track in our school. It was a harsh race which will last around five minutes. All the runners had gathered in front of the VIP seats.

As the first runner positioned themselves while the starter carried the pistol onto the pitch, I turned around and asked Senpai,

"..... Why didn't you tell us about your ploy earlier?"





'Competitors will have to wear their respective attires' — the announcement from the sports committee would be passed down only to the president of the club, who was Senpai. We only came to know about it yesterday.

Senpai answered me with a faint smile,

"I was looking at the three of you running and sweating every morning from the rooftops. The scene was so incredibly dazzling that I could not bring myself to inform you people about my petty tricks."

So you do come to school every morning? Then how about you attend your lessons?

"Moreover, it is not like it is an incredibly huge ploy or something. When starting gun fires, we can obtain victory only by relying on our heart and our legs."

"You mean we've nothing else once the race starts?"

I asked weakly. I mean, I am worried. I could sense Mafuyu's gaze from behind me, glancing past my shoulders.

"Yeah, we no longer have any direct strategies. All that's left are things like this."

With that said, Senpai showed me the item in her hand secretly.





It's a MD with the label [Offenbach <天国と地獄>]. It's a very well known piece by itself, though there are some who will recognize it as the jingle used in the commercial of the pastry chain Bunmeido. In any case, it's a well-known operetta that is incorporated into the standard tracks to be used in the sports day..... Wait, what is it doing here? Won't they be using it during the events? [TLNote: 天国と地獄 (Heaven and Hell) is Japanese's unofficial name for <Orphée aux enfers>, and it's most notably recognized for and linked to its can-can part in Japan. Parodied into countless MAD and stuff such as this]

"Yeah, so I secretly swapped this with the rock music which we like."

Just as I lifted my head to look at Senpai in surprise, the starting gun fired at the exact same time with the fill of the drums. I turned my head around in shock.

What I saw was the starting line being torn apart by winds of various colors as they dashed away. I stared at Chiaki's tiny body as the group of shoving runners approached the very first corner.

What was played through the speakers was the pure and flawless strumming of a guitar which could bring one to tears, followed by the glamorous sound of the piano that came into the fray together with a series of low drumming, which sounded like the gradually increasing rumblings of the ground. A certain microphone picked up the conversation between the sports committee who were at the seats reserved for them.





"..... Eh?" "Were we supposed to play this song?"

Next came the hoarse singing which sounded like it was intended to crush that conversation into pieces. It was Bruce Springsteen.

- <Born to Run>

My body gave a subconscious tremble. How? This song has been playing on and on in my mind for the past two weeks whenever I was doing the morning run.

"It has to be this song. Am I right?"

Mumbled Senpai from behind me. I turned around on reflex and stared at her face.

Can she see through everything? Or, would that be the song which appears in our mind whenever we want to want to express our feelings as we run? I guess the latter should be closer to the truth.

I looked into the cloudless sky. The deep belief in the powers of rock-and-roll was sprinting within me, causing my blood to burn.

I searched for Chiaki as I scanned the track, and I found her when the leading runner reached the first corner. The third runner with a small white frame, with her pink headband fluttering in the winds. My fists were clenched subconsciously. A group of runners was following Chiaki closely behind, and among them was a runner in karategi.





Where was the Drama Club? I could not see any of those attention-grabbing attires. How could this be? Where on earth—

The first and second runner were neck to neck with each other, and I was shocked by what I saw. The second runner was the girl from Drama Club who spoke to us with a threatening tone. I did not locate her earlier because I was searching the back.

So that was not just all talk, she was really something. Commentator Inoue was shouting excitedly, "Drama Club! Drama Club's second and following closely behind!"

An earth-ripping roar erupted from around us. The leading runner from the Football team took a fall — seemed like his leg was hooked by the sword hanging from the Drama Club runner's waist or something. A chill ran down my spine as I looked at the fall which stirred up a cloud of dust. There was the possibility that the runners at the back may get themselves entangled in this mess—

Someone slipped through the chaotic crowd without hesitation and burst her way to the front.

"Chiaki!"

Mafuyu shouted. That was indeed Chiaki, who was sprinting forward in a straight line while ignoring the footsteps of the guys who were closing in on her. It was as though Bruce Springsteen's powerful voice had given her a push from behind — I could almost see those splattering sweat drops of hers.





The blue attires of the Track and Field team finally overlapped with Chiaki's small silhouette in the third corner. Mafuyu stood up and turned her head around to look at me with a gaze, from which I sensed how she was overwhelmed with pressure. We had never expected Chiaki to approach the ending point neck to neck with the hot favorites.

"I'll be waiting for you!"

I squeezed out that line with all my might.

"Do not care about those behind you! Also, there is no need for you to worry about those in front of you! It's okay even if you are overtaken by others! All you need to do is to run towards me!"

"I-I get it!"

The blushing Mafuyu shook her ponytail and began sprinting on the track.

A cheer rang yet again. I lifted my body to look at the forth corner. The leading two runners came into contact with each other by their elbows. The lighter Chiaki was almost pushed out of the inner lane. The upper body of the Track and Field member took a huge wobble as well.

Chiaki was the one with the faster recovery rate. However, the strength of the Track and Field team was indeed something, especially when it came to sprinting in a straight path. They had gained a lead of a few meters by the time Chiaki had passed the





baton to the second runner. An amber-colored wind streaked past my sight — Mafuyu's hair was fluttering in the air due to her speed.

"..... Sorry for not getting the lead."

The panting and sweating Chiaki wobbled towards us and collapsed in Senpai's bosom.

"No, you've done incredibly well. That was way beyond my expectations."

Senpai hugged Chiaki tightly. I wanted to say some words of consolation to Chiaki, who bit her lips bitterly. However, I could not say anything at all.

I turned my head and saw her maroon hair fluttering gently with the wind along the edge of the track as it reflected the rays of the sun. I slammed my fist against my trembling knees when I saw Mafuyu being overtaken by the runners one by one. There was no need to be flustered!

The Track and Field team built a sizable lead — about half a lap difference compared to the last runner. Just then, the dull white silhouette of the karategi closed in on Mafuyu. I was shocked — that guy reached his hand towards Mafuyu's hair.

I stood up on reflex. God damn it, what was he trying to do!? Mafuyu strayed off towards the outer lanes of the track, and that made the Karate Club member missed his grasp.





My mind was filled with my prayers. Please come back to us safe and sound, no matter what happens! The runners were approaching the third corner as Mafuyu was overtaken by the third person.

"Where do you think you're supposed to be, young man? Get onto the track now!"

I was shocked motionless by Senpai's sudden voice. Oh right, what am I doing? I was the next runner.

"You are a guy, so the Karate Club will probably not go easy on you. Be careful."

She hammered my back—

"You don't have to think of anything. We'll win as long as you pass the baton to me."

And with that, she pushed me onto the track. Quite a few of those different colored batons flashed by me as the runners were passing the baton to their next runner. The Baseball Team, the Drama Club, followed by the Kendo Club. Next was the Karate Club—

Just then, I noticed the third runner of Drama Club exchange looks with his counterpart from the Karate Club, who was right next to him. They nodded their heads together.

What was with that? They should be bitter enemies, no?





However, the two of them disappeared from my sight after having received their batons.

I caught sight of Mafuyu in the fourth corner. Her headband was missing, and her hair was all messed up because of rushing wind. However, she was still running towards me.

I moved a few steps back in the relay zone so as to get myself acquainted to the rhythm of her steps. I then began accelerating. Mafuyu was getting closer and closer, and our distance had gradually shrunk by an arm's distance with each of her passing steps. I was already in the air the moment I felt the icy touch on my fingers along with hearing the sounds of the saxophone solo of <Born to Run>.

White lines were flowing past my feet at an unbelievable pace. I reached the corner in an instant, and it felt like the centrifugal force pulled me away from the track. The oncoming wind flew into my nose and seared the deepest parts of my brain.

I saw the back of the karategi. It was that orange-belt guy. The distance between us had shortened to within an arm's length. He saw me when he turned his head around, and on his face was a twisted expression. Must be painful to run barefooted — his running style looked very unnatural. I will have to at least get close to the Drama Club after overtaking him. That was the position I was aiming for before I passed the baton to Senpai.

I could no longer hear the sound of my footsteps by the time I reached the second corner. All I heard was the intense thumping of





my heart, the wind that howled past me as well as the sound of the guitar played by Springsteen. The back of the dirty karategi was getting closer and closer. His running was off and his upper body was trembling. I was certain he would leave the inner lane if his center of gravity was shifted outwards during the bend. And so I will have to conserve my energy until that happens—

The wind blew a small grain of rock onto my face. As I refocused my attention, I saw a narrow gap appearing in the inner lane. The Karate Club member was veering towards the outer lanes.

It was only when I slipped into the gap that I realized it was all a trap. By then, it was already too late.

That orange-belt bastard lifted his elbow. He stretched out his leg to knock it against my calf. My vision wobbled and my body took half a turn.

The sounds of my heartbeats, the wind and the guitar were all engulfed by a scrapping noise. My right cheek was assaulted by an unbelievable burning sensation, followed by the feelings of pain and dampness. My right hand grabbed hard onto the baton subconsciously in order not to let go of it.

The orange-belt and I was tangled up into a mess as we rolled away from the tracks and towards the audiences seats. Next came a series of shrieks.

My consciousness was slowly getting hazy. I swallowed the pungent metallic taste into my stomach. Just as I was about to lift





my head up, I could feel the back of my head coming into contact with something.

That orange-belt bastard was actually laying on my back. Get off! Get off of me!

"Hey, are you alright? You're bleeding!" "Medic!"

I could hear a few voices with my ears, but I ignored all of them. Don't touch me, the relay race is still ongoing. However, the orange-belt bastard grabbed onto my wrist tightly just as I was about to push myself off the ground.

"..... Y-You!"

Are you really that desperate to stop me with those despicable means of yours? Are you dumb!? All I could do is to look at the Drama Club runner getting further and further away from me. But I was unable to make any sound with someone lying on my body, so the only thing I could do was to crawl on the ground while dragging him along with me. I have to get myself back onto the track even if I can only inch closer a centimeter at a time. My legs were losing strength, and I could not push away the weight on my back. I could not stand up.

"Get off!" I roared furiously with my feebly soft voice. "It will end up with the both of us losing, so get off!"

That orange-belt bastard replied by increasing the strength of his grip around my wrist. That bastard—





"Nao, stand up."

I heard the painful voice of Chiaki. My mind cleared all of the sudden. I realized something.

That's the motive of the Karate Club all along — to perish together with Folk Music Club. As we only have twenty minutes of performance time, we'll lose all of it as long as we are last and the Drama Club gets anything higher than sixth. With that, they can kick us out of the sports complex. All that was left after that was to work on the details and pass the remaining unused time to the Karate Club. So they had formed an alliance in secret and planned all of this. God damn it, to think..... to think that we've actually lost to these people.

However, I could not shake away the orange-belt bastard who clung onto my back like a zombie. All I could do was to grit my teeth and slither forward like a slug. Faraway from us, the Drama Club team was passing the baton to their last runner—

"Nao—"

Chiaki's voice pierced its way deep into my consciousness.

"It's not too late, so stand up! Min! On! Fight!!! Min! On! Fight!!!!"

I lifted my heavy head to accept the voice which grabbed me and touched my heart.





That's right, I am still carrying Chiaki, Mafuyu and Senpai on my shoulders. I have to continue running. This despicable person is nothing compared to the weight of the responsibility on me—

"Min! On! Fight!!!"

Chiaki's cheers just so happen to overlap with Springsteen's scream.

I mustered all my strength to lift up my shoulders and pushed myself off the ground. There was a jolt of pain as the wind blew against my face. For a brief moment, I could feel the singing voice descending onto my eyelids.

— Someday girl — I don't know when — We're gonna get to that place — Where we really wanna go, and we'll walk in the sun..... But till then, tramps like us - Baby we're born to run.

We're born to run.

I kicked my feet against the sand, shifted my body weight forward and began to sprint wildly. All those time, I never let go of the baton in my hand. Though I could feel something tumbling off my back, it did not matter to me anymore. At the end of the corner was a few white lines extending away from my feet, and I could see the silhouette with black hair standing near the converging point of these lines. Blood and sweat were flowing into my eyes, but I still did my best to keep them opened.





I lifted the baton and stretched out my arm to pass it to her. I could sense a resounding feeling passing through my hands. In the next instant, a crazy strength pulled the baton away from my grip. My knees collapsed onto the ground amid a cloud of dust.

I could faintly see the two braids fluttering in the air like the tail-feathers of a wild beast as it flapped its wings and flew away from me.

I was sent to the infirmary right after that, so I did not know the details. From the commentary and the photos, it's obvious that the whole incident had stirred up quite a ruckus.

Terada, the female boss of the Third Class of First Year, was someone who lacked any sense of compassion. I was forced to leave the infirmary bed to participate in the final boutaoshi event held in the afternoon. Moreover, I was given the most difficult task of supporting the beam. It was a miracle that I managed to stand on my feet during the ending ceremony.

The school gave us the next day off so that we could rest. And since my body was aching all over, I spent the whole day in bed.

It was only until Tuesday that my body had recovered enough for me to barely play my bass.





When I stepped into school, the scene of the guys in our class all covered up in band-aids, medicinal plaster and bandages was incredibly eye-catching. They were probably all drilled hard by Tyrant Terada.

I don't know if it was worth the sacrifices, but I heard the Third Class team (our sports day was held by grouping the same class number of each year together to form eight teams) obtained first. Second went to the First Class team, where Kagurazaka-senpai belongs to. The upper brass of our class were all pleased by the result, since it could be considered as revenge for the chorus contest. As for me, I spent the rest of the day in a weakened state.

"..... Does our school have the policy of changing classes....."

One of the guys murmured during our lunch break, which reminded me of a horrifying truth: the sports day for the next two years will probably be as crazy as this.....

As for Mafuyu, she was very concerned about the graze on my cheek.

"Are you feeling better? Chiaki said you had a fever."

"Ah, yeah. Ouch! It hurts. Don't touch my injury for now."

Chiaki even came down to my house yesterday to take care of me. But the so-called looking after me was just her buying lunch from the convenience store to satiate Tetsurou, who was continuously





complaining "I'm hungry, I'm hungry". That allowed me to sleep properly.

"Mmm, but Nao worked really hard!"

Chiaki hammered my shoulder happily. Stop. That really hurts.

"..... Urm, I do not really know the details of the result, so what exactly happened to the competition? How much performance time do we have?"

Despite the speed of Senpai, we did not manage to cut down on the distance between us and the Drama Club, resulting in them reaching the finishing line first. However, Chiaki and Mafuyu remained silent after exchanging a look between themselves. So what exactly had happened?

"Ask Kyouko." Mafuyu replied coldly. "I guess Kyouko must be dying to explain it all herself."

"Yeah. Senpai will be disappointed if we tell you everything."

I could only wait for the school to end as I wondered what on earth had happened.

With the sports day done, our school begun to focus on the school's festival. Everywhere, including the corridors and the courtyard, was filled with the sounds of nailing and sawing of planks. The smell of paint lingered in the air.





The three of us met Kagurazaka-senpai at the door when we made our way to the practice room together. Before I could even say anything, Senpai was already grabbing me tightly by my right hand and caressing the injury on my face as she looked at me with her slightly teary eyes..... Eh? Urm, what's going on here?

"I still cannot forget the moment when I received the baton from you. What a numbing sensation that was. You've actually suffered so many injuries for my sake."

"No, I did not do it especially for Senpai..... Ow, Mafuyu, that hurts! Stop pinching me! And you stop too, Chiaki!"

Mafuyu was pinching me on my injured cheek, with Chiaki was joining in by prodding on it as well. I protected my face by squatting down in the middle of the girls and shielding it with my arms.

"What are you girls doing? Please, stop doing such things to me. I am injured, you know?"

Mafuyu wore an unhappy expression on her face, while Chiaki stuck out her tongue towards me with a "Bleh". As for Senpai, she opened the door with a laugh and pushed us all into the room.

"Did I mention this? We are ranked sixth for the relay race."

Said Senpai nonchalantly as she took out her Les Paul guitar from its casing. I guess Karate Club should be last, but shouldn't that make us seventh? Did I overtake someone? After that fall?





"Well..... who's seventh? It was impossible for that to be the Drama Club, isn't it?"

"Seventh's Kendo Club. I have to praise them for their tenacity. Drama Club was fifth."

Ah, I see. Going by Senpai's ploy, Kendo Club will definitely be overtaken by us, since they have to run in their protective gear. I only knew later that their last runner dropped the baton by accident. Can't blame them, since they were all wearing kote as well. [TLNote: Kote's the gauntlets of Kendo wear.]

Meaning to say, we can shave away twenty minutes from Karate Club, but will have ten minutes taken away from us by the Drama Club. So that leaves us with an addition of ten minutes.

"This victory is obtained with the help of everyone, and not just me alone."

Kagurazaka-senpai opened her arms wide and pulled Mafuyu and Chiaki's head to her side before planting a kiss on their cheeks. It's only at times like this when Mafuyu will put on a bashful expression without offering any resistance. No, wait a second. Why was she so happy? Her smile was suggesting that we've actually obtained a huge and comprehensive victory.

"Well..... even so, we can only perform for thirty minutes, no?"

"No no no."





After connecting her guitar to the amplifiers, Senpai turned around and did a 'V' sign at me.

"It's two hours."

"..... What?" What did she just say?

"You see, since Karate Club is last, their performance time will be reduced to zero. Meaning to say, their time will be shared between the Drama Club and us. Oh right, you all should take another look at the pledge letter. Here."

Senpai showed us the photocopied document and pointed at a certain line.

'We agree that the other conditions will remain as per what was determined initially, and nothing is to be changed'

"..... So what does that line have to do with this?"

"You still don't get it? The other conditions cannot be changed. Meaning to say, the Drama Club can use the time which they take away from the Karate Club only after our performance was over."

"Ah....."

My jaws dropped in surprise. What sort of sophistry is that? W-Will the Drama Club really agree to that?





"That's why I made this pledge letter and got the student council to witness the whole thing. The Drama Club did complain a lot though. The additional time was useless if they could not use it continuously. And since we are smack in between them, there was not too much difference for us even if we are to proceed with the initial schedule. I made not a single concession to them."

"Urm..... so how did things go? It can't be that the Drama Club accepted this just as it is, right?"

"No way. Actually, I had already booked the audiovisual room at three in the afternoon for the Drama Club. Not many people know they have a complete set of lighting equipment over there. Actually, I did think of that as a backup plan in case we failed, but I did not tell you people about it so as not to dent your enthusiasm. That place is not as spacious as the sports complex though."

I recalled about how I saw Senpai at many different places. So she was actually taking care of stuff like this?

No, hold on.....

"But..... I-I mean, their ranking was higher than ours, no? Wouldn't they say things like 'Why don't the Folk Music Club use the audiovisual room instead?'" What sorcery did she use for them to make such a concession?

"Mmm, they did say that to me. However, they shut up immediately when I mumbled about how they teamed up with the Karate Club to interfere with your race. Rather than my sophistry,





that incident was what actually allowed us to deal the decisive blow."

So she knew all along.....? That's quite sharp-eyed of her.

"That was why those injuries are your badge of honor. I am very proud of it."

Senpai gently caressed my cheek once more, and the sensation caused me to shiver.

What a scary person she was. Everyone's modus operandi was well within her grasp. Thank god I was standing on the same side as she was.

I finally understood Senpai's plan. We only have to beat at least one of the clubs and get them kicked out of the sports complex. Should the amount of time taken be decided by the difference between our rankings against the winner, it is highly possible for the club which came in last to have all of their time taken away from them. With that, Senpai will be able to use the trap she set in the pledge letter to negotiate with the other party. She will probably request for even more time in exchange for changing the schedule of our performances. Then again, Senpai probably did not expect the result to be like this despite how cunning she was. Folk Music Club has obtained a total victory without losing anything.

..... Meaning to say..... Eh? A resounding victory? That means our performance time will be—





"With that, we are the only ones left standing on the piece of scorched earth. And that means—"

Senpai did another 'V' sign.

"We have two whole hours."

"Two....."

It took me a long time to process whatever Senpai had said.

"— Two hours? Nonstop?"

"Of course. Just like what we had planned initially. I mean, we are still young."

"No, no way, that's impossible. It's not like we are a band on drugs! Two hours!?"

"I am looking forward to it!" "How about we perform an opera?" "I hate operas. I'll prefer a suite."

The three of you, listen to me!

"Right, in order to be able to take on two consecutive hours..... Nao, come here. Let's start with push-ups—"

"That's right. And this time round, you'll have to train until you can do them while the three of us are sitting on your back."





"Stop joking with me! Also, are we really going to use up the two whole hours?"

Then came a series of tumbling sounds. Mafuyu placed bundles of scores that she was hugging in her chest onto the bass amplifiers between us. Seems like she borrowed all these scores from the music preparatory room.

"There are a whole bunch of scores that I want to play. Two hours are not enough."

The three girls began selecting the scores based on their preferences. For a while, I could only stare at the scene in a dumbfounded state.

I took a glance at the calender on the wall. The school's festival will be here in a month's time.





Chapter 4

Connected Names

There were quite a few picture frames drawn on the jacket sleeve of this album.

They were titled <THE GNOME>, <THE SAGE> and <THE OLD CASTLE> — but all three frames were empty inside. The titles of the albums were printed in the frame at the bottom left.

<PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION>.

I removed my headphones with a sigh and placed the CD back into its case before stacking it on top of the mountain of <Pictures at an Exhibition>.

I had an urge to yell in frustration. Why were there so many versions of the same song?

"Allow me to explain. Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, one of the many musicians who strove to express Russia's musical nationality, was someone who always abandoned his compositions when there were only halfway done. For example, nearly all of his operas were incomplete works. However, his ideas of music were innovative and colorful; moreover, many people are attracted to his works





precisely because they 'are not perfect'. His masterpiece, <Pictures at an Exhibition>, has spurred the imagination of countless past and present musicians, and that resulted in the birth of many variations!"

"..... Tetsurou, why did you barge into my room without my permission?"

"No, I was just thinking..... if I do not comment like how a music critic should once in a while, would I forget it all someday?"

"Whatever, get out."

"Feel free to depend on me if you're fretting about music, yeah? Because I do not help with any of the housework at all."

"At least wash the clothes if you're aware of that!"

"I don't know the difference between washing powder and wheat flour — are you really fine with that?"

I chased Tetsurou away by throwing my pillow at him. I then faced the desk and began inspecting the songs in the CDs one at a time.

The piano version composed by Rimsky-Korsakov; the most famous orchestral version by Ravel; Henry Wood's version which dates back much earlier; Tomita Isao's synthesized version. These were the various versions of <Pictures at an Exhibition>.





Still, I returned to the version that I was listening to — the live-performance by Emerson, Lake & Palmer. God knows how many times I had listened to it already.

The first to speak was Mafuyu. It happened during our club activity today. She picked out a musical score from a huge stack and opened it.

"One of the main themes of <Pictures at an Exhibition> is <Promenade>. We can form a complete medley if we insert that between our songs."

"Pro..... what does that pro-whatever song sounds like?" Chiaki lifted her head and asked Mafuyu. Mafuyu grabbed her guitar silently and played a sample of the main theme in B ♭ major.

"Ah, I heard that before."

"Comrade Ebisawa has not released <Pictures at an Exhibition>, right?" asked Kagurazaka-senpai. What Senpai was referring to was obviously the piano version. Mafuyu nodded her head slightly after a brief moment of silence.

"I'm looking forward to it. I must listen to Comrade Ebisawa's version of Mussorgsky even if it's performed using a different instrument. Well then, young man. Thanks to that—"

"Eh?"





"I'll leave the composing to you."

"Why?"

"I can't believe you're asking me why."

Senpai inched towards me and lifted my chin with her finger. What appeared before me was Senpai's black eyes, which looked like the starless skies in the night. I could not move my whole body, much less my face.

"You're my other half; my dearest Paul. Is there a need for anything else?"

"Eh..... U-Uh....."







"I never expect you not to know that. Guess I've no other option but to lock you in a room at a hotel to let you know how much I treasure you."

"Geez— Senpai!" "You can't!"

Chiaki performed the triangle choke on Senpai and pulled her away from me; as for Mafuyu, she strangled me from behind and pulled me towards the side of the entrance. That's painful. Why is everyone not giving a damn to my neck recently.....

"Now's not the time to be doing stuff like this! We're only a month away from the school's festival!"

Senpai became a little depressed after that scolding from Chiaki. However, she straightened herself immediately.

"Sorry, I've reflected on it. So let us all head to the hotel together."

"You've used that gag last month, no?"

"Mmm, mmm."

Looks like Chiaki has improved considerably..... please continue to tsukkomi Senpai in my stead.

"But you don't hate <Pictures at an Exhibition>, do you, young man?"





"Hmm? Not really....." Don't veer back to the topic all of the sudden. "I don't actually hate it."

I'll be the one to compose it? I took the score from Mafuyu's hands and stared at the floor.

"That's decided then. Please compose a medley that is irritatingly long, but so exciting that our audience will never have the chance to catch their breaths."

I hugged my head in response to Senpai's unreasonable request.

When I returned home, I dug out all the versions of <Pictures at an Exhibition> that I could find in Tetsurou's collection and took out the synthesizer as well. It was the one Tomo gave Senpai, who then lent it to me for an unlimited duration. I tried playing the <Promenade> theme with various sorts of timbre.

<Promenade>.

It was a theme which depicted the scene of someone walking leisurely in an exhibition, appearing six times in the the entire piece during the various variations. It brought a strange sense of uniformity to the piece.

All in all, that was what Mafuyu was referring to. Our song could be added into the exhibition as long as <Promenade> appears in between our songs.





Her argument may sound a bit forced, but I did agree with it in general — the reason was the lasting impression that melody brings to the ears. I have no idea why it sounded so easygoing to the ears despite the alternating 5/4 and 6/4 beats, and the intense irregular tempo.

However, I did not really like Mussorgsky's piano version. There were way too many unreasonable sustained tones in it, which sounded like he forcefully recomposed an orchestral piece into a piano piece. Especially that finale.

Therefore, if it was me doing the composing, I would use the organ or a similar instrument to play a resounding cry — like the way <GNOMES> did with the unison of the bass and drums—

I then realized something — my headphones were conveying the desired timbres in my mind. I subconsciously replayed the album by Emerson, Lake & Palmer.

I sighed and turned off the audio before tossing the CD onto my desk. The mountain of <Pictures at an Exhibition> tumbled and fell onto my bed.

That won't do. If that was how it was, I might as well as copy their performance.

I grabbed my cellphone so that I could give Senpai a call, but I decided against that in the end.





I was about to tell her that I could come up with something — it would be really embarrassing if I was to tell her that.

All the songs played by feketerigó were composed by Senpai. Why didn't Senpai compose the songs this time around as well? Why did she make me do it? Perhaps she thought that I was adept at classical pieces just because I was the son of a music critic? Mafuyu would be a much better choice if that was what she thought.

What should I do? The music of EL&P continued to reverberate in my ears.

On Wednesday, we had a rare guest in our house. It was already late into the night when I ended my practice in Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store. When I arrived back home, exhausted, I saw a large foreign car parked in the garage of our house.

"Wow....."

I recognized this car straight away because that was my fourth time seeing it. For a brief moment, I seriously contemplated if I should just stay over at Chiaki's house for the night.

I opened the door silently, and what greeted me was the loud, blaring Shostakovich as well as the occasional uncouth quarrelings between two middle-aged men.





"..... that is why I say, the fugue should go on all the way till the exposition! How long are you gonna emphasize the voices? You're blindly following Shostakovich's orchestration — the instruments are scattered all over! This is far from the standards of the original."

"That's all that is needed from The Symphonic Brass of London to make the piece shine! It's not like they do that only during Shostakovich. Most importantly, the conflicting inner voices in the most important part of the final movement—"

"Don't be surprised if the concertmaster deliberately refuses to show up after a quarrel with you. It will be due to your insistence to sticking to the same tone as the American orchestras."

"Stop pretending like you know everything!"

"May I know what you two are quarrelling about.....?"

Ebichiri and Tetsurou, who were about to get into a brawl, were shocked when I stepped into the living room. They quickly tidied themselves and took seats on the sofa. A clear and thick string adagio was playing though the speakers. I knew immediately that it was a live performance conducted by Ebichiri.

"Sorry for intruding on you despite the late hours."

Ebichiri greeted me with a wry expression on his face. I nodded my head slightly in response.





"..... Urm, you want a cup of coffee?"

I was pretty sure Tetsurou did not offer our guest any drinks.

"Ah, that's unnecessary. Actually, I am here to speak with you."

..... Again?

"Urm, but, it would be rude for us not to offer you anything. It'll be better if I get you a drink."

I slipped into the kitchen and tried to calm myself down as I washed my hands. Well, I don't think Ebichiri's here to pick a fight with Tetsurou since he was a busy man. That means he'll be talking about things related to Mafuyu. "But what exactly? Did I do something wrong?" I tried to jolt my memories as I lit the gas to heat up the water.

"— He's a really considerate boy. Are you sure he's your son? Could he be the son of Misako and another man?"

Ebichiri, I can hear what you're saying clearly. He's surprisingly dense in some weird areas — something that could be clearly seen from Mafuyu.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but he carries 50% of my genes."

Tetsurou, please do not answer him with such a disgusting reply.





I offered them two cups of incredibly thick coffee as small revenge on my part, but both of them drank it all indifferently. That was not fun!

As he placed his cup away, Ebichiri looked at me with his stern poker-face and said,

"Thanks for last time. I was really grateful for that."

"..... Eh? Huh? What are you thanking me for?" I don't remember doing anything that deserved his gratitude.

"You brought Mafuyu to the concert, didn't you? That was her first time ever. She followed you along, didn't she?"

"Ah. Urm, well....."

So that was what he meant. But that was because Mafuyu obtained the tickets on her own for some unknown reason. It was not me who brought her there.

"I kind of forced Flaubert to perform in the concert as well, but Mafuyu seemed pretty happy thanks to that..... Speaking of which, I've met Flaubert a few times after that."

"Eh? Ah, yeah."

"He too talks of you all the time. You are..... a really unfathomable person."





I-Is that so?

"Oi, wait a second, the Flaubert you are talking about is Julien Flaubert? What the heck? Nao, you actually met him? Where? Where is he right now?"

Tetsurou suddenly pulled himself close to me, his eyes blinded by the sign of cash.

"Can you hook me up with an exclusive interview with him? The editor-in-chief has been chasing me for that — even photos are okay! Damn, I shouldn't have bragged and said I can snag the interview with my network and contacts."

"Shut up Tetsurou!" "Don't bring your dirty work into this conversation!"

Tetsurou was retorted by the both of us yet again, but he did not back down this time.

"Hey! Quit joking with me! What do you think allowed me to raise Nao up into a fine person he is today—"

"You said you were the industry's ruffian, no?" "It's because you are the industry's ruffian!"

"T-The industry's ruffian's no sleazy job, okay!? We don't manipulate strings behind backs and do bad stuff like controlling the middleman who introduces members to the orchestras, nor do





we act as spies for the College of Music. It's true! Nao, what's the meaning of you looking at me with that cold stare of yours!?"

It's pointless, Tetsurou. Your voice is turning strange. Just be quiet and give it a rest.....

"Uhhhh, that's mean of you treating me as a shady person!"

And with that, Tetsurou grabbed his cup and ran to the kitchen in tears. Ebichiri let out a deep sigh when he saw Tetsurou's sorry state and took a sip of coffee.

"Well, just the image of Flaubert is enough for the magazines to sell like hot cakes, so I can understand why they are that desperate to locate his whereabouts..... I think you should already know this, but please do not disclose anything about him to anyone else."

I nodded my head. Yuri probably disliked being chased about by the Japanese media and being the subject of some baseless articles.

"You might have heard this from Flaubert or Mafuyu already. I guess I'll tell you just in case..... Mafuyu's preparing herself for the comeback."

I kept my gaze on the cup in Ebichiri's hands.

A comeback.





Mafuyu was slowly returning to that glamorous but cold world.

"Please keep this to yourself. Mafuyu hates the media — those things she was involved in weren't pleasant, and I have no intention for her to be harassed as well. But the industry's a small world, so it's quite impossible for us to keep it a secret forever. There are people looking into this already."

"..... Right."

"I've no idea what on earth happened, but her fingers were almost completely healed, which is a miracle. Early last month, her fingers were no longer numb. The doctors were surprised as well, but since her numb fingers were caused by something psychological..... so it is highly possible that her recovery is the same as well."

It was the same as what Miss Maki said in early October.

And I think the return of Yuri is the biggest reason for that change.

"Though she's unable to hold concerts for now, she'll be releasing an album. The record company's all geared up for that. Her comeback album will probably be Beethoven's violin sonata."

My shoulders flinched.

Typically speaking, a violin sonata is written for a piano and a violin, composing of various movements.

I see — that was what it was all about.





But I still could not help but to ask him something that I already knew the answer to.

"..... She'll be performing with Yuri, right?"

I was surprised by how cold my voice was. I could not bring myself to look at Ebichiri's face.

"Of course, since the idea did not materialize back in America. The producers were gunning hard for their success, and the two of them seemed pretty enthusiastic about it as well."

That combination should be a popular one. Lots of things to talk about, and even I want to listen to their performance. That's quite the pleasing news. And so?

Why are you here to see me?

"Therefore, I would like to ask you — you see, I've never seen Mafuyu practice the piano at home."

"..... Oh."

So that was what he was here for? You should know even without asking me, yeah?

"I think she's practicing in the school's music preparatory room or something?"





Though I didn't think those practices were enough. It's been said that professional pianists would have to spend at least six hours a day playing the piano, or else they would die like fishes out of the water. Therefore, she may have continued practicing in other places unknown to Ebichiri and me.

"I..... see."

Ebichiri gave a sigh and relaxed the expression on his face.

"That's good. No, you may find it strange to see me acting like this, but — I can't believe it. About the fact that Mafuyu is willing to pick up the piano once more."

Well, the same goes for me.

"I guess it's all thanks to Yuri?"

"No—"

Ebichiri stared hard at my face for some unknown reason. It seemed like he was hesitating on what to say. After a long period of silence, he finally shifted his gaze to his knees.

"..... I don't know. That girl never tells me what she's thinking."

She did reveal quite a bit of things to me, though those are just a tiny part of the whole picture. I still do not quite understand her very well even now. I guess it's because I am too stupid.





"However, she began to talk to me after she transferred to that school."

A faint smile appeared on Ebichiri's lips as he continued his mumblings,

"I had initially planned for her to transfer to a high-school that was affiliated to the College of Music, in the hopes that she'll be motivated from all the pianos that would be around her. However, Mafuyu was strongly against the idea. Come to think of it, it's a blessing that I did not force her to. I feel— I'm really glad to have enrolled her into your school."

I nodded my head in silence. My feelings were settling down when I heard those words from him.

"But in the near future, she'll probably be apply for leave away from school frequently."

I lifted my head in shock when I heard that.

"She'll become busier and busier due to her piano practices as well as the recordings. And while she's still rejecting the interviews now, that's not something that she can do forever. Wouldn't it be the same as before if she continues to reject all interviews....."

A troubled expression appeared on Ebichiri's face. It was probably the same expression on mine as well.





"This time round, she's the one who wants to do this, but I've no idea if that's something good or bad. She may not even have the time to attend school."

Somehow, there was the illusion of my heart thumping at my feet.

Mafuyu would not be coming to school. This was not the same as what happened before — she was the one making decisions this time around.

Despite it being something with a good chance of happening, the very thought had never once crossed my mind. And when she returns back to that world, she'll disappear from mine.

Mafuyu is about to leave.

What happened after that was I answering Ebichiri's questions in an absent-minded state. I had no idea when he left the house. Before I realized it, I was all alone in the living room, slumped on the sofa. The music of the strings that came from the records in Tetsurou's study sounded very far away.

The following day, I headed straight to the music preparatory room after school. Not only did Miss Maki loan me the keys, she also gave me permission to look through all the scores on the shelves.

Well, Tetsurou's study was better stocked in terms of genres as compared to this place, but no one knew the locations of the





different scores (aside from the very person himself) since he never tidies his room properly.

I spread the staff papers on the desk, placed my bass on my knees and began to browse through the pile of scores. However, I had no will to move my right hand with the mechanical pencil in its grip.

I tossed the pencil away with my hand.

The classes' preparations for the school festival starts at four-thirty, but I skipped it anyway. That's because the Folks Music Club begins our practice at four-thirty in the studio. I had originally planned to come up with something before our practice, but my brain was filled with nothing but Mafuyu playing the piano.

I suddenly thought — what if I get Mafuyu to help me out with the piano or the synthesizer on stage—

Wouldn't I be able to keep Mafuyu around with that? What if I get her to play the piano in the band?

I had jolted all my ideas onto the staff paper when I was fiddling with the synthesizer at home. The synthesizer was nurtured by Tomo's very own hands, so it was well stocked with all sorts of sound effects. That unit alone contained almost all the sound effects found in movies.

If we could use that synthesizer onstage; if Mafuyu was willing to play the piano for me — if that happens, then any song..... or





even something as extravagant as including guitars into EL&P's <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION >—

I shook my head and tore the staff paper into shreds before rolling them up into a ball and throwing them away.

It's about time I move away from EL&P and Mafuyu's piano.

Even if she had the intention to pick up the piano once more, there was no way she would be willing to play the piano beneath the spotlights just for my sake. That was something I already knew since a long time ago, wasn't it? I shouldn't even be thinking about keeping her by my side..... Though I have not asked Mafuyu what her plans were.

Just then, my train of thought came to a halt. I could not think any further.

I then heard the sound of the door opening. As I turned my head around, my eyes crossed with a pair of navy blue eyes.

"Ah....."

I stood up in a hurry. Mafuyu walked in silently and looked at the messy scores, the notebook and the pencils that were on the desk. She then asked,

"..... Sorry, am I interrupting you?"





"Nah, there's not much progress anyway. Are you going to practice the piano?"

Mafuyu nodded stiffly. I was using the piano chair. I tidied up the scores, stood up and decided to head somewhere else. It felt a little nervous to be with Mafuyu right now.

Mafuyu tugged the hem of my shirt just as I was about to leave.

"..... Urm, why are you stopping me?"

"You don't have to leave."

"But!"

"L-Look, it's not like I am deliberately trying to hide fact that I am playing the piano again from you."

Mafuyu covered the lower half of her blushing face with the scores. She looked upwards and peeked at my expression.

"I had intended to tell you only after I have done it and became good at it. If possible, I hoped to tell you after the recordings."

"..... With Yuri?" I was wondering why I asked her that question.

"M-Mmm. Urm, but....."





"No, it's fine. It's not like I really mind," I lied. "This is the only place where you can practice in school, yeah? I'll head back to the classroom after I am done selecting the scores."

"You can listen by the side."

There was no way I could leave after hearing that from her. Just as I sat myself down before the desk, Mafuyu began playing the Hanon etudes in the various octaves. I stared hard at Mafuyu's back while she sat before the piano. I was overcome with an inexplicable feeling as I watched her maroon colored hair sway along with the steady rhythm.

Speaking about the characteristics of the pianist Ebisawa Mafuyu, the first thing that came to mind was the uniform strength she exerted on all her fingers on both hands. A certain critic likened that as something similar to 'breeding pearls of the exact same sizes'. I was not quite happy with the way he put it, but I understand what he was trying to portray.

After listening to her at such a close distance however, I realized that her right hand was slightly weaker when it comes to the high notes. Those were the three fingers that Mafuyu had once lost.

I think I managed to pick that out only because I was listening out for that. If I were to immerse myself into the music just like an intricate toy that was powered by flowing water and drifted along to the rapidly rising octaves, I would definitely not have noticed the two-and-a-half years break to her playing.





Just then, her practice stopped all of a sudden.

"I-It will be better—" Mafuyu turned around and looked at me, "if you do not stare at me. It's hard for me to play like this."

"Eh....."

Then..... off I go. With that said, I walked past Mafuyu, only to find her tugging at my shirt yet again.

"You don't have to leave."

What the heck is this? I've no idea what you want from me. I sighed, made my way back to the desk and turned the chair away from Mafuyu. This time round, she was playing phrases that required her to span her tiny hands to a tenth. That was really impressive. [Editor note: It refers to distance between her thumb and pinkie while playing the piano; they are ten piano keys apart.]

Her piano sounded almost as beautiful as before. The blank period to her playing may still surface on a certain piece or two. However—

Mafuyu will be leaving soon.

That realization of mine was much more real and pressing than all the sentences she had said before. This time round, she was not running away to a certain place by herself — she would be soaring back into the world where she belonged with her healed wings.





And so, I no longer have any reason to stop her.

None? No reason at all? was that really true?

If Mafuyu leaves— Even though I wished to stay by Mafuyu's side, but if Mafuyu really leaves, then I—

"..... Naomi?"

I flinched in surprise and stood up on reflex. Turning my head around, I saw Mafuyu standing behind me without me noticing, her head stretched out to look at the staff papers in my hand.

"Eh. A-Ah..... Y-Yes?" I let off a strange voice subconsciously.

"There is no progress in your composition?"

I covered the empty staff papers in a hurry, though it was already too late for that.

"..... Mmm."

"Is there anything I can do to help? I can play any song you want me to."

"Eh, ah, no....."

I was very happy how she was willing to do that for me, but it just felt worse when I was once again reminded of how she could play the piano.





Speaking of which, all I had to do is to ask, no? If she was returning to the status of a professional pianist, and should she resume her performances—

What is she planning to do with the band?

But I could not bring myself to ask. I was afraid of Mafuyu's answer.

"I can play the original version or even Rimsky-Korsakov's interpretation if you want me to. It's okay even if it is impromptu."

"No—" I sighed. I just couldn't focus my thoughts on <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION> for now, but I can't remain stuck either.

"My thoughts are not sorted out yet. I have no idea what I should be doing for now."

"Kyouko mentioned about how a rock band had performed <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION> before. I guess you know about that as well?"

"You're talking about Emerson, Lake & Palmer? They're the reason why I'm stuck!"

"Stuck?"

"It will end up as a copy of their version regardless of what I do."

"And that's not okay?"





I looked at Mafuyu's face, surprised.

"I guess..... not?" I grabbed the scores of the original <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION>. "Because I've no understanding of Russia's musical nationality. I spent a whole night researching it only because I received a job to write about it, and it's not like I have learned music composition seriously. This..... This is something that is born out of mimicking what I have heard from someone else — how can I possibly compose something good out of that?"

"How do you know if you do not try?"

I shook my slumped head.

"That's nothing more than an inferior copy. I've no idea why Senpai delegated this job to me. Are you interested in trying this, Mafuyu? Not only have you played this before, you're also much more knowledgeable than me when it comes to Mussorgsky, isn't that so?"

I spilled out my thoughts while staring at my hands, but soon realized Mafuyu was clenching her fist. What greeted me when I lifted my head was her face filled with anger. She said,

"That has nothing to do with what you have in hand! You should be the one to compose this!"

"Didn't I say it already? Whatever I compose will end up as nothing more than the rock version of the original melody. I mean, that's





all I've been listening to up till now! I've only listened a little of the classical music."

"Isn't that fine!?"

Mafuyu slammed her palm hard on the empty staff papers, and that caused me to nearly fall off my chair in shock. I straightened myself and looked at her.

"You really have no idea why Kyouko passed that job to you?"

Mafuyu's navy blue eyes were staring straight at me, and all I could do was to shake my head absent-mindedly and reply,

"..... I really don't..... know....."

Because I cannot differentiate between Senpai's jokes and her serious words. Mafuyu lowered her gaze, her shoulders were trembling non-stop.

"It's..... It's because of you that I....."

My chest was assaulted by a sudden surge of pain. Just as I was taking in a huge gulp of air due to my inability to convey my words properly, the door opened all of a sudden as though someone banged against it.

"Yeah, they're here! Both of them!"





There were two people at the door — they were Chiaki and Class-rep Terada. The sight of them both caused me to forget everything, including the words that I was about to say and the reason why I was in this room.

"..... What's with that attire of yours?"

Chiaki and Terada were both dressed up in very feminine black dresses with plenty of frills — very similar to those worn by Yuri during his live performance. And they even put on the headbands as well.

"You've no idea what's happening because you always skip the festival preparations, isn't that so? It looks like our class will be doing Gothic café."

"Sorry, never heard of that."

"And Nao will be the waiter," Terada added.

"Now that's something new!"

"It's your fault for not being around for the poll! Come here, we'll be sizing you up. Put this on right now!"

She tossed a black object into my face. I opened it up and realized it was a half-apron and a vest. So they have the costumes all ready huh.....





"Also, to the Princess over there who's behaving like she has nothing to do with whatever's happening here — you're the waitress as well."

"E-Eh!?"

Mafuyu was just as surprised when Terada shoved a goth-lolita dress into her arms.

"Nao, you'll be changing at the corridor. We'll be helping the Princess to change."

"This dress is not something which you can wear on your own on your very first try, so let me teach you how to do it." Chiaki's eyes were sparkling all of the sudden. I was pushed onto the corridor before I could even say a word.

Thanks to that additional burden, we were forced to skip our band practice. We had to work on the interior decorations of the café as well as come up with a menu after class. Whenever I had the time, I would spread the stave papers apart and stare at them as I sank into despair. Then again, I could only practice by myself even if I made it to the practice room. The reason we could not practice together was because I was not done with my composition yet.

I find myself pathetic for the slight feelings of relief in me. I would definitely not be able to think deeply into this if I never talk to Mafuyu, and I would be running away from trying to conclude this.





It seemed like the First Class of Second Year will be doing a play of <Romeo and Juliet> at the sports complex. Senpai, being the main character of the play, was all busy thanks to the rehearsals, so she would only be at the practice room for our band practice after six. However, Mafuyu and Chiaki were stuck with our class' preparations, so they could not come down for the practice.

"It feels like the role of Juliet does not suit Senpai one bit....."

"That's because our script is modified off the <West Side Story>. That's why the Juliet whom I am playing will not die at the end. Instead, she's a character who will bring an end to the feuds of the House of Montague and the House of Capulet."

I see. Now that was something I could understand very well. What a scary Juliet that is.

"And I took the opportunity to seek my classmates' assistance with the lightings during our live performance. That's because the Folk Music Club will be performing right after my class."

I am really thankful for that.

"So all that's left is to wait for you to be done with your composition. Can you finish it by this week?"

"Uguuh!"





Senpai grabbed me by my collar just as I was about to slip out of the practice room.

"Oh right, the effects should be great if you can use grand words to fill in the lyrics for <Promenade> or <Great Gate of Kiev>. How about the hymns from the Russian Orthodox Church?"

"Why are you making things difficult for me....."

"Because, while you'll complain and moan, you will always answer my expectations at the end of the day. That's how it has always been, be it the chorus contest or the sports day. That's what I like about you, young man."

Please do not hold my head with your arms and say that to me with such close proximity!

"..... Why—"

I wanted to ask Senpai what Mafuyu meant when she said "You really have no idea why?". However, I swallowed my words upon facing Senpai, who looked like she would bite onto me while putting on the smile of a ferocious beast. What was the point in asking her that anyway?

Could I respond to her demands, or will I fail? The answer must be one of the two.





And so, I took a trip to the library on my way home. In the end, the four of us could not fork out any time to practice together. It felt kind of sad to head home without making any progress.

But where on earth were the hymns of the Russian Orthodox Church located? Were they related to religion? Or foreign literature? Come to think of it, it was unlikely for me to find such books in the school's library in the first place. There were not many people around, so I walked about aimlessly between the bookshelves as my gaze wandered around the endless spines of books.

I did want to meet Senpai's expectations of me, but I was short of time. If all I could do was to struggle on the same spot while wrecking my brains out on something which I deem impossible, then I might as well apologize to Senpai right now!

I am just an ordinary high-school student who had studied only a bit on the history of music and its theory, and I have only picked up the bass just four months ago.

By coincidence, I came across a small silhouette standing before the shelves of foreign literature, causing me to almost yell in surprise. Mafuyu froze for a brief moment as well with her hand reaching out for a book on the shelf.

"Why—" Why are you at the library? I was about to ask her that question, but I shut my mouth immediately. Speaking in the library was strictly forbidden.





Mafuyu quickly placed the book back onto the shelf and shook her head hard. She then walked past my side in a flash and went out of the library. I did not even have the opportunity to stop her.

It felt like she was avoiding me ever since that day. Come to think of it, I said lots of depressing stuff to Mafuyu back in the music preparatory room. Not only did I shift the blame of my lack of progress in the music composition to other things, I wove a whole lot of excuses as well—

Moreover, I did not ask the most important question.

Will she not come to school any more? It was just like what Ebichiri had said — Mafuyu has been applying for leave frequently in the recent days. Perhaps she was busy with the recordings.

It somehow felt like Mafuyu was slowly drifting away from me before I could express what I wanted to say.

I took a glance at the shelf that Mafuyu was searching earlier. I had no idea if this was some sort of coincidence or what, but she was searching for Russian literature as well. The books were indexed with the character "タ (ta)". Then Chekhov, Turgenev..... Fyodor Dostoyevsk.....? Tolstoy? No wait, not all the books on the shelves are novels. There were a few books on Kagurazaka-senpai's favourite revolutionary, Trotsky as well. Mafuyu was planning to read stuff like these? I didn't recall seeing her read these kinds of books. [Editor Note: Bookshelves in Japan are sorted by kana order; for example, "ta" would be followed by "chi" "tsu" "te" "to". Thus, "Chekhov (Chehhofu, che is a compound





sound starting with chi)", "Dostoyevsk (Dosuefusukii, do goes with to)" and "Tolstoy (Torusutoi, ru comes after su)].]

I guess I really didn't understand Mafuyu a single bit after all. It was always music whenever we spoke with each other.

However, we will no longer be able to chat like that in the near future.

Mafuyu had already taken up an unimaginable amount of space in my heart.

Will Mafuyu continue to stay in feketerigó as its guitarist — all I had to do is to ask. But I was afraid of her answer. There was no way I could ask.

Can you..... stay with me here by my side?

And with that came the weekend. I did not make my way down to the practice room on Friday after school — I head straight home instead. That was because I made no progress at all, and the stave papers were as spotless as ever. That was just embarrassing of me. I could not bring myself to face Mafuyu, Senpai, or Chiaki.

Even though I hesitated for quite a while, I sent a mail with a rather unconvincing "Sorry, stomach's aching. I'll be heading home first" to Chiaki's phone. I hugged my head and squatted down at





the entrance when she replied with "You have always sucked at feigning sickness, you know".

I was quite worried about how I should respond should any of the three girls give me a call, but I hid myself in the blankets, plugged in my earphones and blasted my ears with the music of <London Calling> by The Clash until I fell asleep.

I woke up to the ringing of my handphone and checked the time groggily. Nine. But I had no idea whether it was the morning or the night. No wait, the light's filtering in through the curtains, so it should be in the morning. I was assaulted by some strange noise which had caused me to nearly miss the ringtone. And why does my head hurt? It took me a while to realize that I was still wearing my earphones. I quickly removed the earphones that were playing the voice of Joe Strummer endlessly.

I took a look at the incoming number. Not from my band mates, but a number unknown to me and it started with 03..... From Tokyo?

I was greeted by a clear voice the moment I accepted the call.

"—Naomi? Are you Naomi? Great, I finally got through!"

"..... Yuri?"

There is no way I would forget his candy-like voice. Come to think of it, I did give him my number. But why was he calling me?





"Are you free today, Naomi?"

"..... Eh?"

"Today's a rest day, isn't it? Can you head down to Shibuya before three?"

"Eh? Ah, well....."

I rapped my temple with my fist in an attempt to jolt myself awake as I answered him in a daze. Shibuya? Today, and then what?

"We've made an agreement with each other, didn't we? It will be me who will invite you next time so that I can retaliate."

"Ah, yeah."

It still felt like my eyes were obscured by something hazy. Yuri was looking for me? So he was serious about it and did not actually just say it on a whim? What did he mean by retaliating?

My low spirits were more or less related to Yuri, but it's not his fault. And it was rare of him to invite me.

Perhaps it was not a bad idea to meet up with someone whom I can talk music with other than my band mates, but that may just turn into a scenario of him listening to me while I whine and complain. I have no desire to let Yuri see me in such a state—

"Urm..... where shall I wait for you at three?"





"You are willing to come down? That makes me really happy! There's a 3L Studio located at Spain-zaka, do you know where it is?"

"Ah..... It should be okay with a search on the net". I have not visited Shibuya before.

"See you at three, and do not be late."

"What's going on over there?" Since the place was a studio, it should be something related to the band?

"Secret. I want to give you a surprise."

I knew he would say that. That was just the sort of person he was.

"Oh right, I have a question for you. I am fine with meeting you, but about your attire....."

"Mmm, don't you worry. I'll be wearing something cute that you'll definitely like."

That was not what I meant! But the phone hung up on me just like that. I kept my phone and booted the computer. I got the information I required straight away when I searched for '3L Studio'. I printed the map out since I was not familiar with Tokyo. If I were to factor in some time just in case I got lost, I would need to set off at noon.





I should have taken a closer look at the search results. If I had done that, I would have known the reason Yuri requested to meet me there.

Spain-zara was filled with stores on both sides, with their appearances dominated by the popular Southern Europe styles. The place was exceptionally crowded, perhaps due to the fact that it was a Saturday afternoon. It was a street filled with an irritatingly large amounts of cafés, general stores and fashion stores. I never expected myself to sweat in October, which was all thanks to the heat caused by the crowd.

It took me a while before I could finally locate the pristine building with the words <Studio LLL> written on the wall along with the logo of the recording company. That caused me cover a little. Wait, so this was actually a commercial recording studio?

There was a lady in uniform behind the counter. She led me into the building when I gingerly told her my name. Studio No. 7. We walked past a lobby with a kitchenette in it before opening the soundproof door that was located furthest to the left.

"Mr. Hikawa is here."

With that, the counter lady urged me inside.

There was an incredibly large mixer - the largest I had ever seen - that occupied half the space of the control room. It looked like the





cockpit of a giant robot straight out of an anime. Sitting on the chair before the mixer was a guy in sunglasses with a sparse beard. He was giving off quite a wild aura, so I thought he was probably the music producer or something. That person shot me a brief look. I can tell he was not too happy despite the sunglasses on him.

Standing next to him was a fat middle-aged man who was almost bursting out of his polo shirt. Probably the audio engineer or something. He grinned and walked towards me when he noticed my presence.

"You must be Tetsurou's son? Nice meeting you."

"Urm..... How do you know?"

"Hmm, I used to receive lots of care from him back in the days. As for what they are, I can't really reveal them."

As expected from the industry's ruffian. No wait, where was Yuri?

Just as I scanned my surroundings with my eyes opened wide, the door to the control room opened all of a sudden and a small person came rushing in.

"Naomi!"

Yuri was about to rush towards me to give me a hug, but the producer stood up quickly and grabbed him by the collar to pull him away.





"Don't be silly, head back to the recording room now! This may be a test recording, but I have no time for you to be fooling about! You are not the only person who is doing the recording here!"

"Uhhh—" Yuri swung his limbs about with tears in his eyes. He was not the only one who's doing the recording?

I took a look at the soundproof glass located in front of the mirror. On the other side of the window was a spacious recording room filled with plenty of microphones, and in the middle of the room was a black piano with its lid propped open—

Her maroon coloured hair swayed lightly. She then looked towards me.

"..... Mafuyu?"

It was Mafuyu. It was indeed Mafuyu sitting before the piano in a pale yellow dress. She crossed sight with me. Lots of different expressions flashed past her face before she returned back to her calm state. She then turned her face away all of the sudden.

"Mafuyu said she wants you here."

I could not believe what Yuri had said. I looked to-and-fro at the side profile of their faces that were located on either sides of the glass window.

"She wished you can listen to this song which we will be recording right now."





Mafuyu..... did she really want me to listen to her duet with Yuri?

Her navy blue eyes were looking at me through that thick glass once again, and her gaze seemed to be inquiring something from me. However, Yuri blocked her gaze with his back when he returned back to the recording room.

Mafuyu turned away to face the piano after giving a nod in my direction. Yuri lifted his violin and flashed a brief smile before picking up his bow.

With my mind in a mess, what came to me was this: I see, so this is the retaliation Yuri was talking about?

Back then, I asked Yuri out and made him listen to the mashed-up concerto of him and Mafuyu playing together. And this time round, it's Yuri's turn to strike.

I had created music based on the imaginary world of the synthesizer — with the help of others no less.

However, Yuri can create the 'real form' of that tune together with Mafuyu.

"Hey, Hikawa Junior."

The bearded producer spoke to me softly,





"Don't just stand there, take a seat. You are here to look, isn't that so? Please don't create any trouble for us."

I slumped myself in a chair prepared by the audio engineer.

"Take one."

Yuri's and Mafuyu's eyes, which were of the same bluish color, turned ice cold the instant that voice reached the recording room — a gaze which I had never seen from them before. Both of them were neither suppressed nor burned to crisp by the light beaming down from the skies above. All they did are to look at the endlessly-stretching seas before them.

Yuri stabbed the tip of the bow in his hand towards the skies. The volume of the sound dropped in an instant after a brief passage of the majestic accent. At the same time, Mafuyu replied with a conflicting feelings of gloom and passion, forming a harmony with the sounds flowing out from her piano. The questions and answers between the two then embedded themselves firmly into the A minor. The first movement was a passage sounded like a person who was groping about in darkness. Yuri's hands were pulling that song towards the light.

This song is—

Beethoven's Opus 47, <Violin Sonata No. 9> in A major — <Kreutzer>.





As my brain was engulfed by the sound that was searing its presence onto me, I suddenly recalled an old explanatory article that was written by Tetsurou.

There are countless numbers of duet concertos written for the piano and the violin, the king and queen of the classical musical instruments. Before the appearance of Beethoven, all the concertos were written with the piano as the main focus, while the violin serves as a decorative ornamental, an 'accompaniment to the piano concerto'.

- That was what Tetsurou wrote. I guess this is something well known by all composers already, but the timbre of the two instruments were fundamentally not compatible with one another, so there is no way one could harmonize the two instruments together just by themselves. Even the genius Mozart could not bring the queen on equal terms with the king in his violin concertos.

The idea of harmonizing them together was finally abandoned in Beethoven's era. And in this <Kreutzer>, a final form of the violin concerto composed by Beethoven, comes the portrayal of the 'battle' between the violin and the piano.

And now I had finally realized the meaning behind those words.

A sense of frustration was brought about by the stagnant atmosphere, baiting for the hammering from the piano. The violin's passage then began to dance as though it was engulfed by the tongues of the flames. The same melody were sent to my ears constantly, though they were either sliced into pieces or stomped





into dust; there were times where they were above me, others below. The gradually increasing heat was seeping its way into my ears before finally tearing apart its wounds and bursting into a touching movement. It felt like someone was taking away my sense of hearing within my consciousness in response to the music; but despite all that, I could not move my gaze away from the other side of the window — the scene of Yuri and Mafuyu giving their all as they play.







Both of them were standing on the same ground at a place high above me.

It was a place where I could not reach with my hands, a place where I was screened off by a wall of mirages.

How long has it been since I cried from listening to music? A searing sensation streaked past my cheeks, but at the same time, the retorting personality within me was thinking calmly like an idiot. Even back when Misako left the house, my emotions on that morning were nowhere close to what I was experiencing right now.

Why does Mafuyu want me to listen to this?

As of now, the one by her side..... is no longer the the person who was lending her his shoulders and supporting her with his exhausted body. That meant she has found someone who could fight together with her beneath the same sky. What does she want from me after I was done listening to this song? I had no idea.

But there was one thing I was painfully clear about — I will never be able to touch Mafuyu, who was standing on the other side of the glass window, ever again. That made me really sad. My tears were burning my throat.

At the end of the first movement, the melody of the two soared through the storm towards the gap between the clouds. As they flew upwards, they harassed and gnawed at each other before they were finally cut off by a crash.





Yuri lowered his bow gingerly amid the lingering sounds which shook even the soundproof walls. Mafuyu lifted her hands slightly off the keys of the piano as well. I stood up subconsciously. I knew Mafuyu was about to look in my direction, but I had no confidence of taking on her gaze.

I pushed the back of the audio engineer aside and made my way to the door. The two person behind me seemed to be saying something. I rammed the door open with my body and stumbled my way towards the lobby.

As I was surrounded by the dry air of the real world, I finally understood that the dampness on my cheeks were not just an illusion. I burst out of the building and dashed through the crowds of Spain-zawa. While taking in huge gulps of air, all I felt was my shirt drenched in sweat sticking on my back. It felt like my body was about to be melted away by the heat.

But I cannot stop in my tracks.

If I stop in my tracks..... if I steady my hurried breaths and regulate my heartbeats, the <Kreutzer Sonata> played by the two would reverberate endlessly in my ears once more — not just that, but the variations in the second movement as well as the tarantella in the third movement would surface in my mind despite the fact that I did not listen to them. And they would tear me into pieces.





I must have been a wreck when I reached home. Tetsuro came out to welcome me by yelling, "Nao, I'm hungry", but he walked back into the living room silently when he saw my face.

I was overwhelmed by a strong sense of regret after shutting myself in my room and dropping onto my bed with a thud. What the hell was I doing? I dashed out of the place before I said anything or asked them any questions. I even circled the Yamanote Line a few rounds on the train. Mafuyu called me multiple times but I lacked the courage to pick up the phone. It never crossed my mind to switch the phone off or turn it into silent mode either — the phone was left to blare <Blackbird> a few times on the train. That made the other passengers stare at me in irritation, which caused my situation to become even worse.

What an idiot I am.

Thank god it's rest day tomorrow. I don't know how I'll face Mafuyu otherwise.

I'll have to explain it clearly to Mafuyu. After speaking to her about it and apologizing to her—

Then what?

I flipped my handphone open and closed for a few times and hesitated for a while, but I could not press the button.

Next came the knocking on the door. Tetsuro said,





"..... Nao, want some cup noodles?"

I nodded my head slightly while lying on my desk. There should be no way he could see me doing that, but I heard the sound of the door opening anyway. A cup of steaming hot instant noodles appeared before my eyes.

"You can speak with me if it's about music," Tetsurou murmured. "Sorry for being a useless father. I can't help you much."

No, you're much better than me — I thought to myself.

Because you always notice it when I am feeling down.

Tetsurou left without saying anything else. I held the cup noodles silently with both of my hands. That feels so warm! But I was in no mood to eat that.

Why have things become like this, I thought.

I recalled a question which Yuri asked me earlier on.

"Why do you want to be together with Mafuyu?"

"Naomi, what is your relationship with Mafuyu?"

Just what is the relationship between us? And also, Mafuyu and I—





I had almost sunk myself totally into a mire, so what gradually pulled me out of that and back into reality was something that have happened quite a few times already — the rapping of my room's window.

It was a Sunday morning. A silhouette was blocking out the rays of the sun that were filtering through the curtains, and I could hear the dull sound of a fist knocking on the glass window. I snuggled against the blanket and counted the knocks for a while. Who's that? Is that Mafuyu? Nah, can't be her.

I stumbled towards the window and opened it up together with the curtain. What came to my eyes was a pair of denim suspenders and a mustard-yellow blouse. Moving my sight up, I saw a pair of eyes that were giving off a headstrong gaze.

So it is indeed Chiaki.....

"..... You thought it was Mafuyu instead?"

Chiaki questioned with a very serious expression. I quickly turned my eyes away.

"Nope....."

"Then I am coming in?"

I took a step back as I was strangely overwhelmed by her imposing attitude. Chiaki came through the window frame after she was





finished removing her shoes. She then shut the window and leaned against it. Her head was lowered and she spoke not a single word.

I walked back to my bed and sat down. Why on earth is Chiaki here?

"Urm, are you angry about what happened on Friday? I'm sorry, I was—". I mean, she saw through my lie. However, Chiaki shook her head.

"That's not the reason why I am angry."

That's not it—

So she is indeed angry huh?

"I heard from Mafuyu," Chiaki said.

I had a feeling of ice falling into my lungs. She finally lifted her head and stared at me as though she was trying to see right into my heart.

"Mafuyu..... she was worried about you. She had no idea why you went back without saying anything, and she was thinking of all sorts of wild things. She originally wanted to come to your house, but she came to mine instead since she dared not do it."

So Mafuyu—





She had originally planned to come to my place? Yesterday? It should have been really late already.

"..... What happened?"

Chiaki was practically interrogating me.

I exhaled a sigh and took a deep breath as I stared at my hands with my head dropped low. I never thought Mafuyu would look for me despite me running away.

"Why did you run away?"

Chiaki's voice sounded like it came from far away.

I have to give her an answer. I can't just run away forever.

"Yuri said....."

My voice was jammed in my parched throat. It hurts.

"Yuri said that was his revenge. He's an exceptional violinist, and he's together with Mafuyu, so— they will probably continue to create lots of impressive recordings from now on. With that, Mafuyu will no longer have the time for the band. As for someone like me....."

I had no idea what I was talking about either. However, Chiaki's expressions became gentler as she listened to me, and that made me feel like crying.





"For someone like me who's not that great when it comes to playing in a band, I'll be stuck in the same place forever. And so, Mafuyu and I will probably....."

Not be together.

Even though I just muttered whatever that came to my mind, I guess that was the ultimate reason behind everything: I may never be together with Mafuyu ever again — I was close to tears just from thinking about that.

When did I like her so much?

I was by her side ever since the beginning, involved in her sorrow and happiness precisely because of my close distance to her. Because I wanted to do something for her..... because I wanted to follow her.

Why did I realize this only at an important time like this?

"..... You're really terrible, Nao."

Chiaki murmured. That sentence seeped its way into the almost-healed scars on my face.

"..... Mmm, I know that."

"No, you don't understand."





I lifted my head — Chiaki's expression was like the autumn sky. She had finally put on a smile, but along with it was a touch of loneliness.

"Both of you are terrible people, but Mafuyu's worse than you. She passed this to me despite knowing that."

With that said, Chiaki pulled out something from the pocket and shoved it into my hands.

It was a piece of paper folded up several times. I opened it and realized it was a staff paper. The neat handwritten notes invoked a nostalgic, sweet and yet bitter feeling inside of me. It had happened once before. That was the time when I received Senpai's scores from Chiaki; a time when my heart was sent flying with a kick.

And now, it's—

"Practice it before coming down tomorrow — that's what Mafuyu said. Why must I accept chores like these....."

Chiaki pulled her hair into an untidy heap as she said that with a sad smile on her face.

"But I guess it can't be helped..... 'Love'..... is a painful thing, isn't it?"

"Eh..... A-Ah..... Mmm."





Chiaki opened the window and sat on the window frame. Her hair, held together with a hair-clip, was swaying along with the incoming wind. I looked past her shoulders to glance at the gloomy skies. Chiaki continued with her murmurs,

"I think it's much easier to 'hate', because all we have to do is to separate ourselves. But 'love' is just painful, because the distance between us can never be smaller than zero. And I have no idea what to do."

I stared at the profile of Chiaki's face in a daze while holding onto the scores in my hand.

"Distance..... smaller than zero?" Is she talking about Mafuyu and I?

"Yes, because both of you did not voice out the most important thing to the other person despite the fact that you were by each other's side since the very beginning. You two never expressed your feelings to each other. That's why!"

Her expression was sorrowful as she kept looking upwards into the autumn sky.

"That's why you cannot become closer, and yet it's painful to be at a loss of what to do."

So that's what she meant by not being able to reduce the distance beyond zero.





Why did Chiaki understand the feelings I have in my mind?

"Oh right....."

As she turned around, the smile on her face had finally returned back the the cheerful smile she always had.

"The reason I let you off is because you'll not be able to play the bass should I fracture your arms after punishing you with the Juji Gatame. Got it?"

..... Miss Chiaki, the smile on your face is really scary, you know?

"Well then, see you in school tomorrow. Should you whimper and not come to band tomorrow, then how about having a taste of my figure-four leglock? I mean, you can still play the bass even if your legs were snapped into two."

Chiaki leapt through the window frame nimbly when she finished saying her dangerous line to me. I watched her climb down the tree without any trouble before shifting my attention back to the scores.

This is something written by Mafuyu for me. For me?

It was a bass portion that was taken off a certain song. Looking at the phrasings, I guess it was probably the cello or the double bass. We are really bad at expressing our feelings — not only are words incapable of breaking into our souls, they are not even close to touching them. Our feelings are forever connected by music.





That's the reason why I must pick up the bass by my bed.

That's the only place I can return to regardless of how bad things have become.

"Nao, it feels like you are unaware of the fact that you are a part of the Third Class of First Year."

"Haven't you heard at the class meeting? Didn't we say we'll be coming here early to work on the class decorations?"

I made the effort to reach the school slightly earlier on Monday, but I was scolded by my classmates who were around for the class decorations early in the morning.

"S-Sorry....."

"You didn't attend the practices regularly during the sports meet as well."

"Listen up Nao. The only one who can withstand the atrocity of our class-rep and the fellow girls of our class is none other than you, thanks to all the training you've received at the Folk Music Club. We'll leave the preparation of food to you on the actual day of the festival."

"..... Then what are you guys doing?"





"We will be busy with the other important jobs!"

"Taking the pictures of the waitresses; selling the photos; appreciating the pictures."

"You guys, enough is enough!" Upon seeing the furious Terada, the guys quickly picked up their tools and returned to their workplaces that were scattered all over the classroom.

"Listen up, Nao!"

Terada prodded my at chest hard as she said that.

"You'll be in the kitchen the whole day since everyone knows you're good at cooking. You'll have to practice at the home economics room the day before that. I don't think there will any time for you to rest."

"No wait, am I not the waiter?" Didn't they make me put on the waiter's clothes back then?

"Your job is to wear the waiter's attire and take pictures with our guests. Rush into the classroom should anyone requests for a picture."

"What's the point in that....."

"You have a complaint?"





"Nope....." I whimpered. I can't complain because I had not really participated in any of the class activities.

But I have to thank our busy schedule. Glancing through the corner of my eyes, I could see Mafuyu working on an innovatively designed wooden binder together with Chiaki and the rest of the girls, which will then be used for our menus.

We never had the opportunity to exchange looks, much less to speak with each other. I had no idea how I should portray myself when I speak to her. It was impossible for us to carry on like this forever since her seat is right next to mine.

When the bell rang, my classmates began to stuff the half-finished work into the cabinets in a hurry. Larger items were shifted to the space behind the class.

Mafuyu then returned to her seat beside me. I dared not raise my head, and had even hoped for the hustle in my class to continue on forever. Chiaki, who was sitting in front of me, turned her head around to take a brief glance at me before shrugging her shoulders in resignation.

The hustle in our class died down gradually, and the sound of the chairs slowly came to a halt.

"Naomi....."

A tiny voice came into my ears, but I could not hear it clearly. I stared at my table and squeezed out an answer,





"..... Mmm."

"Did you practice?"

I took a look at the pocket of the bass casing. The score which Chiaki passed to me yesterday was placed inside it.

"..... More or less. But it's still not....."

"Alright, head to the practice room after school."

Said Mafuyu faintly. As for me, I had the feeling that my heart was melting, boiling and close to flowing out from my ears. She should be angry. Is she okay with talking to me?

Can I stay by Mafuyu's side?

I gulped and nodded my head.

I ran away from the classroom during lunch break. Mafuyu, who sat besides me, would look at me occasionally with that pair of eyes — eyes that looked like they contained the skies of the night. It looks like she wanted to say many things to me, but I almost asphyxiated from her gaze.

I walked along the corridors in dejection and thought to myself: everything should be okay if I have a heart-to-heart talk with her. I'll apologize to her, ask her the question properly before I..... convey my feelings to her.





Things would not have turned out like this if I could do just that.

So I ran out of the class, but now what? Mafuyu may appear at the practice room if I hid myself in there to kill time (though recently it was rare of her to lock herself in the room during lunch break).

All Mafuyu said was for me to head to the practice room after school, and that was the only agreement between us. And so, the pathetic me decided to go with just that and delayed concluding the matter. If that was the case, then all I have left is that place.

The rooftop.

"I am right after all. The only place you can run to is here. You had not been to here recently, but I had the feeling that would. Looks like I made the right decision to cast my web here."

Kagurazaka-senpai, who was leaning against the fence and listening to her walkman, took off her earphones and flashed a charming smile at me when she noticed my presence.

"Oh no you don't. I'm not letting you run away."

"W-Whoa!"

Just as I was about to turn around and run away, Senpai came in from behind and hugged me to prevent me from doing so.





"Don't you have something to say to me?"

"Urm, well— Hyaa!" Quit exhaling onto the back of my ears!

"I am not angry about how you failed to finish the composition last week."

I froze in the Senpai's arms.

"I am just frustrated when I see you sink into the abyss of your heart without saying a single word, young man. Geez, you and Mafuyu are way too alike. It's painful to watch."

Mafuyu and I are alike.....?

"Both of you bumped into each other for the same reasons, and yet you two passed each other because of same reasons as well. As a bystander, I find you two unbelievably cute."

I am fine with you calling me cute, but I am in no mood to be listening to that.

"Right, I am actually not in the mood to be saying things like this. The day of our live performance is approaching, and yet we've not even decided on our songs yet. The both of you are frustrating to watch, and I can't possibly be dote on you two forever."

"That's because—"





I was close to slumping onto the ground, so I gripped Senpai's arms hard.

"— Must it really be me who composes the songs? Why? But Senpai is better....."

"I'm better?"

"You're better at coming up with great songs, isn't that so? You're different from me. I am not well-versed in composing—"

Senpai pressed her finger against my lips to stop me from going further. I twisted my upper body so that I could turn my head around. Senpai plugged one of the earphones into my ear all of the sudden and placed the other into hers. She then pushed the old walkman into my hands.

"..... What's this?"

"My treasure."

Murmured Senpai as she placed her hands softly onto mine and pressed the play button.

The sounds of the waves; the footsteps on the sands; the noise of the portable mini amplifiers. A blurry but gentle dyad. I held my breath reflexively.

Next, I heard a faint singing voice.





"This is....."

I lifted my head and was almost sucked in by Senpai's eyes. We were at a distance where our skins almost came into contact with each other. The only thing connecting us together was the thin, long wires of the earphones.

"You do remember, don't you?"

I nodded my head in surprise. How can I possibly forget? That was the sample tape I made during our training camp — the tape which was filled with the immature playing of my bass and my voice.

"This is the song you robbed off of me."

Senpai's fingernails scratched my arms lightly.

"You had no idea how much of a shock I suffered back then, did you?"

Senpai's sad murmurs were overlapping with my singing voice. I could not breathe.

"It's really simple, young man. Things are much simpler than what you're thinking in your head. You have a power to make a tune take its shape. And that power of yours is something which I lack—"

Senpai dug her nails deep into my arms.





"That's the reason why I delegated the task to you. It's that simple."

"But, but I—"

"I know what you are trying to say. This time round, your opponent is not just me alone, but together with Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, Keith Emerson, Greg Lake and Carl Palmer. You have no chance of winning. Am I right?"

I hesitated a while before nodding my head. That is indeed the case according to how Senpai puts it. But if you ask me, it's just simply: 'I was not confident in composing'.

"Mmm, I get it."

Senpai laughed and removed the earphone in my ear. The song which was playing in half of my world disappeared. For a brief moment, it felt like I was abandoned beneath a starless sky.

A sense of uneasiness assaulted me and froze my inner body as Senpai took a step back. Is she giving up already? Had Senpai gave up on passing this task to me? Why was I feeling so depressed? Isn't this what I wanted all along?

"I will never give up."

Senpai flashed a sinister smile and fished out something from her jacket's pocket before stuffing it into my hands.





I took a look at the object and was rendered speechless.

"What's..... this?"

"Hmm? Isn't it obvious? Sauce cutlet bun, of course. You know, for victory. Though I am not praying for your victory."

"Ah, right....."

It was indeed a sauce cutlet bun wrapped up in a plastic wrap. But what's with the praying for victory?

"Because Comrade Ebisawa asked you out today after school, didn't she? It's the same as what you did before. You said things like wanting to teach her a lesson because she did not accept what you had said."

"Ah....."

"The two of you are really alike. And that's why, young man—"

Senpai put on a gentle expression all of the sudden and pressed her palm on the area close to my heart.

"I hope she'll teach you a really good lesson."

It was two hours of physical education for the afternoon lessons, so classes ended without me bumping into Mafuyu. Just as I was





heading to the changing room in a state of exhaustion, the girls who were done changing had already begun their work on sewing the tablecloths and designing the brochures. I did not see Mafuyu though.

"She had already made her way to the practice room," said Chiaki. "Hurry up, stupid Nao! It's best you get your ass kicked by Mafuyu!"

"..... Mmm, I get it. I'll go and get my ass kicked by her right now."

Chiaki tilted her head in surprise when she heard my reply. She then returned to her angry expression and turned her head away.

I must apologize to Chiaki properly one day, I thought to myself.

But for now—

When I reached the courtyard, the old music building looked gloomier than usual somehow. I could faintly hear a guitar playing Beethoven's bagatelle through the soundproof door. The soundproofing was still not perfect despite the fixes I've made. Sounds were still leaking out from the room.

It's the same as that day.

"..... Mafuyu?"

I yelled. Beethoven's bagatelle stopped for a moment.





There was no response after that. I tried pulling the door, but it was locked.

My gaze fell to my feet as I was at a loss of what to do. It was then that I noticed a small black hole that was dug beneath a hinge of the soundproof door. A cable connector was located there for the purpose of that showdown with the rights to the practice room on the line. So it has been five months since that showdown huh. It still feels unreal.

However, it felt like my time spent with Mafuyu was way longer than that — but I guess that illusion of mine was caused by the lack of conversation between Mafuyu and I.

The god of music will be angry if I push the blame on him, won't he?

But god, please give me, who is poor at expressing himself, a chance.

I opened up my case and pulled out the cable. I plugged one of its ends into my bass and the other beneath the hinge. It felt like a faint electrical surge flowed through my body the instant I plugged the cable into the connector.

"..... Are you ready?"

I finally heard Mafuyu's voice through the soundproof door. I leaned against the door and replied,





"Mmm."

I had zero confidence in following along to her tempo since I spent only one whole night in my preparation for this. More importantly, I had no idea what was the song we will be playing. Who shall be the one to start?

Giin A feedback, together with the Mafuyu's breathing, came from the back of my head.

The faint sounds flowing out from the strings of the guitar caused me to hold my breath subconsciously. As the violin and viola played their long overlapping octaves, another violin squeezed itself in during the brief interval with its trills.

Of course, those were none other than the sounds produced by Mafuyu's guitar. The timbre was so incredibly clear and comforting, it was hard to imagine that those sounds are produced by the hands of a girl. I almost missed the timing of my entrance into the piece. The bone-chilling footsteps of the cello approaches me one step at a time amid the icy clear sounds of the treble. It was a passage filled with unease.

This was a string quartet, one whose harmony was vastly different from what I was familiar with. My body was trembling with the inexplicable harmony, which had a eastern European style to it. I knew this tune; I should have heard it before. From the cello to the viola, and then the viola to the first violin. I searched through my mind as I endured the frustrating melody. It's probably the music





from Czech, but it's neither Smetana nor Dvorak. If that's the case—

I finally got it. Janáček.

It was at this very moment when I really felt like I was hit by a bolt of electricity, which caused me to be unable to find my own melody. Mafuyu's solo of the three melodies were scratching me on the back of my neck. I got it.

It's Janáček's String Quartet No. 1, <Kreutzer Sonata>.

Despite it having the same name as Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9, one will not find traces of <Kreutzer> in the melody of the piece. That was because what connected the two pieces separated by a hundred and twenty years apart was something totally unrelated to music.

I gripped desperately my bass in an attempt to find a place in the music where I enter. It was only then that I realized that what Mafuyu wanted me to listen to was not just the piece she performed live together with Yuri in that studio.

Mafuyu's guitar gave not a damn to my bass, continuing its way forward as it weaved the melody. I could not catch up to her — there was no way I could reach her side at all. The back of Mafuyu was becoming smaller and smaller.

I cannot remain stagnant however.





If I wished to stay by Mafuyu's side, the only thing I can do is to run.

I fumbled my bass without much of a clue. The intermittent and sporadic themes of the quartet agitated my sense of frustration, causing it to slip away from my weak grasp constantly. Before long, Mafuyu had constructed a tall arpeggio bridge across the raging waves of repeating melodies. She then abandoned me just like that; the melody kept rising. It became transparent before finally fading into a cloud of mist and disappeared completely.

I heaved a huge breath, removed my sweaty palms off the bass and pressed the back of my head against the door. I accomplished nothing. All I did was to stare at the walls of the school building — that was because the tears would flow out of my eyes should I close them.

For some reason, I knew Mafuyu's body was on the other side of the door.

Despite her close distance to me, I came up with all sorts of nonsensical thoughts and even ran away before Mafuyu could even speak. How should I apologize to her? What should I say—

The door behind me opened all of a sudden, causing me to dive into the soil. I hit my head against the ground.

"Geez, you can't keep up at all....."





I directed my gaze towards the source of the sound. Mafuyu, who stood behind the door, crossed sight with me while my forehead was still stuck on the ground. That made her swallow her words. Instead, she ran to my side and knelt down as she peeked at my face with teary eyes.

"..... S-Sorry, are you alright?"

"Eh? Ah, I-I'm fine." I move myself stiffly backwards a little with my butt and my hands still on the ground. I then patted the soil off my pants and said, "I'm fine, really. Mmm."

I was at a loss of words again, so I moved my gaze away from Mafuyu's face. I found myself useless and pathetic.

As for Mafuyu, she remained by my side with her lips tightly shut — at a distance where we would touch each other should I get up just a little.

Before long, the silence forced the words out from my throat through my mouth,

"..... Sorry. You took the effort to get me here, and yet I screwed up. And this <Kreutzer>. You prepared it specially for me, and yet I did not realize it at all..... I'm really sorry."

I finally said it. It took me three gulps of breathes to stabilize my own emotions before I finally moved my eyes slowly onto Mafuyu. Her navy blue eyes were reflecting that embarrassing face of mine clearly.





Mafuyu lowered her gaze and shook her head.

"You don't have to apologize to me for that."

Her cold voice froze my throat.

"You should apologize to Yuri instead. He was really concerned about this. As for me—"

Mafuyu, whose head has been lowered all these while, pressed her forehead against my chest. There was a burning sensation on my chest and my heart was pumping wildly like a beast's. I could not move my body.

"I long knew you were stupid, dense and slow, someone who does not take my feelings into consideration at all."

I really felt like crying when she reminded me of all my shortcomings.

"However, it's fine so long as you realize this piece is <Kreutzer>."

Mafuyu breathed her depressed voice onto my chest one word at a time.

I did not even realize something as simple as that. I never thought she was searching for books written by Tolstoy despite bumping into her at the library.





19th century Russian writer Lev Tolstoy wrote a novel under the influence of Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9. This piece, which name was endowed with the title of a novel's name, had finally returned back into the hands of a musician after a century. Janáček found inspiration in that novel and created a series of his early works, naming them after the title of the book. Most of his works were lost over the years, so all that's left is the String Quartet No. 1 to inherit the ill-fated name.

<Kreutzer Sonata>.

A span of a hundred and twenty years apart. They were linked only by their same names. Music — novel — music.

Such miracles appeared frequently around the world. This is where music links the fate of people from different eras and different countries together. I doubt Janáček was afraid of falling under Beethoven's shadow while he was composing his own <Kreutzer>. All he did was to borrow a few phrases while serving Beethoven his greatest respect. That was how music is interlinked together, and almost all the music we have in our hands were remnants found at the ends of the flow of music.

And so—

"There is no need for you to be afraid of Mussorgsky."

Mafuyu lifted her head to a distance where the tip of our noses were almost in contact with each other's.





"All you need to do is to come up with an ordinary piece of rock. Even if it is the work which you copied off others, the music still belongs to you. I..... Chiaki, Kyouko and I — we all want to play the music composed by you."

"..... Mmm."

My music.

No matter how much I copied it off others, regardless of how humble I was, even if I were to turn my gaze and run away—

I cannot disappear from this place.

"You....."

Mafuyu pushed both of her hands hard against my chest, causing me to stumble backwards. I stabilized myself by planting my arms on the ground behind me.

"You played so badly! Practice properly and finish your composition quickly, get it? You couldn't even catch up to me at all."

"M-Mmm....."

I sank into depression when she lectured me right to my face.

"Did you think about it properly? Or are you still stuck?"





"I did think on it a little, but....." I was mumbling vaguely. I retracted my chin when Mafuyu's face closed in on me. "When I was fiddling with the synthesizer at my house during my attempted composition, it will all end up with me coming up with some sort of arrangement using the keyboard. However, that arrangement will not work for the live performance. Therefore, there is no—"

"But you have me."

..... Eh?

Mafuyu pressed her right hand against my chest. Different from the hands of Kagurazaka-senpai, Mafuyu's hands were not only soft, but her touch felt unreal as well.

'Because I can move my right hand again.'

For a moment, I could not understand what she was trying to say. I lowered my head to look at her delicate right hand. I then stared at Mafuyu's face and muttered with a sense of disbelief,

"What do you mean..... you are willing to play? No, but..... this is a live performance, no?"

"I cannot use that as an excuse any longer. I am about to return..... back to that place."

I could feel something jamming in my throat. An icy flame was burning in Mafuyu's navy blue eyes.





Mafuyu is about to return back to the stage once more — this is the first time I actually heard it straight from her mouth. I could still feel the lingering sensation of her maroon hair brushing against my face as I propped my body up.

"B-Back then....."

Mafuyu hugged her chest and said with a painful expression,

"You helped me many times on your own accord. All I'm doing this time is the same as you did, so why are you still complaining?"

"S-Sorry," I am not complaining. I am just finding it hard to believe it right away.

"Finish your composition as quick as you can. Bring that synthesizer to school as well, you hear me?"

I nodded my head hard several times.

Mafuyu offered me her right hand which she had once lost.

I accepted her hand with a firm grip of my own. I could feel the strength flowing through my arms when I stood up.

I may not be able to stand up on my own, but Mafuyu's around.

The question which I had tried asking several times but failed in all of my attempts was swimming within my mouth once again — will Mafuyu stay by my side? Or will she fly towards that world and





never return? Regardless of the answer, it does not really matter any more to me.

I wish to stay by Mafuyu's side. Even if I can't catch up to her—

All I can do is to continue running forward.





Chapter 5

The Song of Blackbird

Three weeks passed by in a flash.

The preparations for the school festival were in the final stage. A tense atmosphere permeated the school, just like how one has muscle pains after an intensive exercise. It even felt like the temperature rose by a degree or two after school.

"Are we really going to perform in these attires?"

I asked Senpai yet again as I stood at the edge of the stage in the sports complex. The area behind me was filled with drums, amplifiers and footlights, while Senpai was standing before the microphone in the middle of the stage.

"Of course. The four of us will be burning on the stage!"

Senpai took a glance at Mafuyu who stood to the left of the stage, and then at Chiaki who stood behind the drums. Her expression became slightly dazed. The two girls wore black dresses with lots of frills. And since Mafuyu had European blood in her lineage, the dress suited her perfectly.





As for me, I wore a black vest with a half apron. The typical attire of a waiter.

Next was Kagurazaka-senpai. Her attire was of a fourteenth century Italian style — a glorious white multi-pleated dress accompanied with a bright red shawl. Simply put, it was her Juliet costume. The reason we wore our attires was because Senpai said we should all go on stage in the attire we will be wearing for our class.

"We'll waste no time in changing. Moreover, all of us can promote the band's live performance during our class activities. What a great plan."

"Well..... you're right."

"Actually, I want to look at you two in this attire since both of you are ravishing!"

"I've no interest in your true intentions!"

So that was the reason why Senpai wanted us to wear the official attire even though it was just a rehearsal one week before the actual performance?

All the windows of the sports complex were draped over with black curtains, so the stage looked especially bright thanks to the spotlights. After Chiaki was done tuning the snare drums, she began drumming various fills as warm ups.





"Whoa, it's quite hard to drum in this fluffy dress," said Chiaki with a frown.

Senpai walked up to the drums and sank into thought.

"Can't we think of something so that those cute curves of Chiaki's legs can be put on full view for the audience.....?"

How could that be possible? Now was not the time to be fretting about things like that, yeah?

"They'll be visible if we switch to transparent drums. How about that?"

"Good idea. I'll check out the warehouse of the Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store. Problem is, there are situations where the contents in your skirt will be in full view to certain audience's angles since you're a drummer—"

I decided to ignore the two girls who were seriously discussing silly things like that and went over towards the wiring for the effector. Just then, Mafuyu at the other side of the stage spoke,

"Naomi, can this thing stores only up to sixteen sets in its performance? I have no idea how to synchronize the memory between these."

She pointed to the two synthesizers that were stacked on top of each other as she said that.







"Ah, hold on. I'll be right over."

A weird lament struck my heart as I looked at Mafuyu who was before the keyboard.

Mafuyu has returned back to this place once more so that she can play the piano amidst the lights once again. But that was something I had never once considered before the end of summer.

"..... Yes?" Mafuyu noticed that I was staring at her face in dazedly. I quickly shifted my gaze onto the control board.

"The memory space for this unit is smaller as it is an older model. We'll set three main tones for the upper one."

"Is there no way we can synchronize it with the one below?"

There were lots of things I could teach Mafuyu ever since she came into contact with synthesizers. This may be just temporary, but I prayed for this luck to go on forever. There was really nothing much I could do for Mafuyu.

"It's about time you guys begin with your rehearsal! The guys after you are rushing us already."

A member of the broadcasting club yelled at us from the temporary PA console erected beneath the stage. I flashed a thumbs up at Mafuyu as Senpai heaved her guitar onto her back and made her way towards the microphone, before I ran back to my bass located at the left side of the stage.





Turning my head backwards, I could see Mafuyu's guitar slung over her back, supported only by a strap on her shoulder. I did think that was quite a crazy idea, but I did want the audience to see Mafuyu on stage as a guitarist as well. She would have to be quick when she change her instruments, so that must be really tough on her.

But I was sure it will be our best performance yet.

The footlights dimmed, signalling a change of scenes. All that was left were the blue lights moving about behind us on the backdrop of the stage.

There was the sound of endless bubbles floating up from the depths of the waters. The metallic timbres of the celesta could be heard vaguely amid the waves. All of a sudden, it felt like I was in the Disney movie <Fantasia>. Just as expected from the synthesizer nurtured by Tomo. It could replicate all sorts of scenes realistically, regardless of whether it was a snowing morning or the seas amid a violent storm.

Next, the bright melody of the piano pierced through the darkness.

It was the main theme of <Promenade>.

The heavily twisted roars of Senpai's Les Paul were was climbing upwards non-stop as it sunk its teeth deeply into Mafuyu's organ. The fugue had already strayed far away from the music envisioned





by Mussorgsky and was beginning its sprint. As it approached the highest register, it began to spread its wings apart.

My very own <Pictures at an Exhibition> could not be considered as music without the fingers of Mafuyu — my spine trembled I realized that fact. In order to catch up to Senpai's guitar, Chiaki's fills descended deep into the fugue as the cymbals exploded countless number of times. I paced myself to her temp and suppressed the elation in me as I carved each and every heartbeat into my mind.

When we were done with school, the four of us went down to McDonald's to have our meeting — something which we had not done in a long while. As there was only a week left until the school festival, it felt like we shouldn't waste any of the remaining time we had in our hands. There was no way we could head home straight after school as a result of that.

"Let us sell our feketerigó T-shirts and the CD of our live performances at the entrance of the sport complex!"

And here we have Chiaki with her entrepreneurial mind in full display. She did mention selling the T-shirts before as well. Was she really serious about that?

"We should make use of this opportunity and put the <Ebisawa Mafuyu & Lollipops> T-shirt on sale as a rare item."





"N-No way!"

Mafuyu knocked into the tray when she stood up in protest.

"I am thinking of recording our live performance on a DVD. I mean, we're going to wear those beautiful clothes."

Senpai was dreaming as well. No wait, she might actually be serious about that. On a side note, we'll have to obtain permission from the students council if we wish to sell things during the school festival, so the actualization of that was highly unlikely.

"Oh right, Comrade Ebisawa."

Said Senpai suddenly with a serious expression on her face. Mafuyu tilted her head in response.

"Are your fingers really okay? You paused in the middle of our rehearsal, and that was no mistake."

Mafuyu's expressions froze. So Senpai noticed that as well?

That was something that happened in the middle of our rehearsal. Catching the news of us rehearsing in our actual attire on stage, the various sports clubs came flocking down to the sport complex to watch us in action (and in a certain sense, the Folks Music Club was incredibly well known in school). We were performing the fourteenth song <Con mortuis in lingua mortua> then. A ray of beam suddenly burst into the sport complex filled with darkness





and the whisperings of the spirits, and a group of noisy people came walking into the hall.

We did not stop our performance though. Chiaki and I continued our performance along to the pace which we had practiced to a countless number of times — we did not slow down.

But I knew Mafuyu's fingers went stiff. The promenade variation which were conveying the words of the dead came to a halt in mid air. She returned to normal only when we were at the song <Baba-Yagá>.

"..... I'm okay."

With that said, Mafuyu bit onto her faintly trembling lips.

"I am confident of stuffing the sports complex with people, but are you really okay?"

Mafuyu did not open her mouth; instead, she nodded her head several times in reply. But that just makes me even more concerned for her, since she had once injured her right wing amid the glamour of the stage.

"..... I cannot run away any longer."

Mafuyu surprised us with the her overly unyielding voice. Even Chiaki dared not look at her straight in the eye, but she still stared at Mafuyu with a worried expression on her face.





"I have always wanted to say this."

Mafuyu's hands were encased around the paper cup with iced red tea inside, her eyes fixed onto the straw.

"I will be embracing the role of a pianist once more, and am now preparing for the recordings. If the situation allows, I'll be performing in a concert as well."

"Then— Comrade Ebisawa will be returning back to the glamorous but icy world?"

Asked Senpai as she clasped onto Mafuyu's right hand tightly. For some unknown reason, she was phrasing the question in the exact same way I had in my mind as well. Oh right, I remember Tetsuro had once said this in a certain critique of his: "a world shimmering in icy rays".

Mafuyu nodded.

"Then what about the band?"

Chiaki asked gingerly. Mafuyu's shoulders flinched, my arms went stiff as well. That was the question which I could not bring myself to ask and had long decided not to think about it any longer, but Chiaki voiced out the question easily.

"..... I hope to continue playing with the band."

Said Mafuyu while she stared at her own hands.





"I hope". Not "I will".

I should be happy about that answer from her, but the insecure me had decided to dig out the seeds of uneasiness which could be found in each and every crevasse of my heart. I mumbled my question without looking at Mafuyu's face,

"Won't you be busy? I mean, with activities like the recordings or the performances and so on."

I knew the girls were all looking in my direction even though I had my gaze on my knees.

"I don't know. But I will try my best....."

It felt like Mafuyu's voice was slowly fading away.

"Even if you say that now, what will you do should you be on a tour or some other activities?"

"Then I'll—"

"Calm down, young man."

It was only when Kagurazaka-senpai pressed hard on my shoulders that I realized that I had actually stood up. Mafuyu was cowering as she looked upwards at me.

"Comrade Ebisawa has already said 'she hopes to continue'."





Senpai pressed her finger hard against my chest.

"There is nothing more assuring than that. There should not be a problem so long as she wishes for that. We will offer you our strength any time regardless of what happens so that you can realize your dreams."

It was as if Senpai's smile had encompassed my fears as well.

"Just like what you had done before."

I swallowed the words I was about to say and sat myself on my seat.

We could offer our strength any time. Was that really true?

Should Mafuyu's delicate fingers become immobile due to some unfortunate reason in the future..... I won't be able to help her with anything even if I was by her side.

It was depressing to say this, but the person who would be able to help her then will not be me.

Yuri gave me a call that night. I was sorting through some data on the computer for the synthesizer after a bath, and the phone call came not long after I was into the task.





"Naomi? Sorry, I was really busy. My living place was found out by someone from a certain magazine, so I was fleeing all over the place. Ah, right. I've decided to carry a handphone along with me, since I think I'll be staying in Japan for a while. Do remember my number, okay? Japan's handphones are incredible! They're so small and light!"

I had no idea what I should say when I heard the truly happy voice of Yuri. We have not contacted each other since our meeting at the studio in Shibuya. It was because I could not contact him, and I was actually wondering if I should get Mafuyu to pass a message to him. But it somehow felt a little despicable of me should I do that.

"U-Urm....."

I gave a cough. Calm down.

"..... I am really sorry for last time."

"Eh? A-Ah, mmm, it's okay, I did not take it to heart. But Mafuyu looked really depressed, so you'll have to apologize to her, okay? Did you make up with her already?"

He said the same thing as Mafuyu.....

"I guess. Back then, urm....."

It was hard for me to explain to Yuri. Simply put, I was jealous of Yuri. Thankfully I was speaking to him through the phone, or else I would have ran away already if I was meeting him in person.





"Are you angry at me, Naomi?"

"No, that's not it. No way. Everything's my fault, I've got everything wrong. I am really sorry....."

"Did Mafuyu and my performance made you unhappy?"

"No, no way. How can that be—" I swallowed the words that were halfway out of my mouth. Actually, in a certain sense, that was exactly what it is. I ran away precisely because my heart was pierced by their <Kreutzer>.

"..... Naomi?"

Yuri's voice was filled with a sense of unease.

Perhaps I should tell him the truth. I am tired of constantly running away from things.

"Urm, well....."

I shut my eyes and clenched my fists that were resting on my knees. I then relaxed my body and focused all of my attention on my body.

"Actually..... I am really envious of you."

"..... Me?"





"Mmm..... because you're the only one who can compete against Mafuyu's piano."

"Hold on, but I heard from Mafuyu you'll be performing on stage during the school festival, no? And Mafuyu will be playing with the synthesizer as well, right?"

"Eh..... yeah."

Oh right, Mafuyu said she was willing to play it.

"Why are you envious of me? Hey, I think I should be the one who's angry right now. I have always, always been envious of you, you know?"

"Eh? Ah, well....."

Why? Why must I be chased about by your words?

"..... But the reason Mafuyu's willing to pick up the piano once more is because she wants to play together with you..... and the reason Mafuyu's fingers are movable once again is because you've returned."

"..... Me?"

Yuri sank into a temporary silence after that. Urm..... what was wrong?

"..... Hey, Naomi, I want you to answer me this honestly."





"M-Mmm."

"Do you love Mafuyu?"

My hand slipped by accident and the phone dropped onto the floor.

"What's with that loud sound just now? My ears hurt!" came Yuri's voice that were close to tears when I picked up my phone.

"S-Sorry. Urm, you were saying....."

"I asked you if you are in love with Mafuyu."

I dropped onto my bed, burrowed my face into my pillow and fretted about for a while. I then kicked my legs about in the covers before slumping onto the bed in exhaustion. The phone had never once left my ears during all this while, and I even heard Yuri shout out my name a few times.

There was no way I can run away any longer. I had to give him an answer. And so I gipped hard onto my phone.

"..... It's just as you've said."

"I see."

I could somehow see the shoulders of an angel-like boy trembling as he tried his hardest to hold back his laughter.





"I get it then. Naomi have said lots of mean things to me today, but it can't be helped if you are in love with Mafuyu. I'll forgive you."

"What are you talking about....." Crap, the hand I was holding the phone with was getting sore.

"But I can't hand over Mafuyu to you. No way. I won't allow it."

"It's not like she belongs to you."

Ah, no, wait. I hesitated for fifteen seconds before asking him the all-important question,

"I have a question for you. Are you and Mafuyu, urm..... in that sort of relationship?"

"Hmm? Well, we did see the sleeping faces of one another, and we do swap our clothes as well. Our relationship's probably something like that."

What sort of relationship was that..... But come to think of it, didn't I see Mafuyu's sleeping face before as well? But I spoke no further as the conversation seemed to be getting more and more complicated.

"Though we used to be together all the time, it's nothing like what Naomi's worried about."





I see. I heaved a soft sigh of relief, but I tried my hardest not to let Yuri notice it.

"But Mafuyu does not belong to Naomi as well, isn't that so?"

"Urm, you're not wrong. No wait, the way you put it....."

"You do love Mafuyu, right?"

Really? was that so? I guess it was.

"Have you told Mafuyu about it?"

"How can I possibly say that!?"

"Why not?"

"And you're asking me why not....."

I've been thinking — I don't know what would happen should I tell Mafuyu that.

"Is it that hard? Are you planning not to tell her forever?"

"Don't make it sound so simple, I'm—"

"Listen to me, Naomi....."

"Hmm?"





"I love you."

I accidentally dropped my phone once more.

"Be careful! It's really scary! It feels like my phone will break down as well!"

Yuri sounded furious when I picked up my phone.

"S-Sorry. No, that's not it. Urm, what did you just say?"

"See? It's easy to say it, isn't it?"

I opened my mouth and froze for a while. I finally heaved a sigh after a short while, though it felt like I was about to puke my innards out as well.

"Can you quit teasing me? I'm at my limits already."

"It's not my intentions to tease you....."

Yuri gave a sigh as well. It seemed like he was actually surprised by my words.

"Just to tell you this, I've said that many times to Mafuyu already."

"Whoa....." I can't take it any more. My head was about to burst.

"Do you want to know just how mean Mafuyu's replies were?"





"Urm, Yuri, I'm sorry. I give up. Please spare me from that."

Yuri snickered. That bastard. I'll pay you back for all the humiliation some day.

"Then I'll be returning back to the topic!"

"O-Oh, mmm....." Speaking of which, why did he give me a call?

"Mafuyu invited me to the school festival. I do want to attend it, but I'll be busy with a rehearsal with an orchestra that I'll be working along with for the very first time, so I will not be able to make it. Please tell her that I'm sorry."

"Why don't you tell it to her yourself—"

"Don't be so pissed! Therefore, I have a favor to ask from you. Can you record the performance and pass it to me? Please?"

"..... I get it."

I dropped onto my bed in exhaustion once more after I hung up the phone. It felt like I had suffered a pretty huge blow, so there was no way I could get up any time soon.

"Why are we having sashimi-don for dinner even though it's November? I want something hot."





Complained Tetsurou relentlessly at the dining table during dinner.

"I no longer have the strength to cook."

I drenched the tuna with a thick layer of soy sauce. How could I possibly cook after that energy-draining phone call?

"Oh well, whatever..... But isn't this miso soup the leftover from morning—"

You don't have to eat if you have any complaints.

Despite all that, Tetsurou still ate twice as fast as I did. As he poured himself a cup of after-dinner whiskey, he suddenly remembered something and asked,

"Oh right, about Mafuyu from the Ebisawa family—"

"..... Hmm?"

"I heard she'll be playing the piano on stage during the school festival?"

"How did you know that?" I don't remember telling you that. Or was Ebichiri the one who told you that? No way, Mafuyu would never tell her father about something like this.

"Nah, I heard it from a fellow industry ruffian, and the news is spreading already. You know, since Ebichiri Mafuyu is famous and all."





"That's right, but why are you asking that now?"

When Mafuyu and her father returned back to Japan from America, they did stir up quite a huge commotion in the media for about a month, but the media stopped reporting on the news after that. So Mafuyu and I were totally not concerned about this.

No wait, Ebisawa Chisato..... was he still concerned about this?

"Because, it felt like Mafuyu's right hand was a goner judging by the stuff that happened back in June, isn't that so? Since no one knew the details of the situation, and there were nothing from Mafuyu as well — everyone thought she had retired already, so that lacks news value. However, Julien Flaubert came to Japan, didn't he? The whole industry is aware of the news of him and Mafuyu playing together in Mafuyu's comeback album, and that has captured everyone's attention. And since it came down to this, there should be lots of interested people if she is to play the piano during your live performance."

"Ah..... I see."

I do understand the musical world very well — the closed society of Japan's classical music circles is shockingly small. Moreover, Yuri said the media had information on his whereabouts as well.

This will be quite troublesome for Mafuyu. For some reason, I began to worry about the live performance during the school festival. I hope nothing bad will happen.





"From what I know, there's quite a few companies who will be happy to sink their teeth onto any news related to Ebisawa Mafuyu."

"Hold on, Tetsurou, are you really planning to use Mafuyu as a way to earn cash? Don't do that!"

"Oi oi, what's wrong? You think you're a knight or something? Daddy will be heartbroken if you're that interested in girls."

"I'm talking to you very seriously!"

"You know, I've written countless crass and horrible articles to raise you to who you are today."

"Bring those words with you to your grave! Listen up, Mafuyu is now in the toughest period of her life, so don't use her for your article!"

Tetsurou made a silly face in response. Damn that bastard, was he planning to visit the school festival?

"Actually, I am much more interested in the goth lolita café that your class is doing."

"How the hell do you know that!?"

"Heheh, don't underestimate the industry's ruffians."





"What sort of industry are you in!?"

"Just kidding. Chiaki told me. She's really a good girl — she even knew that the stockinged legs of high-school girls are what I love the most."

"Don't you dare come! You're banned from coming! I'll call the police if you do!"

"Nao, it's no good for you to have all the girls to yourself even if you're in charge of the café. It's not like you'll lose anything if we share."

"I'll have to be in the kitchen..... no wait, stop leading me astray!"

Tetsurou ignored the furious me and ran away to get his digital camera. He then began wiping the lenses with anticipation. God damn it, I'll throw you out of the school should I see you on that day.

The emcees in charge of the school's broadcast were rambling on and on as they assisted the guests with navigating through the festival — I guess even real disco DJs would be shell-shocked by what they will hear. The performance venues are in the sports complex, the music hall and the visual-audio room, while the performances include dramas, homemade movies, mimes, orchestras, manzai and rakugo. [Note: Manzai is a type of stand-up comedy, where two people exchange jokes, mostly involving





puns, at high speed. Rakugo is sort of an one-man show, where one person enacts out a long comical story.]

The school's corridors were filled with visitors, whose numbers dwarfed the students in uniforms by about three times. The mobile advertiser with the billboard hanging from his body and the ramen store waiter were yelling with loud voices; the lost child was crying; the festival community members with sleeved logos on their arm were running about all the time as they communicated via the walk-talkies with a pale face.

The school has turned into a battlefield on the day of the school festival.

Thinking back on how heated the atmosphere was for the chorus contest, it was no surprise that the school festival are the way things are now. Even so, we had never expected the foods and drinks we had prepared to be sold out by morning.

"Manager, I've bought the bread and ham, but I forgot to ask for the receipt."

The student who came running into the home economics room slammed two stuffed supermarket bags onto the table.

"Don't address me as the manager. Now cut the ham into halves," I replied hastily as I quickly diced the onions required for the hotdogs.





"The red tea's almost finished as well. You should have checked with us before getting the items!" "Can we dilute it with water?" "Just add more ice to it!" "Can't do, the tea's hot." "No problem, they'll never notice."

They definitely will! Don't do that. It's not like we're some unscrupulous shop that rips people off.

"Manager, there's a customer who wants to take a photo with a waiter."

"Again? But I'm really busy right now!"

"Nope, taking pictures is part of your job as well. Now go!"

After I was kicked in the butt, I dropped the knives and dashed out of the home economics room. I wondered whose idea it was, but we were offering photo services for with the waiters and waitresses for our costumers (but they'll have to pay). Thanks to that, our shop has turned into one of the most popular destinations around. Of course, the majority of the customers were here for the waitresses in their goth lolita costumes, though there was an occasional female customer who requested for a photo with the waiters. That means I would be asked to take part in the photo-taking despite me scurrying around the kitchen due to all the work. I've already lost count of the number of times I had to run to and from the classroom and the home economics room. Did they want me to die or something?





The entrance of our classroom was decorated with styrofoam that was made to look like a bricked gate. The styrofoam was covered with a layer of ivy — looks like everyone had put in a great deal of effort into this. My head hurted even more when I saw the long queue waiting outside of the café. Today's Saturday, the first day of the school festival. Wouldn't it be even more chaotic tomorrow since it will be a Sunday?

"Welcome..... Oh, it's Nao."

I almost bumped into Terada when I squeezed myself into the heated classroom, who was dressed up in a fluffy waitress dress.

"Come over here, the customer's waiting for you. Let's take a picture."

Five minutes later, I was finally spared from the flashes of the camera. However, someone grabbed me by my arm just as I was about to head back to the home economics room.

"Nao, listen. There was a really weird customer earlier on."

It was Chiaki. She had removed her hair-clips today and and replaced them with a headdress. I almost did not recognize her.

"A weird customer?"

"Mmm." Chiaki shot a glance into the classroom. Standing by the side of the tables, to the left, was Mafuyu, who was taking orders from the customers. She was the only one who looked like she was





not from Japan. It was not just the color of her hair and skin or how her body shape was perfectly shaped for a dress; even the surroundings around her looked especially different.

"There was a middle-aged guy who came to ask for information about Mafuyu, though it's lucky that Mafuyu was not serving the customers then."

"I was questioned as well."

Terada interrupted all of the sudden.

"I was asked about her usual attire, whether she attends the music lessons, things like that. It was incredibly irritating. Moreover, it seems like the person who approached me was different from the one who spoke to Chiaki. The ones who approached me were two middle-aged man and a young man who looks like a university student. It feels really disgusting to have so many perverts around us."

So there are people asking for information about Mafuyu? And not just one?

"What should we do? Should we get Mafuyu to stay away from the classroom?"

"M-Mmm....."

But Mafuyu's our star waitress, and there was actually a whole bunch of people who wanted to take photographs with her.....





"And since they brought their cameras along with them, we barred them from coming into our café."

Whispered Terada after she took a brief scan around the café. I see, as expected from our competent class rep.

"They are giving off a really suspicious feeling. One of them was wearing a baggy coat; there's another one who looks quite young and was wearing jerseys and sandals."

I froze. Jerseys? With sandals?

I took a look at Chiaki. Seems like she had noticed it as well.

"Was that guy in jersey holding onto a camera as well? Urm, he's not shaved, wears a pair of massage sandals and looks like an unemployed man?"

Terada's eyes opened wide when she heard my question.

"That's right..... you know that guy?"

"How could that possibly be? I don't know any person who fits that description, and there's no one like that in my family as well."

I said something strange without thinking. Chiaki sighed and shook her head in resignation. So Tetsurou actually came down!? And he was asking questions about Mafuyu? I had already reminded him time and time again, and yet that bastard was still planning on





writing that damn article? I'll definitely sever our father-and-son relationship should he do something like that.

"Call me again should anything happen."

I left the classroom after exchanging a nod with Chiaki. I had a bad feeling about this somehow.

Just as I walked past the courtyard to reach the sports complex, a thunderous cheer erupted from within. I had almost mistaken it as an earthquake.

It was already three in the afternoon, so it was the moment when the First Class of Second Year's <Romeo and Juliet> came to an end. The cheers from the audience were crystal clear to my ears when I entered the sports complex through the back door.

We had turned one of the storerooms into our personal green room. There were lots of expensive and large items inside such as the amplifiers and the drum set. Piled onto a heap next to the wall of the room were things like foldable ladders and extension wires, old bicycles, cupboards and a fridge. There were also what looked like the props of the drama club; either that or they were your typical large-sized junk.

As I was about to dismantle the drum set in order to facilitate its transportation, an emotional Kagurazaka-senpai came walking into





the room with her face flushed red. The long skirt made it difficult for her to walk.

"Sorry, I'm late! The curtain call took quite a bit of time."

"How many are there in the audience?"

"You can flood the sports complex with their tears alone. Let's begin with our rehearsal quickly..... where's Comrade Ebisawa and Comrade Aihara?"

"They couldn't leave as there were too many photo-taking requests. I guess they'll be here soon."

"I too want to queue up so that I could take a close look at them in their waitress attire."

You can look all you want when we're on stage!

However, the two girls did not show up even after the First Class of Second Year were done with their cleaning up. I was done moving the amplifiers and the drum set onto the stage already. We were given thirty minutes for clean up and preparation, but if they did not make their way here quickly, it would be time for our performance soon.

"I'll go to our classroom to take a look."

I dashed out through the back door after yelling towards the back of Senpai, who was busy setting up the PA system.





After walking past a flight of stairs and onto the carpark, I heard the snide voice of Chiaki.

"Stop following us already! Please move away, we're short of time! Didn't Mafuyu say she doesn't want to already?"

They were at the courtyard. I hastened my pace and turned past the corner of the building.

What I saw were the backs of four men in trench coats and half coats, and I could faintly see two black dresses. It was Chiaki — and there was also the maroon hair hiding behind her back.

Chiaki was protecting Mafuyu with all her might against those men despite the fact that they were cornered at the trees next to the fence. Who were those people? Everyone of them had a camera in their hands. Were they the people who went to our café earlier to get their hands on the Mafuyu's information?

"So I say, all I want is to ask Mafuyu some questions."

One of the guys pulled his face close to Chiaki and said with a disgusting voice,

"Eh, are your fingers healed already? What made you want to play the piano on stage today?"

"We've heard you'll be releasing a CD with Yuri, when's that? Do both of you meet up frequently?"





"Please, everyone's looking forward to Mafuyu's comeback."

I ran towards them straight away. They were from the media! It was just as Tetsurou said.

"You've never played the piano on stage ever since the concert at London two years ago."

"You had suddenly decided not to go on with the concert anymore, and there was no official apology from you after that. How will you explain that?"

"— Mafuyu!"

I yelled from behind the reporters. The reporters turned their head around in surprise, while Chiaki's expressions softened as she relaxed a little. As for the cowering Mafuyu, she lifted her head up as well. I pried apart the guys who were surrounding them and grabbed onto Mafuyu and Chiaki's arms.

"Let's go. Senpai's waiting."

"Oi, wait a second."

The reporter placed his hand rudely on my shoulder. I shoved it away and began to pull the two girls along as I walked briskly towards the sports complex.

"Hey, come on, please. We're not here to play!"





Those crass voices came chasing us. I knew Mafuyu was close to her limits already — Chaiki was the one who was supporting her with her steps. We were caught up by those reporters in no time.

"You do know the London incident has become something that is quite serious, don't you? You disappeared off the music world without even holding a public conference. Please let us in on the details if possible."

What the heck is that!?! Are they that insensitive? Why are they asking Mafuyu these questions? I could sense Mafuyu trembling in unease through her palms.

"Was it related to your father? Is it true that you are on bad terms with him? Did that happen after the divorce of your parents?"

"We heard you went to look for your mother when you were performing in Germany. Is that true?"

Mafuyu's hand flinched. My arm was hit by a sudden tremble, and that made me stop in my tracks.

"Mafuyu!"

Chiaki yelled sadly. Mafuyu was squatting down on the asphalt of the carpark with her hand gripped tightly on the sleeve of my shirt. The few guys caught up to us and surrounded us.

"I'll be calling the police if you guys don't stop!"





Chiaki's voice was trembling as well, but all the reporters did was to look at each other and shrug. The fury hidden in my heart was burning. What the hell was wrong with these people? Why are they tramping on Mafuyu like this?

"We did nothing to her! I've said it already, all we want are some answers from her."

"Eh, but we'll not take up much of your time, so why don't we head to somewhere where you guys can relax so that we can have our interview. And oh, some photo-taking as well."

"You guys—"

Just as I was clenching my fists, Chiaki's arms appeared before my eyes.

"Nao, take Mafuyu and run! Hurry!"

"But—"

"Don't worry, just go!"

Chiaki moved like a black whirlwind — all I saw was her lowering her body, and I could not catch what she did next. I don't know if she rammed them with her body or sent them flying with a kick; all I knew was that the two reporters on both sides of me had collapsed from impacts on their body.





"Uh...oh" "Wha....."

I carried Mafuyu and began to ran. She felt much heavier than the last time I carried her, probably because her limbs were overly stiff. I could hear the angry howls of the guys behind me, but I shook them away and scrambled up the stairs. We then squeezed our bodies through the gap of the back door. I was really worried about Chiaki as well, but I'll leave that for later after I finish taking Mafuyu to the green room. Mafuyu was in a wrecked state as she slumped on my back. Her breathing was rough and disheveled, and that made me felt really uneasy.

"Young man?"

I bumped into Senpai in the corridor in front of the storeroom. Looks like she was making her way back from the stage.

"What's going on—"

It was only when I was pointing at the door that I realized my throat was parched. "Chiaki, she—" were the only words I barely squeezed out of my mouth.

Senpai turned around right away and sprinted towards the back door, and Chiaki came stumbling into the building at the same time. The two of them knocked into each other. Chiaki's headdress and dress was in a mess.

"Are you alright, Comrade Aihara?" asked Senpai as she offered support to Chiaki's body.





"I-I'm alright. They did not follow me here."

The four of us then retreated into the green room. All of the large items were moved to the stage already, so all that was left in the room were the guitars and the two synthesizers stacked together. I used one of the large props as a makeshift chair and sat Mafuyu on it. Her body was still trembling and her lips were pale.

"Mafuyu, are you okay? Mafuyu!"

I called her next to her ears. She nodded in response, though her eyes were dazed — however, that action of hers was so minute it looked as though her chin was shaking from her trembling.

"It looks like those guys were loitering around our café."

Said Chiaki in disdain.

"They approached us all of the sudden just as we were crossing through an empty area. They're disgusting."

"So what happened to them?"

"I ran immediately after I kicked them, so I've no idea. Probably went to the audiences' seats, I presume."

Mafuyu's shoulders flinched in fear.

"Sorry, if only I had been more careful—"





It was not Chiaki's fault. They are the ones who are at fault.

"..... I knew it."

I did not realize Mafuyu was the one who murmured those words. When I turned my head around, Mafuyu's body was no longer trembling that much, but she was still grabbing tightly onto my wrists. Her eyes were fixed on a certain spot on the ground.

"Those guys knew about my Mama."

Her voice were like the moan of the dead, and that made me shudder. I knelt down beside her in an attempt to look at her eyes, but she shut them tight to avoid eye contact with me.

"Why? I had forgotten about it already. I have decided to forget it already....."

Mafuyu's empty words were landing drip by drip onto the folds of her black skirt.

"I was really composed on the day I met Mama. I even thought to myself, 'Oh, I never expected myself to be so composed. I must be a really cold person'. B-But....."

Just then—

The announcement from the school's broadcast sounded especially loud — "Three-thirty, Folks Music Club <feketerigó> will be holding





their very first live concert in school at the sports complex". The announcement acted like a catalyst of some sort. I could hear the cheers and footsteps even though we were separated by a wall.

It has already begun. I could feel the rumbling of the sports complex. Mafuyu gripped onto my wrists even harder, and that made me realize something.

"I was not composed at all. On the second day when I was about to go on stage..... I heard it..... the sound of applause—"

Mafuyu should be gripping hard onto my wrist with her right hand, but I noticed her grasp was weak. Why? Because Mafuyu only ringed my wrist with her thumb and her index finger. Her middle, fourth and baby fingers were slumped weakly by the sides.

"Mafuyu! Your fingers—"

Mafuyu shook her head hard as if she wanted to tear her head apart from her body.

"It's okay, it's alright now. I'm fine."

"How are you fine!? Just now—"

Senpai and Chiaki realized it as well. Senpai bit her lips as she leaned her body against the wall; as for Chiaki, she ran over quickly and gripped Mafuyu's knees.

"Mafuyu, a-are you okay? Do you want to go to the infirmary?"





"I'm fine. It's okay, I'll be alright after a rest."

The fingers on Mafuyu's right hand were twitching strangely. Fine? You're like this and you say you're fine?

"Now's not the time to be worrying about the concert. Let's get a doctor here."

Just as Senpai said that in a calm voice, Mafuyu grabbed me tightly on my shoulder and stood up wobbly.

"Don't call the doctors!"

"Objection overruled. We'll have to fix your body....."

"I'll think of something! Please, I am really okay. Please don't cancel the concert."

"Why are you so insistent on this—"

I've never seen Senpai with such a speechless expression. I was thinking the exact same thing as Senpai. Why was she so insistent about it?

"I-I want to stay here, I want to stay in this band! So please!"

"You can't force yourself even if that's the case!"





Chiaki grabbed Mafuyu by her shoulders and gave her a hard rattling. The noise and footsteps from the audience were getting louder and louder. How much time left until the start of the concert? There was no way we can continue with this, can we? Since Mafuyu's already in such a state—

"This is something created by the efforts from everyone. I don't want to wreck everything just because of me."

"I've no interest in your willpower talk or whatsoever."

Senpai severed the unnecessary speech with her incredibly cold words.

"Ten minutes. I'll cancel the concert if your fingers are not fixed by then."

With that, Senpai took her guitar and left. Her back looked really gloomy.

"It will be pointless for us to perform with a member down. I'll check the stage and be back in a jiffy."

Looking past the shoulders of Chiaki, the Senpai's back was swallowed up by the closing door.

"Mafuyu, is there anything..... I..... I can do to help?"

Mafuyu shook her head and released my hand. She could barely stand up with the help of the synthesizers next to her.





"Wait for me at the stage..... I'll think of something myself."

Chiaki looked at me and then at Mafuyu. She wanted to say something but decided against it in the end. All she did was bit her lips in disdain and lowered her head, before lifting them up again and pressing her fists against my chest.

Please think of something — somehow, Chiaki conveyed the words that she could not say to me through her arms. She then left the room without even looking back once.

"Naomi, you too....."

Said Mafuyu as she rested her hands on the control board of of the synthesizer.

"Go. I'm okay, I'll—"

"How can you recover in your current state?"

Even I was surprised by how cold my voice sounded. Mafuyu lifted her head in shock, and her eyes were close to tearing.

"What on earth is happening? Why are you insisting on doing this? Are you an idiot? You should know very well the condition of your body!"

But I couldn't help but to think: what the heck is going on with me as well? Why am I so angry? It was because I knew I could do





nothing for her. Mafuyu had stood up by herself due for a reason unknown to me, and now she has collapsed before me in a place where I could not reach. This was just..... pathetic.

But I could not stop myself. I continued,

"It's okay for you not to play the piano now. We'll not disband from a thing like that, and yet you're forcing yourself to play the piano in front of everyone—"

"It's you—"

Mafuyu cut me off as she cried.

"It's you who said this to me — you wanted me to play the piano for you on stage. But, but I could not do it then, so I was disappointed in myself."

I..... said that? I asked her to play the piano for me?

The air in my throat was solidifying into a lump. That's right, I did say that, and it was back when the two of us were alone in the music resource room. The time when we performed <Ave verum corpus>; the miraculous piano accompaniment which blended the singing and the conductor together. Back then, I did say I hope to hear her piano in an actual performance and not just during practice. But I never thought—





"And so I wished to play the piano for you. I had planned to live in a world far away from the piano if you never asked me to play it, but....."

Everything was for..... me.

"But, my fingers..... can gradually move."

Mafuyu continued with her depressed voice.

"And it happened after the chorus contest. It was all because of you."

My throat was trembling slightly. I could not speak. Her fingers were healed not because she met Yuri, but..... because of me? Mafuyu picked up the piano once more because I said to her, 'Please play the piano for me' — how could that be?

"It's okay to force myself because you're here. For now, no matter what, I'll—"

Mafuyu stood up with difficulty, gripping hard the keyboard. Her frail arm, which she will be using to play the piano once more, for my sake, even if it means to do so beneath the cruel lights, were trembling non-stop. It hurt me to see her like this.

Why was it me?

I wished to stay by her side forever. I hoped to give her strength when she was in pain. However, half of the reason Mafuyu was in





pain right now was because of me, and the other half was because of herself. If what she said was really true, then what should I do at a time like this?

"But you have never once responded to me. You had said many times that you wanted to listen to me playing the piano, and I tried to get you to listen as well. I've even recorded everything of Beethoven so that you could listen to my piano. I wanted to tell you that my fingers are all healed, and everything should be fine now. But I never thought..... I am so..... weak. That I'll become like this just because—"

The fingernails of Mafuyu's left hand were digging deep into her right hand when she said that. Her fingertips even turned pale as a result of her tight grip.

"..... Mafuyu," I did my best to squeeze my voice out from my parched throat. "Calm down."

That was the only thing I could say. A line which I find to be totally stupid and corny.

"Why are you doing so much for someone like me?"

No wait, that was not what I wanted to say.

"— Sorry, I never noticed."

That Mafuyu has already picked up everything again.





"I never noticed it myself either."

With her wet eyelashes lowered slightly, Mafuyu continued with the hoarse voice of hers,

"I never thought I'll want to play the piano for someone."

I had already lost everything— Mafuyu murmured, her words falling into the scarred black cover of the synthesizer.

"I don't know anymore. I have no idea what I should do. I do not know where I should return to. I have never played the piano for the sake of someone."

How could that be— was what I wanted to say, but I swallowed my words.

Back when we ran away from home, I heard from Mafuyu that her last memory of her loving the piano was when she was together with her mother. It was an unfillable hole that caused Mafuyu to be immobile from her fears; and it was those damned reporters who reminded her of the times which she will never be able to return to.

Mafuyu reached for the casing of the synthesizer with her fingers. Her face was filled with tears when she turned around to face me.

"..... Go. Kyouko and Chiaki are waiting for you."

Mafuyu's voice sounded like the cracking of ice.





"I..... I'll come up with something..... But if I could not make it in time, then just go without me. The rest of the songs can be performed with just three—"

I raised my fists and slammed them against the synthesizer to interrupt Mafuyu's words; I could not listen to her any longer. Her long maroon hair trembled slightly, her blue eyes were filled with unease as she looked upwards at me in fear.

"I don't want that."

My voice were cold and yet crystal clear.

"I'll definitely not leave you alone in here and walk out of this room."

"Why? B-But I may never be able to play the piano ever again."

"No— it has nothing to do with the piano or the band."

I stared straight into Mafuyu's eyes, which looked like they were about to sink into the bed of the ocean. I said,

"I've already decided that I'll be staying by Mafuyu's side forever."

We used to be connected only by music.

If so, what would happen if someone was unable to sing or to continue playing? The only thing we could do then was to stay rooted on the spot. I don't want to carry on like that.





It was because I loved Mafuyu. I wanted to stay by her side even if we lose our music.

Those feelings of mine turned into bubbles and vanished on the surface of the ocean between us. Mafuyu's pale face was dyed with a faint dash of redness. She then lowered her head in an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

"But, even if you've decided to stay here....."

I can't do anything for you even if I am around? Was that really the case?

"But I have never once played a melody for you successfully. What should I do? I have no idea."

What should I do? What must I do so that Mafuyu can pick up the piano once more?

I won't be able to help her if I was only staying by her side. I was unable to speak; all I could do is to stand there frozen in a daze. My hands would not come into contact with where she needed my help—

Just then, that melody, the darkness, the howling of the wind as well as the smell of the raindrops appeared in my mind once more.

It had.....





It had happened before.

"..... You did."

"..... Eh?"

"Mafuyu did play the piano for me before."

Her blue eyes trembled slightly in confusion as though they were melting. She shut her eyes.

Did Mafuyu really forget about it already?

But I could still remember that miracle very clearly. I shot a glance to my bass which was resting on its stand by the side. That fragment of my body was still around precisely because Mafuyu played the piano for me.

Perhaps it was just my auditory hallucination. Perhaps it was just a magic constructed by the howls of the sea, the echoes as well as the thick mist. But what I heard was certainly the sounds of Mafuyu's piano.

If so, then what should I do? How could I get Mafuyu to remember?

I can do it.

Unknown to me, I had already opened my tightly shut eyes. The world before me was one surrounded by the dirty concrete walls of





the dark storeroom. Me, Mafuyu, my bass and the synthesizer were leaning tightly against each other under the gaze of the junks by the side of the wall.

Can I really do it? Can I summon her memories?

I have no idea. But the only thing I could do is to try.

"— Mafuyu."

Her head was lowered even as I called out to her.

"Mafuyu, step back. I'll make some preparations."

She lifted her head to my sentence. Her eyes were still swollen from crying.

"..... Why?"

I pulled Mafuyu away from the synthesizer silently and knelt down to stuff a stack of scores beneath one of the legs at the side. The angle of tilt should be something close to this.

Next, I scanned the room and pushed the fridge down by its side before shifting it next to the synthesizer. I then placed the upside-down bicycle against the door. After that, I dumped the cupboard and desk clock onto the floor. Finally, I moved the drawers before the keyboard.

"Take a seat."





Mafuyu stared hard at me with her teary eyes.

"What are you doing, Naomi?"

"Don't ask. Just take a seat."

I pushed Mafuyu on her back to get her seated on the drawers. I then stood behind her and flipped the switch of the synthesizer. Could I really do it? For a brief moment, I thought the thing which I'll be attempting to do as something incredibly ridiculous.

But—

If that was really a special place.

If that was really Mafuyu's greatest wish—

"Close your eyes."

I murmured.

I stretched my arms over Mafuyu's shoulders to reach for the keyboard. I then fumbled around with the control board to locate the switch to the sound effects.

It started off with the sound of the raindrops.

The gentle drops of rain that landed on the roofs of the scrapped cars, the buckets full of holes as well as the broken cupboards.





That sound was overlapped with the faint roars from the waves of the sea.

The sounds of the waves that passed by endless trees.

The rustling of the leaves of the forest.

The howls of the winds as it breezed past the mountains.

The sounds of the passing train far away.

The sound effects which were hidden within the machine were appearing before the darkness of my eyelids one after another through my hands and were spreading outwards endlessly. We could not hear the commotion from the audience; what surrounded us was silence formed by the stoppage of time.

<The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

The junkyard where we first met, the same place where we found what we had lost. And at the same time, it was a place located at the ends of the world where the remnants of dreams accumulate.

That was my long-standing wish. I made a wish back then; I wished I could listen to Mafuyu's piano once more. And with that, Mafuyu responded to my wish. I did hear the fugue that night. The miraculous power which allowed me to find my bass was Book 1 of Bach's <The Well-Tempered Clavier>.





As I was praying, I switched on the other synthesizer. The lights on the control board lit up and a series of white noise appeared amid the rustling of the forest.

Unknown to me, Mafuyu was already staring at me with her head lifted. There was still the remnants of her tears on her upside-down face. Both of us had opened our eyes. However, the magic has yet to cease. We were still located at the end of the world where the miraculous department store was.

"Do you remember now?"

Mafuyu nodded her head gently.

"If so....."

I said each and every word slowly after choosing them carefully in my head. I had to say it before the magic disappeared.

"I hope you can continue to play the piano. I wish to listen to Mafuyu play."

"..... But I have no idea what I should play."

Said Mafuyu as she rested the back of her head on my chest. Her eyes were like that of a nestling which has lost its way after it was separated from the flock of birds.

"..... You decide, Naomi."





I had no idea what I should get her to play as well. Bach's fugue had just ended in my mind, and dawn will be approaching soon.

I allowed the LCD screen on the control board to guide my fingers as I sought for the answer on the keyboard

Then came the final sound effect.

A screech was calling out to Mafuyu, followed by the fluttering of a pair of wings from amid the trees as the bird prepared itself for its flight into the dawn. Mafuyu's hand struck the keyboard once, releasing the cold sound of the piano.

Perhaps it was due to the constant striking of the G note, but it felt like our heartbeats were overlapping inseparably. Mafuyu's counted the remaining traces of the tiny ripples on the black and white keys with her fingers - fingers of both of her hands - in her attachment to the gradually weakening rain.

<Blackbird> —

The misty veil was shredded into pieces.

The light of dawn.

The song which was about to break free from my mouth disappeared at the edges of my lips.

Even up till now, this song had always existed among us.







The only thing I want to hear was the sounds of the piano until the magic subsides.

A while later, the final note finally disappeared after dispersing itself on the surface of the water. The blackbird has pushed itself off the branch to soar into the sky. The raining had stopped; the wind has died down. We were getting further and further away from the ocean.

The back of Mafuyu's head was still pressed tightly against my chest.

We've returned — to the middle of the messy storeroom, where the synthesizers were giving off an unstable rumble impatiently. I could faintly hear the chatter and footstep from the audience through the walls.

We've returned.

For a while, I did not know what I should say. Mafuyu was clenching and releasing her hands as she stared at them in silence so as to reaffirm the dampness of the rain that were surrounding her hands.

"..... Mafuyu?"

I called out her name gently.





Mafuyu did not turn around. Instead, she removed her hands from the keyboard, placed them on my arm and gripped my wrist hard with all five fingers from her right hand. I could not believe it. There was a sense of elation within me, but what came before that was a much stronger throb. Still, I could not move my hands away just yet.

She may not be perfectly fine, but Mafuyu has returned back to this place.

Thank goodness. But I could barely make anything out of my hoarse murmurs.

"..... T-Thank... you....."

Mafuyu replied in stutters.

"Mmm."

Feels like I should be saying something, but that was a way too difficult task for me. I could not really come up with something perfunctory to say.

"..... Or perhaps..... I should get you to play something?"

Since it was really rare for Mafuyu to ask me what song I would like her to play. Darn, I should have requested her to play the <Diabelli Variations> which was not included in any of her CDs.....

"Idiot!"





My wrist were scratched by her fingernails..... it hurt quite a bit.

She stood up and turned around while staying between my arms. Our face were almost in contact with each other when she raised her head to look at me.

"If it's Naomi..... you can ask me..... anytime."

Mafuyu's face went beet red halfway into her sentence. She even pushed me against my chest with both of her hands, and that almost caused me to fall backwards.

"A-Anytime..... so that means—" Why did she phrase it that way? Because it was me? It was only now that I realized I had said something really incredible to her. I said I'll be by her side forever..... and she did hear what I said. So that means..... Mafuyu, she..... no, but, it can't be, right?

"I-I've already said I will play!"

Mafuyu pushed me on my chest with her two hands yet again.

"You are the one who brought me back here! Didn't you say you want to listen to my piano? Why are you acting as if you know nothing?"

"S-Sorry....."

"Idiot! Dummy!"





Mafuyu pushed me aside and turned towards the synthesizer. She switched it off in preparation for moving it away.

"A person like you should just stay dense forever! All you need to do is to flip the scores and play the bass! Now help me with the other side, I'll be carrying it away!"

"Ah, m-mmm."

After I was done slinging the straps of the bass on my shoulder, I quickly walked to the other side of the synthesizer. Mafuyu turned her burning face away unhappily.

"..... Can I?"

I tried asking.

"Can you what?"

Asked Mafuyu softly as she lifted the synthesizer.

"Can I play the bass for you and help you with the flipping of your scores forever?"

That was the only thing I could think of after I wrecked my brains out. It was because I loved Mafuyu — I wanted to tell her that several times, but I could not bring myself to say it.

"You're my bassist, are you not?"





That was Mafuyu's reply.

I see. I heaved a sigh of relief in my heart.

For now, the only thing that was connecting us together was music. The tears on Mafuyu's face had disappeared completely. She had returned back to the usual Mafuyu with her stinging words.

That made me feel at lot more at ease — I'm really useless.

When Mafuyu pushed the door open, what greeted us was a thunderous mix of cheers and footsteps.

Leaning against the walls of the corridor was a girl in a frilly black goth lolita dress..... Chiaki. She tightened her grip on the two drum sticks and lifted her head slowly.

She flashed an icy stare at me before directing her attention towards Mafuyu.

The three of us did not speak for a while. The noise from the audience that was coming through the walls sounded nothing more than just the breeze of an incoming wind. Chiaki stepped away from the wall. As for me, I took the synthesizer away from Mafuyu's hands and carried it by myself.

Chiaki moved towards us one step at a time and clamped her hands onto Mafuyu's right arm. Confused by her actions, Mafuyu took a look at her arm and then at Chiaki.





"..... It's because Mafuyu will always disappear all of the sudden."

Mumbled Chiaki as she slumped her shoulders. It looks like she was close to tears.

"And Nao's the only one who knows where you are. Always."

"..... S-Sorry."

"I do hope you'll realize how frustrated I am."

Mafuyu nodded. Chiaki pressed her forehead onto Mafuyu's.

"Nao, you can't spoil Mafuyu like that. She can move her hands already, right? Let her carry her own instrument by herself."

"Eh..... Oh, m-mmm."

I gently passed the heavy synthesizer to Mafuyu. Could she carry it? I couldn't help but to worry when I saw those delicate arms of hers.

"And also, come here."

"Eh? W-What?"

Chiaki pulled me by my ear and dragged me in the direction opposite to that of the stage. My mind blanked out for a brief





moment when I saw the person who was squatting against the wall next to the door.

"..... T-Tetsurou?"

Grey jersey, messy hair with a bruise somewhere around his eye — that guy was none other than Tetsurou! But I tried to convince myself that he was nothing more than just an illusion. No wait..... why was Tetsurou here at the backstage?

"Oh? Ohhhh!? You're finally out? Hey brat, you can't have your customers waiting, yeah? Look, everyone's getting impatient already, so get going!"

"W-Wh....." My voice was stuck. "Why are you here?"

"I said I'll pay a visit, didn't I? Can't a father attend the school festival that his son is participating in?"

Tetsurou gave a nonchalant shrug.

"T-Tetsurou, could it be that you....."

Is he here to write articles about Mafuyu—

I then noticed a few straps hanging from the hands of Tetsurou, and connected to them were cameras. Four of them, all expensive looking and equipped with giant lens."

"..... W-What are those for?"





"Hmm? Ah— well....." Tetsurou scratched his head. "You see, I saw four familiar faces at the entrance. They're the parasites of the industry and they pissed me off, so I gave them a good beating and confiscated their cameras."

So that was the cause of the bruise near his eyes? Don't fight in the your son's school, will you.....

"S-So what happened to them?"

"Nothing much. Probably cried their way home?"

I was at a loss of what to say. So what was his reason for loitering around our class and asking stuff about Mafuyu?

"Don't you underestimate the industry's ruffian! I'll be heading off then~"

And with that, Tetsurou waved his hand and opened the back door. He was planning to leave just like that? Didn't he say he was here to watch?

"I'm here to see the goth lolita! Who gives a shit about that horrible bass of yours? Now now, get going, everyone's waiting for you!"

He shut the door heartlessly just like that.

I couldn't help but to wonder—





Did he know that Mafuyu was targeted by those reporters? So he actually came down specially to prevent them from doing so — all so that he could protect Mafuyu.

Tetsuro actually took the initiative to protect Mafuyu? That totally useless guy actually did something like that? This is quite a silly deduction of mine..... But.....

"Nao, hurry up!"

I was pulled back to reality when Chiaki gave me a tug at my sleeves. I saw Mafuyu walking slowly along the corridor with unsteady steps as she hugged the synthesizer that was about as tall as her. With the strap of the bass on my back, I was pulled by Chiaki by my arm and we caught up to Mafuyu.

And before us—

In the midst of the light coming from all four angles, there was the silhouette of a person standing amidst the cheers, teasing the audience with her long hair and the hem of her skirt. I could not quite make out the expression on her face as we were staring into the lights, but I was absolutely certain what smile Kagurazaka-senpai would be wearing on her face at a time like this.

Everyone..... was waiting for us.

I caught up to Mafuyu and briefly exchanged gazes with her. We nodded in unison. It was alright, everyone's here.





Then— let's go!

Chiaki released my arm to walk ahead of me by a step or two.

As for me, I chased her and made my way along the promenade stretching towards the light.

-END-





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