Kazuki Amamiya

ill. Gin

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Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue: The Dream I Once Had

Chapter 1: Calmly, Gently

First Interlude

Chapter 2: The Girl Called a Child Prodigy

Second Interlude

Chapter 3: Because I Want to Be Relied On

Third Interlude

Chapter 4: Courage Grasped Tightly in the Palm of Your Hand

Final Chapter: Valentine's Day

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Bonus Short Story

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue: The Dream I Once Had

I've loved music since I was young. I thought it was only natural, given my parents' influence. After all, my mother was a pianist and my father was a music producer. I was never forced into it. My attraction to classical music, my desire to to play the piano—both stemmed from me. However, considering the environment I was raised in, this was the obvious result.

It all started when my father brought me to a piano recital that my mother would be appearing in. I had been waiting for her turn while rubbing my droopy eyes. The quiet atmosphere lulled me to sleep before I knew it. When I woke up, my father was shaking my shoulder.

"Wake up, Yuino. It's mom's turn," he said excitedly.

"Hm? Mama's playing?"

"That's right. Isn't she stunning?"

My mother, clad in a gorgeous red dress, seemed like a different person up on the stage.

"Yeah, pretty..."

When mother's performance finally began, her fingers looked like they were dancing on top of the keys. It made such a beautiful sound. Part of why I listened so diligently was because it was my mother playing. However, even now, I could still recall the timbre of her song like I'd heard it yesterday.

I began learning the piano the following day.

"I want to be like mom too!"

"Really? Then why don't you try playing a little bit?" I had assumed my mother would surely want to teach me too, but she restrained herself because she didn't want to pressure me. "You can learn at your own pace. Play whenever you feel like it."

My mother had always been far too kind.

"Amazing! You can already play this well? You've practiced hard,

Yuino.”

She always seemed to enjoy teaching me. Fortunately, I also had a talent for music. I grew up showered with praise.

“Say, Yuino. Why don’t you participate in a piano recital?”

“A recital?”

“Yes. You would play in front of lots of people, just like mama does.”

“In front of...lots of people?”

“Do you dislike the idea?”

“Sounds...nerve-racking. I’m a little scared.”

“All right. Then you can just keep up what you’ve been doing.”

“B-But, I want to try! I’ll do it!”

And so I was slated to appear in a recital.

“That Nanase girl is really something.”

“Apparently she’s Nanase Miwako-san’s daughter. It makes sense.”

I realized that I was leagues better than the other children around my age. But because my mother was a professional pianist, people deemed my talent a given. Before long, I was joining piano competitions and winning prize after prize. Performing in front of an audience was more enjoyable than expected, and receiving compliments a delight.

“Is Nanase-san competing?”

“Guess we know who’s winning first.”

The next thing I knew, people were calling me a child prodigy. My name was fairly well-known by the time I entered middle school. Those around me regarded me as the girl who would become a pro, and I was also aiming to be one.

However, my mother told me I should learn a variety of things rather than only focusing on the piano. In elementary school, I trained in tea ceremony and calligraphy, and in middle school, I joined the Japanese archery club. Ultimately, although my world revolved around the piano, those experiences enriched my life.

My mother knew how harsh it was to be a pianist who didn’t sell, so she wanted to give me many possible futures to choose from. She was always wishing for my happiness.

I was blessed, and I knew that. Despite all those options, I elected to pursue the piano. I didn't care, even if there were to be only hardships in store for me.

"Amazing! Yuino-chan, you're sooo good at playing the piano!"

I also had a precious friend who supported my efforts. Her overblown reactions always gave me strength.

"I want to enter higher-level competitions," I told my mom in my second year of middle school, and entered a large national competition.

I passed the preliminary selections and played during the finals. The competition took place at a venue in Tokyo, the biggest location I had ever performed in. There were so many people in the audience, and of course my parents sat among the crowd.

Everyone considered me the special feature of the competition. The finest stage had been set for me. Considering my future goal, there was no better place to make my debut.

In other words, I could not fail.

The moment I realized that, my fingers began to tremble and my mind went blank. My turn to perform was coming up, and I was afraid—even though playing the piano should've been something I enjoyed.

I wouldn't understand that I was nervous until much later. Cold sweat ran down my body like a waterfall. I usually had a concrete image of my music in the back of my mind, but it had turned hazy and disappeared.

I practiced appropriately, so why?

That question kept floating in and out of my head. The sound of the piano keys that I adored, Chopin's étude that I had fervently practiced, became mere discordant noise, and when I realized that it was my fingers creating such noise, I fell into despair.

My crummy performance finally came to an end.

When I stood up, every single stare pierced right through me. There was no applause. I did not have a single ally in this world. I was so, so scared of those stares—my vision went completely dark.

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“It was just a dream.”

When I came to, I was looking at a familiar ceiling. My senses slowly came around, and I returned to reality. I was in my bed. My heart was pounding in my chest. I was covered in an uncomfortable layer of sweat, the area around my neck having become completely drenched. I glanced to the side. The clock next to my bed pointed to seven.

“I’ve got to go to school...”

I threw off my blanket, sat up, and dropped my feet to the floor. The first thing that entered my vision when I exited my room was the music room where I’d grown up. I walked into it on unsteady feet, like I was being drawn in. My eyes jumped to the grand piano enshrined in the center of the room. I reached out, about to touch the keys.

“No... I don’t have time right now.”

I tore my eyes away and left the music room.

Who was I making that excuse for?

Chapter 1: Calmly, Gently

January thirteenth.

Winter break had ended, and the classroom was gradually returning to a state of normalcy. The heater was running, and the sound of the world history teacher writing on the board echoed throughout the room.

I lacked motivation, but I knew I'd be in trouble if I didn't pay attention to the lesson. If it were a science subject, I could've somehow figured it out utilizing knowledge from my first round of life. However, I didn't have much confidence in humanities subjects that were mostly rote memorization.

White chalk clacked against the blackboard, drawing a line. I took notes as I tried to drill the teacher's prosaic explanation into my head. When I had a moment to spare, I glanced at the seat next to mine. A girl with beige hair that hung over her ears diligently stared at the board.

Her name was Hoshimiya Hikari. She was a cute first-year and the (self-proclaimed) school idol. She had large, round eyes and long lashes, as well as clear, pale skin and pretty facial features. Her side profile was so beautiful that I could've stared at her this way forever without getting bored. It was hard to believe that I was dating a girl like her. Sometimes, I even wondered if this was all just a long dream.

Sensing my gaze, she shot me a perplexed look, and our eyes met. She tilted her head and smiled, silently asking, "What's up?"

She was so darn cute that I reflexively averted my eyes. I tried to play it cool by poking her cheek with the mechanical pencil in my right hand. *What am I, five?!* I mentally quipped before returning my gaze to her.

Her eyes narrowed into a scowl. "What're you doing?!" she wordlessly asked. However, although her cheeks were puffed up, she

didn’t actually seem upset.



Cute.

Hikari leaned her face towards my ear and whispered, "Stuuupid."

Not gonna lie, that gave me the tingles. Was that ASMR? Well now I'm awake. While such silly thoughts were going through my mind, Hikari snatched the pencil out of my hand and began using it to copy the writing on the board. *Hey... I only have one pencil in my case. Is this my punishment for messing around during class?*

Since I couldn't take notes, I stared at Hikari until the bell rang. Our taciturn world history teacher said goodbye and briskly left the room. Something prodded my cheek. Hikari was poking me with my own pencil.

"Please pay attention to class," she said.

"Uh-huh... I can't believe you're the one telling me that," I replied. *And to think she was in tears because of her abysmal grades just a short while ago...*

"Natsuki-kun, what kind of person do you think I am?" Displeased, she pressed the pencil into me harder.

That hurts! "Oh, you know... Ha ha ha..." *You're kind of a ditz...but I can't say what I'm thinking.* I looked away.

"I did well on the last exams, but it doesn't matter if I only do well once. I need to pay attention in class so I can keep my grades up. Understand?"

Hikari had promised her father, Sei-san, that in return for his recognition of her dream of becoming an author, she would obtain good grades. However, Hikari's grades had fallen due to lovesickness (I guess?) a short while ago. She had put in a lot of work for our finals and climbed up the rankings by an impressive amount. Nevertheless, she was right—simply performing well once would not be enough to keep her end of the bargain. That was why she had been diligently paying attention to her lessons more than before.

"Sorry for distracting you," I said.

"It's okay, no harm done. I've always liked world history, and my scores have been good."

Hikari's fatal weakness was the sciences. She would have no issues if humanities were the only subjects she needed to deal with.

"World history is useful for my writing too. I can draw inspiration

from it when I write fantasy in the future, which motivates me. And I genuinely find history interesting. Oh, but...don't get the wrong idea, okay?"

Wrong idea? I cocked my head to the side questioningly.

With her eyes still fixed on me and her cheeks slightly pink, she said, "It doesn't...not make me happy...when you pay attention to me." The words came out in a hushed whisper, but I heard her clearly.

"I... I see..." Her destructive force was too immense, and I was precariously close to being knocked out. *She's too cunningly cute! When it comes to Hikari, it's hard to tell when she's doing it unintentionally or on purpose. Both are possible, but my hunch tells me she calculated this one!*

"So, um, I don't mind if you do that sometimes." She glanced at me intermittently, examining my reaction.

This girl is using her cuteness against me! "O-Okay." *But I can't retaliate, because she's so cute! How frustrating!*

Hino, who sat behind us, piped up then. "Uh, hello, can you guys give me a break sometimes?" He wasn't using his typical flippant tone, and he actually sounded pretty done with us. "It gets real muggy in here whenever you two flirt. Do that in the privacy of your own home!"

Nishimura-san, a cool-looking girl with glasses who sat next to Hino, nodded in agreement.

"We don't care that you guys are *the* school couple—this has gotta stop, right?" Hino said.

"Honestly, you're practically having sex."

Uh, Nishimura-san, what the heck did you just say with a straight face?!

Hino cracked up at that and began smacking his desk while cradling his stomach.

"Wh-What?!" Hikari exclaimed.

Look! Hikari looks mortified! And I am too!

"S-Sorry," we apologized, our faces bright red.

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The students trickled out of the classroom one by one after school.

"All righty..." I could take it easy today since I didn't have band practice or work.

Hikari called out to me when she'd finished packing up. "Natsuki-kun, let's go home together!"

"No club meeting today?"

"Nope! I'm going to go home to continue writing my new novel!"

"What's it about?"

"Romance! Youth! A murder case!"

"That last thing is very disturbing." Seeing how elated she was warmed my heart. "Do your best."

"Yep!"

"Oh, Nanase, what about you?" I asked our friend, who was still in the middle of getting ready to leave.

A troubled look spread across her face. "I plan to return home for my piano lesson, so..."

Which means she could go home with us, but given her iffy reaction... Well, I get why Nanase is trying to be considerate. And honestly, I wouldn't want to third wheel a couple either. I would feel like the odd man out. I asked her with my usual amount of pep, but maybe I should've held back.

Without a clue about what was going through my mind, Hikari approached Nanase. "Then you can go home with us too, right?"

"Eh..." Nanase replied.

Huh? Is she not trying to be considerate? Does she actually dislike the idea?

"Wouldn't I be intruding upon you two?" she said.

"Of course not! Yuino-chan, I want to go home with you!" Hikari wrapped her arms around Nanase's—she likely knew her friend was attempting to obliquely decline our invitation, but chose to ignore it.

"Excuse me, could you pick up what I'm putting down? I'm saying that I don't want to."

Nanase's blunt rejection put tears in Hikari's eyes. "Wh-Why?! Yuino-chan, do you hate me now?!"

"That is not it, but... I just find being around you two

embarrassing as of late.”

“Don’t you think you’re being too harsh? Look at Hikari! She’s in shock!”

Nanase’s statement was so brutal that Hikari had turned to stone. She didn’t move a muscle even when I shook her. *The two of us are living earnestly! Stop telling us that we’re embarrassing!*

“S-Still... I’m going home with you, Yuino-chan!”

Oh, Hikari rebooted. She tightened her hold on Nanase’s arm. Hikari’s ample breasts squished against her friend’s arm, enveloping it. *I’m super jealous.*

“Goodness. I can’t win against you, Hikari.”

My secret yearnings aside, Nanase smiled gently at her friend’s clingy attitude. *Yep, she’s Hikari’s mama at heart. It’s hard to believe they’re the same age. What’d you say? I’m on my second round of life?*

“Yaaay! Heh heh heh! Yuino-chaaan!”

“Hey now, Hikari, give me a little space. It’s hard to walk like this.”

We exited the room while chatting. It was then that I realized something. *Huh? Now that it’s this group of three, doesn’t that make me the intruder? The two of them are completely off in their own world. The atmosphere even feels like “Why the heck is this guy here?”*

Suddenly, trauma from my first life came rushing back. However, there were so many similarities that the resistances I had built up protected me, so I was mentally okay. Maybe? Going through that painful existence was what had led me to learn how to make my presence as faint as possible.

I’m not at Mei’s level, though. That guy’s got a natural talent for it.

“Natsuki-kun, why are you so quiet?”

I had been trying to reduce my presence, but Hikari noticed me anyway.

“Thanks, Hikari. That’s my girlfriend for ya.”

“Huh? What? You’re scaring me.”

And there I go, scaring my girl.

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We changed into our outdoor shoes at our cubbies and stepped outside. The stinging, chilly air made my shoulders tremble. Hikari and Nanase commented, "It's cold," and "It's frigid out," as they shared Hikari's scarf.

Aren't they a little too comfortable getting touchy-feely? Who's the girl who said, "I just find being around you two embarrassing as of late"? Huh, what about me? I'm riding solo!

But enough about my envy. Hikari continued chatting with Nanase, bringing up a certain topic. "Hey, hey! Yuino-chan, it's happening this Saturday, right? The piano competition you're performing in?"

"Yes, but I won't force you to come cheer for me."

"I'm definitely going! I love listening to you play piano!"

"I see. If you feel that way, I'd play for you as much as you want at home, then."

"Wow! Talk about friend privilege! But I'm still going to your competition too!"

Nanase smiled wryly when she saw how elated and excited her friend was.

"Plus, Natsuki-kun said he'd come too!" Hikari continued.

"Really now? He doesn't seem interested in classical music."

"I don't know much about it, but I'd like to hear you play," I said.

"It won't be anything impressive. I haven't competed in quite some time, so don't expect too much," she said apprehensively, her eyes averted.

That's unexpected. It's not like Nanase to purposefully set the bar low like this. She always comes off calm and composed.

"Don't say that, Yuino-chan. You're an incredible pianist!" Hikari declared loudly.

"You've said that before," Nanase replied with a strained smile.

I heard that when she was young, people called her a prodigy and she won a lot of competitions. "I knew you played piano as a hobby, but I didn't know you were *that* good."

"There's no point in boasting about something I quit once. Simple

as that."

It is very Nanase to not flaunt any glorious past achievements. If I were her, I'd definitely bring it up all the time while looking smug. "Nanase, how long have you been playing the piano?"

"Since I was around three, I believe. My mother was a pianist so we kept a piano at home."

"Huh? Wait... Your mom is a professional pianist?"

"Former pro. She retired a long time ago, and now she's just a housewife." Nanase's eyes gazed far into the distance, as if she was yearning for the past.

"She was extremely talented; she's Yuino-chan's mom, after all!"

"Hikari observed my piano lessons with my mom on occasion," Nanase explained.

"I enjoyed watching you work hard!"

The three of us passed through the Maebashi Station turnstiles while chatting about Nanase's piano experiences, and boarded the Ryomo Line. The train was a little crowded in the evenings, so there weren't any seats available. I grabbed a hand strap.

"So you learned the piano from your mom?" I asked.

"Essentially, yes. There was also a period of time when I went to piano school, though."

"Wow, you had one unique education." *It's like she lives in a different world. I was born to a super ordinary household, so I can't even imagine what it's like.*

"Back then, I wanted to become a pianist like my mom."

Her usage of past tense there bothered me. "Do you not feel the same anymore?"

"I haven't been practicing lately, so I've gotten worse."

Good point, she's been working part-time, and it didn't feel like she was pouring her all into the piano. I also heard that it's been a long time since she entered a competition. Is there a reason for that? Why wouldn't she, when she has so much talent?

"I reduced my number of shifts to prepare for the competition. Haibara-kun, you might have to take on more shifts because of that."

"Sure, leave it to me. I want more work anyway."

"Really?" Hikari asked with a puzzled look on her face.

"Being in a band means that no amount of money is ever enough," I said. *I want to buy an effector, but it's hard as a high schooler. I want to work as much as possible. The people at Café Mares are nice, so I can be at ease on the job.*

"Thank you, it's a huge help." Nanase looked a little relieved.

"So, Nanase," I began, but she interjected before I could finish.

"You want to ask why I regained the motivation to play piano again?" she asked. "Am I correct?"

"Yeah, basically." What I actually wanted to ask was why she had lost her drive in the first place. She'd gotten the drop on me, though, so I felt like I had to agree.

"It's your fault," she said with a smile.

"What?" My eyes went wide. I needed more time to fully understand what she meant. "Did I do something?" *Absolutely nothing comes to mind. I didn't even know about Nanase's track record to begin with.*

"Remember when you performed at the school festival concert?"

When I heard what came next, surprise and delight simultaneously welled up inside of me.

"I was...moved."

At the time, Nanase had watched my performance along with Hikari. I had spotted both of them from the stage.

"I didn't tell you, because telling you that up front is embarrassing." Nanase's cheeks flushed a bashful red. "After watching you perform, I felt like I wanted to apply myself to the piano again."

"Thank you." Words of gratitude spontaneously flew out of my mouth.

"That would be my line," Nanase pointed out.

"Yeah, but still." *The band performed on that stage in order to change the world. There's nothing better than knowing that our music really did change someone's world.*

"I restarted my piano lessons a few days after the school festival, and it's been around two months since. I'm finally back at a level where I can enter competitions."

"Does taking a break cause your skills to decline that much?"

"It felt hopeless at first. My fingers couldn't move whatsoever. Of course, it wasn't as if I had stopped playing the piano completely, but I hadn't attempted to learn any difficult songs."

Nanase grumbling like this was a new sight. It showed just how harsh the piano world was.

"It had been a while since I had even touched a guitar when I first joined Serika's band... I'd say things like 'I could play a little better in the past,' so I sorta get how you feel."

To which Serika ruthlessly replied, "You probably weren't ever that good to begin with." Yeah, she's right! But I could still play a little more decently in the past!

"Well, isn't it nice that you two are on the same wavelength," Hikari said. She stuck her lips out in a pout from one step behind us.

She's sulking because she doesn't have much to say about music. My girlfriend is cute, as per usual. "Come to think of it, Hikari, have you played an instrument before?"

"She attended the same piano school as me, but quit after three days."

"B-Because... It was too hard! My fingers can't move that fast!"

An amused smile spread across my face as I watched Hikari get flustered, and before long, we arrived at Takasaki Station. I parted ways with them in front of the JR ticket gates. I transferred to a private railway and headed home.

***

After I got home, I went for a run, worked out, and then showered. I had nothing else to do, so I practiced the guitar. *I'm a pretty simple guy, if I do say so myself, but I feel even more motivated after what Nanase told me. Hell yeah! Let's do this! I'm the man who will become Jimi Hendrix!*

"Wait a sec..."

A thought suddenly struck me, and my hands stopped moving. *Nanase was so famous that people used to call her a child prodigy. Maybe there'll be info on her if I look her up on the internet.*

I typed “Nanase Yuino” on my phone. As I had expected, there were multiple videos of young Nanase performing at piano competitions. They all had an impressive view count too. I tapped on the first video.

Nanase was shorter as a child, and also adorable. *Was she in her sixth year of elementary school here?* She bowed gracefully in the video and sat down before the piano. After she adjusted the height of the seat, she stared at the piano keys. The way she lifted her fingers gave off an aura of intense pressure.

Her small, slender fingers pressed the keys and effortlessly moved across them, chaining together note after note to form a song. She played Chopin’s *Fantaisie-Impromptu*. Even as a layman, I could tell it was a remarkable performance. Before I knew it, I had been engulfed by the music and ended up giving her my undivided attention until the very end. The video was longer than five minutes, and yet it felt like a brief moment. I gave myself a while to soak in what I’d just seen.

“Wow... Nanase’s awesome.”

In all honesty, I hadn’t thought she would be this good. It wasn’t that I had doubted Hikari’s words. I had simply been under the subconscious assumption that she was slightly overrating Nanase because they were friends. However, I was wrong. I was about to replay it, when the comments caught my eye.

“She’s a genius.”

“She’s so young and she can play like that? Seriously?”

“Apparently her mom is a pianist.”

“Overwhelming talent right there. It should be nurtured with care.”

“That was a high-level performance. She barely made any mistakes too.”

On a quick skim, there was line after line of high praise in the comments section.

“You know, I haven’t seen her around these days. I wonder if she quit.”

My eyes stopped at the most recent comment. It had been posted two years ago. There were many other videos uploaded onto

MeTube. Though all of them were sensational performances, the newest one was three years old.

Three years ago? That was our second year of middle school. So she hasn't played on the big stage since then... Honestly, I'm curious why that is, but I doubt it's something I can just casually ask.

"Maybe Hikari would know."

Just as I said that, my phone rang. *Like they say, speak of the devil and all that.*

"Naaatsuuukiiii-kun."

It was Hikari. She had probably called me because she knew we were both free today.

"Yessiree?" I replied as I flopped on top of my bed.

"Natsuki-kun, is it just me, or have you been a little sloppy lately?" she complained, displeased by my offhand response.

"That's not true."

"I'm always the one calling you too."

"You sure about that? I was just thinking about calling you, though."

"Really? I'll forgive you, then."

I'm not lying. I was thinking about her when she called me. Hikari has been open about stating her discontent lately, but she's also easy to please, which is a lifesaver.

"Righty then, it's work call time!" I could hear the faint clacking of her keyboard in the background. "So this part, um... It goes..."

Evidently, she was working on her novel. Lately, Hikari often wrote while on calls with me like this. *I'm impressed that she can chat while crafting sentences... I suck at multitasking, so work calls aren't really my cup of tea. I usually concentrate so hard on either conversing or working that I neglect the other. But if I told her that, she'd probably stop having work calls with me out of consideration, so I haven't mentioned it. I want to spend as much time with Hikari as possible, the longer the better.*

"By the way, Hikari."

"Yeees?"

Might as well ask what's been on my mind. "It's about Nanase."

"How dare you mention another girl's name!"

"Uh, scary much?"

"I'm joking... What is it?"

"Do you know why Nanase quit piano?" *Obviously she kept playing as a hobby, but I think I made it clear that's not what I meant.*

Hikari fell silent for a short while. "I don't know," she eventually muttered. "I know *when* she quit. It happened during the spring in our second year of middle school. That's when she started spending more time with me, even during the times she used to have piano lessons."

"Did you ask why?"

"Of course I did. But Yuino-chan didn't answer. I didn't know how hard I should push the subject either... In the end, I still don't know why she quit."

So not even her childhood friend knows why?

Though Hikari's tone sounded a bit sad, she continued on. "But thanks to you, Natsuki-kun, she found the motivation to start again. That's enough for me. If she doesn't want to talk about the past, then she doesn't have to. That's for her to decide."

Hikari's right, but I'm not sure if she truly means that from the bottom of her heart. "I watched a video of one of Nanase's old performances. She was so good."

"I know, right! Isn't my best friend amazing?" Hikari huffed proudly. I could tell she was wearing a smug expression. "And...my boyfriend is amazing too."

"Aw, I'm flattered."

"I wanted to move Yuino-chan's heart with my novels." She said it with such a serious and wholehearted tone that I couldn't say anything in return. "I secretly hoped that after she watched me work hard to achieve my dreams and read my riveting books, she would regain the wind in her sails."

She wanted to help her best friend. She wanted to create stories that had the power to do that. Hikari's statement revealed that those feelings had been a part of her reasons for chasing after her dream.

"But in reality, you and your band's music are what changed her."

"The festival concert was a miracle that resulted from all of our

feelings coming together. It's not something we can just repeat, and I don't think we'd be able to recreate that now." *It wasn't by virtue of my own strength, and I didn't achieve it by myself. I'm not being modest; it's a plain fact. Being complimented makes me happy, but I don't want people to overestimate me.*

And yet...

"He is! My boyfriend is amazing. He's many times more amazing than someone like me." Hikari remained steadfast even after hearing my explanation.

"Thanks, Hikari." *If my girlfriend believes I'm such an amazing person, then I shouldn't try to tell her what the hard facts are. I should strive to become that amazing person she believes me to be.*

"I'm going to become an amazing person just like you!" I heard her loudly and enthusiastically hit a key on her computer. It was probably the enter key. "I'm going to make my debut first! The novel I submitted to an amateur writing contest made it past the second round!"

"What? Really?"

"Yep! The results came out last night!"

Hikari sent me a link in our RINE chat. When I clicked on it, it redirected me to a publisher's page about a writing contest for rookies. The page was titled "Selection Round Results," and underneath the column for works that had passed the second round were lines of titles. Among them was *The Detective Girl Does Not Know Love*.

Wait... The pen name next to it is Natsumiya Hikari.

"Awesome, right?" Her tone practically screamed, "Praise me! Praise me!" However, something else needed to be addressed first.

"Ummm, Hoshimiya-san... What's with your pen name?" I unintentionally addressed her by her surname.

She joyfully replied, "Oh, well, you see. I thought submitting it under my real name would be a bad idea. I figured I should tweak it a little bit, and when I was deliberating about what to do, I just knew I had to use part of your name!"

"I... I see... Wow, I'd expect nothing less of you, Hoshimiya-san." I laughed a few times. *Right, for now I better laugh.*

"Wh-Why does it sound like you're pulling away?! I thought you'd be happy too..."

Whoops, that was rude of me. It was so surprising that even I couldn't help but back away. "I... I am..."

Actually, not gonna lie: I had a vague idea that she was like this when she gave me that short story for my birthday, back before we were dating. I pretended not to notice. It's scary to think about.

"Wouldn't it be bad to debut under this pen name?" I was hesitant as to whether I should speak up about it, but for Hikari's sake, I did it with great sorrow.

I feel like she's been mass-producing embarrassing events for her dark history book lately. As a pioneer in the genre of dark histories, I should firmly put my foot down. If I let her keep adding pages to her book, she'll end up rolling around in bed under her blankets while she has flashbacks of these moments in the future. I don't want Hikari to end up like me! It might already be too late for her, though.

"Why?" she asked, genuinely clueless.

"Um, because, what if...we break up." I didn't want to say it out loud, but it had to be done. *Besides, even if our relationship remains strong, wouldn't it be kinda unhinged for a girl to insert part of her boyfriend's name into her pen name? It could be like a digital tattoo she can never erase.*

"We're not going to break up," Hikari said grumpily after a pause.

Her mood had dipped ominously, so I hastily clarified. "Yeah, I don't have any intention of breaking up with you either. But listen—"

"Natsuki-kun, we're going to be together forever until we die! Why would you even suggest that?!"

After that, Hikari flew into a rage, and it took me nearly an hour to pacify her. It was no longer possible for me to stop the runaway love train that was Hoshimiya Hikari. *I'm sorry, future Hikari... I'm sure you'll suffer because of this.*

***

Lunch break the next day.

I went to the cafeteria with Tatsuya and Reita. The girls were

eating their bento in our classroom.

"Fwaaah..." I had stayed up late last night chatting with Hikari, so I was a little sleep-deprived. *I'm sleepy.*

"Something happen?" Tatsuya asked when he saw my yawn.

Did something happen? Yeah. It's not something I can talk to other people about, though. "Will you keep it a secret?" I was a bit hesitant, but I figured it'd be okay to tell these two. I detailed my squabble with Hikari.

"Ah, I see..." Reita nodded in understanding.

"Yeesh, you've got it rough too." Tatsuya looked at me sympathetically.

Exactly. I've actually got my fair share of troubles! "Well, that part of her is cute too."

"What the hell? Are you bragging now? You two are perfect for each other after all. I shouldn't have asked." Tatsuya gagged and went back to wolfing down his katsu curry.

"Then again, you can tell at a glance that Hoshimiya-san is the clingy, needy type." Reita dropped a brutal observation while shoveling a spoonful of oyakodon into his mouth.

"R-Really?" I asked.

"You also exacerbated it, though," he said.

I couldn't refute that. I knew exactly what he was referring to.

"Y'know, you're the guy who confessed to her during the school festival concert, so you're peas in a pod," Tatsuya pointed out.

"Urgh..." I groaned. He'd hit me right where it hurts.

"There's no doubt about that. They're a match made in heaven like no other." Reita shrugged.

They shared a smirk.

"Still, Natsumiya Hikari? Normally you wouldn't, right?" I asked.

"Yeah...you wouldn't. Just hearing it put me in serious mode," Tatsuya agreed.

"Hey, just to remind you guys, not a word of this to Hikari. Got it?"

"For sure. This isn't something I'd casually bring up. It'd be scary to deal with the aftermath," Tatsuya said.

"This *is* probably better than if she'd registered herself as Haibara

Hikari," Reita said.

"She told me she can't use that because it'll be her name in the future."

"Dude," Tatsuya said, "your girlfriend's kinda unhinged."

"They say love can be heavy, but this is a level past that," Reita remarked.

"What're you guys talking about?"

There was a loud clatter of utensils and chairs. Without us noticing, Hikari, Uta, and Nanase had entered the cafeteria.

"Hm? Oh, uh, just...discussing what's good in the cafeteria. Right, guys?" I said, quickly changing the subject.

Reita and Tatsuya nodded their heads furiously.

"Y-Y-Yes, that's right... I think what I'm eating now, the katsu curry, is the best thing on the menu."

I had never seen Reita so shaken up before. *You're eating oyakodon right now!*

"Oh boy, *Natsu*, it's hot in here, huh?"

Tatsuya, calm down! It's still the middle of winter! You're dangerously close to revealing what we were actually talking about. All because you need to make some cheesy pun about how Natsu means summer?!

Hikari giggled. "What are you talking about? Tatsuya-kun, you're as funny as always."

An uncomfortable sweat was cascading down my back, but luckily they hadn't overheard us. I made eye contact with the other two and let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"A-Anyway, why are you guys here?" I asked.

"We're taking a postmeal stroll. Unlike Uta, Hikari and I don't normally exercise much," Nanase explained. Apparently, they had been roaming the school and only happened to drop by the cafeteria. Then, she added in a teasing voice, "Also, Hikari said she wanted to see you, Haibara-kun, so we had no other choice but to come."

"W-We sit next to each other! I wouldn't say that!" Hikari rebutted with a frown, waving her hands around wildly.

Nanase laughed and patted Hikari on the head. "I'm joking."

"But during lunch you *did* say you felt lonely because the boys were in the cafeteria!" Uta chimed in.

"Hey! Uta-chan!"

What a heartwarming sight. At least, it would be if I weren't being targeted too. As a related party, I feel embarrassed.

"By the way, have you guys decided what track you're going on? Humanities or STEM?" Uta asked as she sat down next to Reita.

We were already a month into the new year and were on our third semester. It was time for us to choose what track to take for our future.

"Oh yeah, they handed out the survey, huh." *It's not due for a while, but I should decide soon.*

"I've already chosen STEM," Reita said.

"STEM for Rei, huh? I'm going to go down the humanities track!" Uta said.

They had chosen the same in my first round of life.

"I'm not sure yet," Tatsuya said uneasily, scratching his head. In my first life, he had been on the humanities track, but that was because of his catastrophic grades in the sciences and mathematics. This time, however, he had good grades in all subjects.

"I heard you'll have an easier time finding a job with a STEM background," Reita said.

"That's true... What about you, Natsuki?"

"I'm probably going to choose STEM," I said slowly. Despite my answer, I wasn't sure if making the same choice as my first time was right. However, I was clearly better at STEM subjects, and it would be the best way to leverage my experience from my previous life. There was no doubt that choosing STEM was the safer option.

"I see. You're choosing STEM," Hikari murmured, looking a bit crestfallen.

"Are you choosing humanities?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I am. I'm not very good at science and math."

Her decision, however, differed from my previous life. Back then, Hikari had been on the STEM track. Those subjects were likely her weak point back then too, but her decision had probably been

influenced by her father, Sei-san. In the future, Sei-san would become the president of Star Flat Corporation, which mainly dealt with machinery. Simply put, it was a STEM-focused company.

However, Hikari was aiming to become a novelist this time. She no longer bent to her parents' will; now, she could express her own aspirations. That was probably why she wanted to be on the humanities track.

"Then we'll all be in different classes," Uta said.

Silence filled the air for a while. At our high school, starting from the second year, grades were divided between humanities-track kids—classes one to three—and STEM-track kids—classes four to six. There might be changes depending on the number of students in each track, but generally speaking, that was how the classes were divided. At the end of the day, though, humanities students and STEM students would be in different homerooms.

"I'll miss you guys." The words spilled out from my lips.

The rest of them nodded. *Of course, just because we're in different classes, that doesn't mean we won't be friends anymore. But there are certain experiences we get to share as classmates.*

"We'll only be in the same class for two more months," I said.

"It's already almost been a year, huh. The time went by fast," Tatsuya said, wiping his mouth with a tissue now that he had finished eating.

"Ha ha ha! Like I said: Time flies when you're having fun!" Uta exclaimed.

"Eh," he said. "It wasn't all fun. A lot happened."

"That's true." *Yeah, a lot did happen. I had my share of successes and failures. I learned that choosing one thing means not choosing the other. I worried and I suffered. It wasn't all fun. Nonetheless, my life now is far more fulfilling than when my days were washed gray. Hikari is next to me, and I'm surrounded by friends. Thanks to them, it's like my world is gleaming with rainbows. I can proudly declare that I'm living my youth to the fullest.*

That's why I don't have any regrets.

"Oh yeah, Yui-Yui, what about you?" Uta got us back on topic as though she were trying to dispel the glum atmosphere.

Nanase was on the STEM track in the past. I remember that very clearly. The humanities and STEM kids have separate rankings starting in our second year, and Nanase always placed first.

"I'm not sure...but perhaps I'll choose humanities."

"Huh?!" I was so taken aback by Nanase's statement that the noise just slipped out.

"What's wrong, Natsuki-kun?"

Everyone was giving me weird looks, so I hastily explained myself. "Oh, I was certain you'd choose the STEM track is all."

"So Yui-Yui will be with me?! Yaaay!"

"I'm still deliberating. We have more time to decide." Nanase let out an uneasy sigh.

Suddenly, something she'd said when we were walking home together flashed through my mind.

"It's your fault."

Did I change Nanase's future? No, wait, she hasn't decided yet. "By the way, anyone know what Miori or Serika is thinking?"

"Oh, Miori-chan said she's choosing the STEM track," Hikari answered. She had gotten extremely close to Miori lately.

"I think Seri's going to take humanities. She doesn't like STEM anyway," Uta replied.

Those two are on the same path as last time, then. That's a relief. But it's possible that Hikari, Nanase, and Tatsuya will make a different choice. It's been about ten months since I leaped back in time. I feel like I'm seeing more concrete changes.

***

About halfway through lunch break, we walked back to the classroom while chatting. Class 1-2 was in an uproar when we returned.

"Did something happen?" Tatsuya asked.

"Not sure... What's going on?" Reita replied.

All the attention shifted to us when we stepped into the room. However, the atmosphere wasn't stifling like it had been back when Reita was suspended for getting into a fight.

"Oh, they're finally back." Hino called out to us in his usual carefree tone. He slung his arm around my shoulders. "Natsuki, we can't get anything done without you."

Outgoing types never have any sense of personal space. "Hino, you're acting overly familiar."

"That's cold, dude! We've been classmates for almost a year, and that's how you treat me?!"

He put on a splendid display of overreacting. Our classmates all laughed.

"Everyone taught me that this is the perfect way to treat you," I responded.

"What kind of plot twist is that?! Is *everyone* my enemy now?!"

Although Hino was dramatically holding his head in his arms, this was proof of just how much our classmates adored him. He would definitely let it go to his head if I said so out loud, though, so I kept that observation to myself. Over this past year, I had learned what a good guy he was.

It's not just Hino. That goes for everyone in our class. Lately, the six of us have been spending more time apart, and not in a bad way. There are simply more occasions where we can mingle with our other classmates. We've all been in the same class for almost a year now, so we can socialize outside our friend groups.

I feel like our class solidarity grew even stronger after we overcame the Reita incident. I think everyone is closer than they were in my first life. In my first round, everyone stuck to their own groups, and I was air. I was the center of attention during the first semester, though. In a bad way, mind you.

Now when we return to our classroom, Uta, Hikari, and Nanase cheerfully join the girls, while Tatsuya and Reita talk with Okajima-kun from the soccer team and Tachibana-kun from the basketball team.

Huh? Wait, am I the only one alone? Realizing that truth, I became paralyzed. "Sorry, Hino. You're my precious friend. Here's to a long friendship," I said.

"S-Sure? Bro, where'd that come from? You're creeping me out."

Although I had painstakingly reevaluated how I should treat Hino

now that I understood his importance, he backed away from me for some reason. *I don't understand. I'm treating him courteously, just like he wanted!*

"So, what'd you need?" I asked, since I still didn't know what was going on.

"Oh, yeah, that... Actually, you're better off hearing that from someone else. Heeey! Kanata!" Hino called out to Fujiwara, who was chatting with Hikari and the other girls.

"I told you to stop calling me by my given name in front of everyone," she muttered as she came up to us.

What a tsundere. Cute.

"Ahem... The music festival is coming up, so we need to choose a conductor and a piano accompanist for our choir," she explained.

"Oh right. Now that you mention it, it's that time of year."

Our high school held a music festival at the beginning of February every year. The main event was a choir competition between the classes, but music-related clubs also performed. The light music club was going to play as well, but a different band would be representing us. Our band had an outsider in it, anyway. We wouldn't be able to participate in school events until Yamano officially enrolled in our school.

"Starting next week, music class will be dedicated to practicing for the choir competition," Fujiwara said.

"Which means we better decide fast, huh." *In my first life, Fujiwara unified the class, but she was always angrily yelling, "Boys! Pay attention!" It seems like a rough job. I hope you work hard this time too.*

"That's right. Which is why I wanted to discuss the matter with you, Haibara-kun."

I raised my brow. "Why me?"

Fujiwara blinked at me blankly. "Because you're the leader of our class."

"That's a funny joke." I almost broke out in laughter, but everyone was looking at me. The atmosphere seemed to scream, "Yeah, duh!" *Huh? I am?*

"It's not a joke," she said.

"C'mon, my girl's saying she relies on you," Hino chimed in with a smirk. "You're our glorious leader."

Your face is irritating. Class leader? I absolutely do not want to hold such a crucial role. Okay, true, I used to admire the popular kids that were at the heart of the class. But I don't want to be in a position with too many responsibilities!

"I'm getting déjà vu from when I ended up on the sports meet committee."

"Busted," Fujiwara muttered, and stuck her tongue out.

"Don't palm off annoying tasks onto me," I said, emphasizing each word.

"Leaving you in charge is the best way to get things done, though."

"Ehhh..." *Do we really need me at the wheel to get the ball rolling?* It felt way too out of character for me to take charge, but Fujiwara looked like she was waiting for me to say something, so I felt compelled to make an innocuous comment. "I don't know... Why don't we see if anyone wants to volunteer first?"

"Good point. If we have no volunteers, I don't mind conducting." Right after she said that, the end-of-lunch bell rang. "Let's finish this later."

I nodded in agreement and returned to my seat.

A conductor and accompanist, huh? Sounds like Fujiwara is willing to be our conductor. As for our accompaniment... Wouldn't Nanase be the best person for the job? Huh? Come to think of it, in my previous life, didn't we have someone else on the piano? If I remember correctly, a quiet girl named Onozawa-san played for us.

I didn't know Nanase could play the piano in my first life, so it didn't really bother me then, but why wasn't she the accompanist? Did she yield it to Onozawa-san when they both threw their hats in the ring?

***

After school.

I stood on top of the podium in front of class with Fujiwara.

Everyone was aware that we needed to discuss the music festival, so they'd hung around instead of heading straight to their clubs or home.

"Okay, I'm sure many of you are in a rush, so let's keep this brief. We need to pick a conductor and piano accompanist for our choir. Any volunteers?" I asked.

We scanned the class, but not a single person raised their hand.

"I can conduct if no one else wants to." Fujiwara waited for a moment and then asked, "Could someone accompany us?"

No one responded. Nanase's eyes were fixed outside the window, and Onozawa-san kept her head down. Hikari watched Nanase with a worried gaze. The mood became awkward, and everyone looked stumped.

"I would if I could, but I can't do what I can't do..."

"Sorry, I'm gonna be in trouble if I don't get to my club soon."

I heard some students excuse themselves. There wasn't much else we could do, so I ended the meeting. "At least we know we have no prospective candidates. We'll think about what to do next. That's a wrap, folks."

Those who were in sports clubs hurried out of the room. *Sorry for making you guys stick around.*

"Great job as usual, Haibara-kun. Things don't proceed as smoothly when I'm in charge," Fujiwara said with a smile.

"We didn't get anything done, though," I said.

"That's true, but the boys were actually listening this time."

"And you're saying that's thanks to me?"

She nodded, but I wasn't convinced. *I don't think I'm that influential.*

"Still, what should we do?" Fujiwara crossed her arms, frowning slightly.

"We have no volunteers, so all we can do is ask people directly," I said.

"Haibara-kun, can you play the piano?"

"Nope. I would've said something from the start if I could."

"I thought you might be able to, though. Oh well."

Who do you think I am? Please don't tell me you think I can do

everything!

"Anyway, so... I heard this from Hikari, but can't Yuino play piano?" Fujiwara asked me quietly.

Evidently, Nanase hadn't mentioned she could play piano to our classmates. Not even Fujiwara—the leader of the girls in our class—was confident that she could.

I was unsure whether it was right for me to talk about it, so I answered ambivalently. "Yeah, I believe so."

"Should we ask her, then?"

We both looked at Nanase, who was in the middle of packing her bag to leave. Her gaze met mine for a split second, and then she awkwardly averted her eyes. *I've never seen Nanase act like that before. If she were her usual self, she would've smiled and given me a small wave. That's when she's at her cutest. It's why I stan her.*

"U-Um... Nanase-san." Onozawa-san was the one to call out to Nanase first.

The two of them weren't particularly close. Onozawa-san was a quiet girl who normally only chatted with her handful of friends.

Nanase looked at her with some surprise. "Y-Yes?"

"Um, well, I like your music."

Shocked, Nanase blinked at her rapidly. "You know that I play the piano?"

"I... I also play piano. I'm not skilled like you are, though." Onozawa-san wasn't that eloquent, but she chose her words earnestly. "So I was wondering...if you would play the accompaniment."

After a beat, instead of answering her question, Nanase replied with one of her own. "Why didn't you volunteer?"

"I...don't play anymore. I could probably do the accompaniment, but since you're here, I was hoping you would." Onozawa-san likely meant that wholeheartedly, which was why she'd mustered up the courage to talk to Nanase.

"Thank you. I'll consider it," Nanase replied with a smile.

***

I left Fujiwara and headed to Café Mares with Nanase. It was just the two of us since Hikari had literature club today.

For the record, because Nanase and I work at the same place, we regularly walk home together, which Hikari has given me the green light for. It would be weird if we left separately when we go the same direction.

Honestly, Hikari's only okay with it because it's Nanase. If it were Uta or Miori, she probably wouldn't permit it. But if it were Serika, it'd be fine. This is all pure speculation, though.

We were silent; only our footsteps made a sound. Nanase wasn't very talkative today, so I was uncertain whether I should bring up what had happened earlier.

"You look like you want to ask why I didn't volunteer to accompany the class," Nanase eventually said.

Right, of course she'd know what I want to ask about. "Is it because it'd be a pain?" *If so, I would understand. She plays piano at a high level, so she likely doesn't have time to waste accompanying a lowly class choir. That would be a sensible decision.*

"That's not it... I simply don't have the confidence to."

"You don't? *You*, Nanase?" I couldn't believe I was hearing that from the same girl who had put on such an amazing performance.

"Well, it's not that I'm not confident when it comes to performing... It's just, I'm lacking conviction..."

"Conviction?" I repeated after her. *What does she mean?*

Nanase clammed up, her lips drawn into a grim line. "I told this to Onozawa-san too. Give me some time to think."

"Will you tell me why?"

"I don't want to talk about it yet."

"Okay."

Earlier, Fujiwara and I had spoken to Onozawa-san. She had agreed to be the accompanist if Nanase refused. We were only waiting on Nanase's decision now. There was still plenty of time left.

We continued to walk without another word. The closer we got to the station, the more people we passed, and the louder our surroundings became.

Nanase clearly doesn't want to talk about her situation. Piano

isn't a topic that even Hikari—her best friend—can broach. I don't think I should casually bring it up. That being the case, something feels off. Nanase isn't as secretive as Reita. She talks about herself quite often, and she even told me yesterday what caused her to start playing piano.

"Come to think of it, Haibara-kun, you said you were choosing the STEM track, yes?" Nanase asked, bringing up a safe topic. It was a blatant attempt to change the subject.

"Yeah," I replied. "I'm good at science and math. I'm not entirely sure yet, though."

"I see. I'm the same as well. Perhaps I should choose STEM too."

Suddenly, I felt an odd sense of déjà vu. *That's right. In my first life, Nanase and I had a similar conversation. From her perspective, it was probably just another casual exchange on an ordinary day, but I didn't chat with others much back then, so I remember it. If memory serves correctly, she said...*

"I'm the same. Though, I don't enjoy it."

"You chose the STEM track even though you don't like it?"

"The path I want to take in life is already blocked off."

I'm pretty sure that's what she said.

First Interlude

"Nanase ranked first in the STEM track."

"Obviously. She hasn't dropped to second place a single time since we became second-years."

Students crowded in front of the ranking list posted in the hallway, chatting noisily. It only listed the top fifty students. I'd placed below that, so it had nothing to do with me.

Even so, I was still impressed that one of my classmates had continuously maintained first place ever since we had chosen which track to take. Her name was Nanase Yuino. She had been my classmate in my first year too. We had barely talked, but she was close to my crush, Hoshimiya-san, so I remembered her.

She hadn't ranked number one during our first year, but perhaps she had become more motivated in her studies when we'd entered our second. There was a twenty-point difference between her and second place. She was blowing the competition out of the water. The aura she exuded felt different from our first year too.

Our second year was almost over. Most students were in entrance exam preparation mode. However, no one else was as driven as Nanase.

According to the gossip I had overheard from a group of girls, Nanase was aiming for the prestigious University of Tokyo. No one from our school had ever been accepted into UTokyo before, so all our teachers were showing her full support. Though our school had high average scores within our prefecture, we were still far from the cream of the crop. The best high schools were surely full of students like Nanase. It was irrelevant for someone like me who was struggling to pass in Ryomei, though.

Rather than thinking about other people, I should study harder so I don't fail any classes. I know that, but it's hard to motivate myself.

I slipped by my chatting classmates and settled into my seat. I

was glad I was next to the window. If I were in the middle of the classroom, I would've been surrounded by popular kids, and that would've been hell. I glanced around the room.

Nanase was the only one with her textbook open, her mechanical pencil scribbling in her notebook. Her bored expression conveyed that she had nothing to do but study.

That one time we talked, she said she didn't like STEM subjects. When she told me she couldn't do the thing she liked anymore, the resignation in her eyes really left an impression on me. I wonder what happened. Not that I care. I'm sure she gave up on something important to her, and now she spends her time hitting the books hard.

I suddenly recalled that memory of a certain mundane, ordinary day.

Chapter 2: The Girl Called a Child Prodigy

After one final twang, the sound of the guitar lingered in the room for a moment.

"Hmm... Not too shabby."

That was the general consensus of today's practice session. I hadn't noticed how sweaty I'd gotten, and I wiped myself off with a towel. Although it was winter, the studio was sealed quite tightly for soundproofing, so it got hot over time.

"Whew! It's tiring to go all out, huh," Yamano said, slumped against the wall.

"My throat is raspy too," I said, sounding out a few "ahhs" as a vocal exercise.

"Natsuki, you can hold high notes longer now." Mei complimented me as he packed up his bass.

"You think so? I've been studying vocal training videos on YouTube." *Honestly, I wasn't sure if it was having any effect, but now that he mentions it, I think I can hold high notes longer. Hitting them feels somewhat easier too.*

"Yeah, don't worry. You really are improving," Serika added.

"Getting praised by you makes me feel really good."

"Does that imply that you don't feel particularly happy when I praise you?" Mei retorted glumly.

"No, no! That's not true at all..." *Yeah, it is true. Obviously, getting complimented by Serika would make me happier!*

"Your guitar skills need a lot more work, though," Yamano muttered just loud enough that I could hear.

I'll have you know that's attempted trash-talking behind my back! "No way! Haven't I gotten better at the guitar too?" I asked.

Mei and Serika wordlessly continued to pack up.

"Why won't you guys say anything?"

"Senpai, face reality." Yamano patted my shoulder.

"You're kidding..." *I haven't been slacking on my individual practice, though!*

"Don't space out. Hurry and pack up." Serika's indifferent tone knifed me in the heart.

"Okay..."

We paid for the studio by the hour, so we needed to clear out quickly. When we stepped outside, the sky was, naturally, already pitch-dark. It was 8 p.m., and it felt especially cold since we'd been inside a hot room. My sweatiness wasn't helping either.

It was after school. Recently, we'd been holding practice twice a week for two hours—six to eight—in the studio we rented. It depended on the studio's schedule, but we usually met up on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

To save up for the studio fees, I usually worked on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On weekends I would prioritize dates with Hikari or plans with friends, but if I had nothing scheduled, I would take a shift at the café. In the rest of my free time, I practiced the guitar and worked out.

"All right, let's go home," I said, and we began walking down the street.

"Oh yeah, the place I work at is hosting an event," Serika said out of the blue.

"You work at a music club around here, right?" *It has enough standing room for around 250 people. I've never been there myself, but I heard about it from Serika before.*

"Yep. They invited us to perform at their music fest. What do you guys think?"

"What? For real?!" Yamano's eyes shot open in surprise.

"Huh? So, you mean...we're playing as a band?" Mei questioned.

"Of course. Well, we're just the warm-up act, though."

"Still, I'm surprised they want us when we don't have anything to our name," I said.

"Shows how much they trust my abilities." Serika flashed us a double peace sign. Her expression remained placid as ever, though.

Serika had been playing with a different band these days. Besides her, everyone else in that band was a working adult, so they only met on weekends. The members must've held her skills in high esteem as well.

"Are you sure they want us and not your other band?" I asked.

"Yep, they definitely meant this group," she said.

"Why the heck not?! Let's do it!" Yamano replied eagerly.

"You say that, but don't you have entrance exams coming up?" I asked.

She grinned and chuckled triumphantly. "Actuallyyy... I already got accepted on recommendation!"

"Wait, really?"

"Really, really! I'll be a Ryomei student in April!" Yamano smiled widely, showing her pearly whites.

So that's why she was so excited during practice.

"Nice going, Saya," Serika said.

"Congratulations, Yamano-san," Mei said.

"Thaaanks! I've been waiting for the right time to tell you guys!"

She mentioned she'd probably get in on recommendation before, and it looks like she wasn't just talking big. Ryomei's not exactly easy to get into, so I was dubious. Then again, she stuck to our practices even when the new year kicked off, so she must've been pretty confident.



"Senpai, aren't you going to praise me?" Yamano stared up at me with a frown.

"Congrats, Yamano," I said.

"Heh heh! Thank you veeery much!" She whirled around exuberantly, like a small animal.

She normally conducts herself with more composure, so this is kinda unexpected. Then again, she may be mature for her age, but it doesn't change the fact that she's only in her third year of middle school.

"That's why I can practice for the show even more than before!" Yamano puffed up with pride.

Puff up all you want; you don't have what you don't have.

"In that case," Mei said, "I have no concerns. After all, our initial goal is to perform at the music club where Hondo-san works."

"Good point." *It feels a little too soon for us to be achieving our goal already, but it's a great stroke of luck. Well, rather than good fortune, it's more like the inevitability of Serika's networking skills.*

"By the way, nothing is set in stone yet, but here's the schedule and the bands that are performing." Serika sent a PDF to our RINE group chat.

I stopped walking, took out my phone, and opened it. Mei and Yamano peeked over my shoulder. *Use your own phones! Let's see... It's going to be in two months. Eh, that's to be expected. Um, and the groups are...*

"Wh-What...?" I gulped reflexively.

"Huh? Aren't these some pretty legit groups?" Yamano remarked.

There were a few fairly famous amateur bands from Gunma Prefecture listed.

"Fold, Kusabi, Maruido." Mei named a few, trembling fearfully. "These bands are quite well-known."

There were even some bands who would make their major debut in the future and go out into the world.

"A-And we're going to be the opening act for them...?" Mei said.

"Th-This isn't exactly what I was imagining. I thought for sure it'd be a bunch of chumps," Yamano said.

Don't call people lame-os! But they're right—we definitely stick

out like sore thumbs here. With this lineup, they're going to sell out of tickets. "Are they sure?" I asked. "They're really okay with us?" *There's no doubt in my mind that we're going to be performing in front of a full house.*

"Natsuki, you scared?" Serika taunted me as she shadowboxed.

"Yeah, of course I am. I understand we were invited because they recognize your skills, but that doesn't mean the rest of us are at your level...and we've got virtually no name recognition."

"Name recognition? We've got some," she replied.

"Huh?"

"Oh, didn't you know, senpai? Mishle went viral." Yamano tapped on her phone and showed me a video.

It was a MeTube video that had over a hundred thousand views. The title was "Ryomei School Festival - Light Music Club Mishle." Someone who had recorded our performance had posted it online. There were also tons of comments.

"When did this happen?" I asked. Apparently, the other three were already aware of this.

"How did you not know?" Yamano countered.

"Thanks to this, my MeTube channel grew too. Very lucky!"

I opened Serika's channel to see that her videos had gained more views across the board. Among them all, our band's original song had blown up the most.

"I bet the three of you have more fans than you think," Yamano remarked.

It's hard to believe, but based on the sheer number of comments, it must be true. "Well, even so, it's still a fact that we can't compare to the other bands that are playing in this festival. I'm not talking about just name recognition either, but skill too."

Yeah... Our performance at the school festival was a miracle. There were so many factors that happened to pile up in our favor, spurring us to play beyond our actual skill level. Even if someone told me to reproduce that one more time, I don't think I could. However, an event this big means that our performance from that time is the bare minimum level we need to be at.

"What'll it be? If you're against it, I can tell them no," Serika said

out of consideration for me. Despite her offer, I knew she didn't want to let this chance get away from us.

"Whaaat?! Let's do it! It's our loss if we don't!" Yamano exclaimed enthusiastically. "It's a huge opportunity!"

Mei and I were clearly the only ones intimidated by the notion. He had his head down.

"If we're to appear in that music fest," Mei stated, still keeping his face down, "we'll need to practice harder and more seriously than ever before. We need to play as well, no, even better than we did at the school festival if we don't want to embarrass ourselves. Otherwise, it's not even worth considering." He offered a pragmatic assessment. "Do you think we can do that as we are now?"

No one said anything for a moment. We all understood what he was getting at very well.

"It's not possible. Not with the way things are now," I finally said.

Given the time that we currently practice, it only amounts to a hobby we take mildly seriously. There are other factors playing into that, such as Yamano's entrance exams, Serika's activity with a different band, me with all my recent troubles, and Mei getting a girlfriend. However, when all is said and done, every one of us has things we prioritize over our band.

I don't think that's an issue. We can't pour our everything into this the way we did for the school festival. We want to keep it in moderation and have fun. We're not wrong for wanting to go down that route. But if that's our attitude, we'll never be able to surpass our school festival concert. I can see that we're not qualified to be even a decent opening act. Would it really be okay for a half-baked bunch like us to appear in an event this big?

We'd all fallen silent, and the mood had become gloomy, so I said, "Give me some time to think," and we dispersed. Strangely enough, I said the same thing Nanase had the other day.

It's difficult. The truth is that I have been treating the band as secondary lately. I spend my rainbow-colored youth with Hikari—my girlfriend—and my precious friends. That's my first and foremost goal, and every time it's seemed like it would fall apart, I've endeavored to solve the problem. This band is one way to achieve

that goal.

I enjoy being in the band, of course, and I'm glad when we play well. I think breaking your back together with your friends is part of youth. But it's not the most important thing.

How much of myself do I want to pour into this band? Since I'm playing with Serika, I need to reconsider that.

***

A few days after band practice at the studio, I did some thinking.

I could increase the amount of time I spend practicing the guitar, but that doesn't solve the core problem. In the end, I need to make a decision. Do I want to be in that event or not? Or better put, am I going to pull out all the stops or not?

Because the band had occupied my thoughts the whole day, I hadn't paid attention in class. Before I knew it, school was over and I was in the middle of packing up, when Nanase called out to me.

"Haibara-kun, could I borrow some of your time today?"

It just so happened that I didn't have work or band practice, and Hikari was going shopping with some of her girlfriends today. I had been thinking about practicing after I got home.

"Sure, I don't mind. What's up?" I replied.

"Come with me."

I obeyed and followed after her. *She probably isn't offering an explanation on purpose.* "Where are we going?"

"The music room."

"The music room? Are we allowed to use it without asking?"

"I already received permission." Nanase held up a key chain with a tag that said "Music Room" on it and spun it around her pointer finger as the key dangled from the ring.

Right, that room is normally locked. It has expensive instruments like a piano in there, after all, so it makes sense... Huh? A piano? That means... "Are you going to perform?"

"That's right. I want you to be the first to listen to me."

Nanase inserted the key into the music room door and opened it. No one was inside. There were folding chairs and a whiteboard in

the back. The grand piano was the only thing left at the front of the room. She picked up one of the folding chairs and set it up next to the piano.

"Your own special seat," she said.

"I'm honored, but...you sure you want it to be me?" *Obviously, I'm not going to complain about listening to her. But even if she plays for me, I can't give her any advice. Wouldn't she be better off with someone else? Like maybe Onozawa-san.*

"It can be anyone, really. I simply want to play in front of somebody."

"Sure, okay then. That makes it easier for me." *If anyone can do it, then I'm confident I can clear this low bar! I guess the important bit is that she wants to practice in an environment similar to a real concert. I can do that easy-peasy.*

"But since I'm making the effort, you were preferable. That's all." Nanase suddenly broke out into a smile.

Cute. As expected of the girl I stan! Needless to say, I'm devoted to Hikari, though. Love and stanning are two different things, so Nanase will be my oshi for life.

"Because you're the person who inspired me to try again."

Nanase sat on the piano chair. She inhaled deeply and shut her eyes for a moment. Then, she slowly exhaled. She appeared unexpectedly nervous. The air in the music room felt tense, even though I was her only audience.

"I'll begin."

She placed her fingers on the keys. Notes began to lightly dance in the air. I didn't know much about classical music, but even I recognized this song. It was one of Beethoven's piano sonatas: "Moonlight Sonata," the third movement.

I could tell she was incredibly skilled. However, I had no way to gauge how this performance measured up to Nanase's talent. It was entirely possible that someone knowledgeable about piano might've heard mistakes. Nevertheless, I genuinely thought it was a wonderful performance.

Nanase wore a serious expression and exuded intense pressure. Her slender fingers moved at an unbelievable speed. I was certifiably

stunned that such a sound could be produced by a single human's hands.

A line of sweat ran down her cheek and fell to the floor, signaling the end of her performance. When the drop hit the ground, I finally returned to reality. Without realizing it, I had been drawn into the world of Nanase's music. The last time I had gotten sucked in like this was when I had listened to Serika's guitar.

I applauded with fervor. Nanase kept her head down for a while even after she finished. Her long, black hair veiled her face, leaving her expression obscured.

"That was a great performance. It was amazing." I meant it from the bottom of my heart, but I hated that I could only offer a grade-schooler level reaction.

She lifted her head and said, "Thank you for listening." She breathed heavily, extremely fatigued.

That just goes to show how much stamina it takes to play piano earnestly.

"It's fine... I can play properly," Nanase whispered to herself.

"Nanase?"

"It's my first piano competition in a long time, so I'm a bit nervous. But I'll be all right. I know that now thanks to you. I can play just fine in front of an audience. I'll be okay."

It looked like she was under a lot of pressure. She kept repeating "I'm okay," as though to encourage herself.

"Yeah. If you can play that well, then there's nothing to worry about." I wanted to assuage her worries as much as I could. "If it's you, Nanase, everything'll be fine."

She shot me a rare bright smile. "I will put on the best performance possible at the upcoming recital, so look forward to it."

A cold breeze blew through the window, and her hair swayed gently, concealing her expression.

***

Saturday.

It was the day of Nanase's piano competition. The plan for today

was to go shopping with Hikari before heading to the venue.

As usual, I rode the most expensive private railway company in Japan to Takasaki Station. Hikari was waiting for me in front of the JR ticket gates. When she spotted me, her face lit up and she waved.

"Natsuki-kun!"

The older ladies in the vicinity watched her with warm gazes—and me as well. It was a bit embarrassing, but Hikari no longer minded it much anymore. *I can't decide if this is a good change or a bad one. Is this what they mean by "love is blind"?*

"Let's go!" she said, hugging my arm.

Whoa... Up until now, we had held hands a lot. This was a new one, though. *She's super close, which gives me a rush of euphoria. Well, this would be too hot in the summer, but it's nice and warm this way in the winter. Also, a certain part feels very soft. It's extremely nice. Yep.*

"Let's look at spring clothes first," she said.

"Can we take a peek at a music store after?"

"Sure."

It's a little hard to walk like this, but Hikari looks happy, so I'll just stay this way.

I accompanied her on a search for spring clothing for a while. Thanks to my mom and sister, I was used to women taking a long time shopping. *In most cases, perusing the clothes is more important than actually buying them!*

In the end, Hikari didn't purchase anything. There were a few items she was interested in, but she decided to put it off until later.

After that, we went to a music store, where I bought a few guitar accessories, like picks and fret wraps. Before we knew it, it was already noon. I had thought up a few ideas for lunch, but this time we went to a French restaurant that Hikari wanted to try.

I'm an indecisive person, so it's a lifesaver when someone says, "Let's go here!" Seriously, if I were alone, I'd never get anything done.

As expected, the restaurant was pretty crowded at lunch on a weekend, but after about ten minutes, we were led to our seats. I

ordered a pasta set meal, and Hikari ordered a salad with a pancake set meal. While we waited for our food, Hikari spoke up.

"I can't wait for Yuino-chan's concert!"

"If I remember correctly, she's on fourth, right?"

The venue was a music hall close to this restaurant. The performance would start in the afternoon, so we had plenty of time before then. I didn't know the particulars, but apparently it was a small regional competition. She was in the division for pianists who had won prizes in the elementary division.

"Yep. The morning is for the elementary and middle school divisions."

"So high schoolers start in the afternoon?"

While we chatted, I dug into my pasta, which the waiter had brought. Hikari's head was tilted questioningly to the side as she worked on her salad. It looked like it didn't taste the way she'd expected. *My pasta is great! I think I picked a winner.*

"That was nice," I said after I finished eating.

"Yeah, it was. How did you like it?"

"It was pretty tasty. What about yours?"

"The pancake was a little meh? It was kind of dry."

Once we finished lunch, we entered the music hall as we made small talk. It had been the right choice for us to dress on the formal side today. The atmosphere here felt too fancy for high schoolers like us, but there was no way around it.

The average age of the audience was on the higher side. A lot of the contestants' families were here as well. It was still a little noisy since the competition hadn't started yet. There was no assigned seating, so we sat near the middle.

"Hikari-chan, it's been a while."

A couple called out to us from the aisle. The man and woman looked like they were in their fifties. They both gave off a tranquil air.

"Oh, Yuino-chan's mom and dad! Hello, long time no see!" Hikari stood up and bowed to them.

Nanase's parents, huh? Now that she mentions it, I think I see the resemblance. They all have this gentle poise and elegant demeanor.

"The last time you came to our home was in the summer...so it's been about half a year."

"Um, yes, that's right," Hikari replied. "I'm sorry for barging in without any warning."

"Oh, it was no trouble at all. Thank you for always being such a great friend to Yuino." Nanase's mom spoke with a very kind tone. Then, she flashed a mischievous smile and glanced at me. "By the way, is this young man your boyfriend?"

"Huh?!" Hikari exclaimed. "Y-Yes... He is..." she whispered.

For a girl who had boldly linked our arms together to scare the other girls away earlier, she sure was shy about introducing her boyfriend to her friend's parents. I wondered how her criteria for feeling embarrassed worked as I gave them a small bow.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Haibara Natsuki."

"Aha! So you're Haibara-kun. My daughter talks about you fairly often. She says you're quite an interesting one," Nanase's dad told me. He regarded me with a curious gaze.

"I-Interesting? Is that what she says?" *Nanase, what on earth did you tell them?*

"She said you're enjoyable to be around because you carry yourself and do things in a flamboyant manner. You're the first boy my daughter has ever spoken about like that, so I wanted to chat with you if the opportunity ever arose."

"Th-Thank you very much... Ha ha ha..."

"Dear, don't bother the poor boy like that! I'm so sorry about my husband," Nanase's mom said, keeping him in check.

"No, it's fine." I chuckled ambivalently. *The best thing to do at times like this is to laugh it off! Well, it's really the only thing I can do.*

"Did Yuino invite you two today?" Nanase's mom asked. I believed her name was Miwako-san.

Hikari and I nodded.

"Yes. Yuino-chan gave us tickets."

"Thank you for coming to support her. I'm worried because she hasn't taken the stage in quite some time... But I'm sure she'll be just fine if she was confident enough to invite her friends," Miwako-

san murmured pensively, her eyes glued to the stage. “She’ll be okay.”

The way she said “okay” with that expression greatly resembled Nanase. It was like she was trying to hide her unease.

“Uh-oh. It’s about to start,” Nanase’s dad said, glancing at his watch. “I hope you two will continue being good friends to my daughter.”

And with that, the two of them left. Hikari and I replied with a yes and bowed our heads. Just as Nanase’s parents took their seats two rows in front of us, the announcer’s voice rang through the speakers, broadcasting the start of the competition. The audience chatter vanished, and a hush filled the hall.

After a short wait, the first participant entered the stage. They walked out from the left side to the grand piano in the center. Once they were in front of the piano, they bowed deeply to the audience and then sat down. They placed their fingers on top of the keys and closed their eyes. They took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

Then their performance began. It was a tune I recognized. This competition consisted of two stages—a preliminary round and a final selection round—and had a set list of songs that you could perform.

I think this is Beethoven’s sonata? It would’ve been hard to appreciate the performances with zero knowledge, so I had studied a little. That being said, I’d basically just watched a few videos online.

With no knowledge of classical music, I had tapped on the videos of pro pianists with the most views and ended up sucked into their performances. The next thing I knew, I had listened to the song until the very end. Pros are truly incredible.

However, in my opinion, the video I listened to of Nanase’s childhood performance on MeTube didn’t fall far behind a professional pianist’s. That might be bias on my part, though. In any case, with all due respect, the current performer doesn’t draw me in the same way they did in comparison. It sounds kinda mechanical and stiff, and gives off a cold impression. When Nanase played, she was softer and had a delicate touch that was phenomenally expressive.

Their performance eventually came to an end, and there was a smattering of applause. Hikari and I continued to listen to the contestants in silence. Talking during a performance was obviously prohibited, but Hikari would give me a quick exposition on the song played between competitors. Though she had only studied piano for a brief period, she was well-versed in classical music due to her upbringing and spending time with Nanase. *This is what they call a sophisticated education, huh.*

Anyway, to be perfectly honest, the average-feeling performances continued, and I was starting to get sleepy, when it was finally Nanase's turn. I wasn't the one onstage, but my stomach felt queasy for some reason.

"Nanase's up next, right?" I whispered.

Hikari smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I can't wait."

"Right... Good luck, Nanase." *I hope this uneasy feeling I've been having goes away.*

Right as that prayer left my heart, Nanase appeared on the stage. She wore a black dress that complemented her beautiful, slender frame. Her long black hair was tied back. She stopped in front of the piano and faced the audience. That was the point when she should've followed recital etiquette and bowed to us before taking her seat, but she stood there motionless. Her complexion was pale and her expression pained.

"Yuino-chan?" Sensing something was off, Hikari furrowed her brow with worry.

When Nanase's unusual demeanor caused the audience to stir, she finally lowered her head. She then sat before the piano and took a long, deep breath. The spectators that had broken into a low whisper instantly fell silent.

Nanase placed her long, slender fingers on the keys and pressed down. That single note was immediately linked with more sounds, forming a melody. Each note stood proudly on its own and was delightful to listen to. Then came a barrage of long chords.

She was playing the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 21 in C Major, also known as the "Waldstein." The atmosphere in the venue changed. Though no one spoke a word, I knew everyone

was concentrating on the song being spun by Nanase's fingers.

We were surely all enraptured. My focus went from Nanase herself to her music. Right when the first theme came to an end, bursting with emotion, the world she'd woven suddenly ceased. The music had cut off. The next thing I knew, the piano chair was toppled over.

And Nanase was collapsed on the floor. It took me some time to process what had happened.

"Yuino-chan?!" Hikari shot to her feet, face pale.



Nanase’s parents also ran towards the stage.

“Yuino?!”

“Yuino! A-Are you okay?!”

The hall suddenly burst into a clamor. Amid the uproar, I rushed to Nanase’s side along with Hikari. Nanase had already been placed on a stretcher by the competition staff and was being carried away.

Nanase’s face was as pale as a corpse, and her breathing was ragged.

“C-Call an ambulance!”

As those voices flew back and forth around me, there wasn’t a single thing I could do.

Second Interlude

Back then, Yuino-chan was like an empty shell. It was the summer of our second year in middle school. Our long vacation had finally arrived, so I hung out with her frequently.

Because Yuino-chan had piano and other lessons to attend, it used to be normal for her to decline my invitations to hang out, but this summer she gladly accepted every single time I asked. We'd go shopping and to karaoke with other friends—that summer was filled with fun.

However, Yuino-chan would suddenly stare at the sky and zone out. She would laugh with me and tease me, but from time to time, her eyes would glaze over with a distant look. She always appeared very mature whenever that happened.

"Did you quit piano?"

"Why would you think that?"

"Because you don't seem to be practicing."

"True. I've not been practicing as earnestly as I used to."

"Why? I love listening to you play."

"I'm a bit tired. That's all."

Yuino-chan wouldn't look me in the eyes, and I couldn't bring myself to push the subject any harder. Her reason clearly wasn't a lighthearted one. She loved playing the piano; anyone could tell just from watching her. I found it hard to believe that she would stop because she was tired. Besides, even if that were the reason she'd quit, she wouldn't have seemed so sad about it.

Yuino-chan was pushing herself right now. I'd known that from the beginning. I had thought she would eventually get back on her feet over the course of our vacation. But it didn't seem like an issue that would be resolved so easily. That was why I had questioned her directly today. And this was the result.

"I'm delighted you're concerned about me, Hikari." Yuino-chan

put on an insincere smile in response to my silence. “But I’m okay.”

I learned for the first time that “I’m okay” was a phrase of rejection. I wanted to help her. I wanted her to depend on me. However, I knew nothing about the world of piano. I wouldn’t be able to do anything even if she did explain her situation to me. The one thing I could do for her was what I had already been doing: Be there for her.

The days passed, and Yuino-chan—who had been like an empty shell—gradually regained the light in her eyes thanks to a simple catalyst. She had become hooked on idols.

“This is my oshi! Isn’t she adorable? Look at how her eyes gleam.”

“Y-Yuino-chan, I’ve never seen you speak so passionately before.”

“Really? But anyway, she truly is wonderful! She always tries so hard and does her best. She energizes me. There’s going to be a concert soon; would you like to go with me?”

I was bewildered by how Yuino-chan had suddenly become a fast-talking, long-winded otaku, but I was thankful that she had regained her spirit. I didn’t know the first thing about idols, though, so I didn’t really understand what she was talking about. I was just glad the shine had returned to her empty eyes.

“Yes. I want to see the things you like too.”

I was happy she had bounced back. However, I had a feeling she might never play piano on a stage again. Even after we entered high school, she continued looking after me. Rather than a friend, she felt like an older sister. I was always being saved by Yuino-chan. That was why I wanted to help her too.

Maybe one of the novels I write will rekindle Yuino-chan’s passion for piano. I liked to dream that something so fanciful might happen. But that hope of mine did not come true.

“I decided to resume playing the piano.”

My wish came true, different from the way I had imagined, because of Natsuki-kun.

“When I saw Haibara-kun and his band perform, I realized I couldn’t give up on it.”

I was overjoyed, but also frustrated that I hadn’t been the

impetus.

"Really? Then I'll cheer you on with everything I've got!"

I was always so powerless—even now with Yuino-chan collapsed in front of me, there was nothing I could do.

I'd had a bad feeling. Natsuki-kun had likely sensed something too. Both of us knew Yuino-chan seemed off, and her strange behavior was most likely related to the piano. I had wanted to believe that her recent change was a positive one, but I couldn't shake off my bad premonition. And today my fears were verified in the worst possible way.

Even now, I still didn't know anything.

Chapter 3: Because I Want to Be Relied On

The day after Nanase fainted. Sunday.

I glanced at the clock; it was 10 a.m. In the end, we had reluctantly returned home yesterday. There was nothing outsiders like us could do. I'd been unable to sleep for several hours last night. Even now, though I lay on my bed, I didn't feel sleepy. My mind kept replaying the moment Nanase collapsed.

Hikari was in contact with Nanase's parents. She had reached out to me last night and let me know that Nanase's health was not in any imminent danger. Nanase was currently admitted to a hospital near the music hall. That was one less thing to stress over. Or at least it should've been.

The way she fell over...that wasn't normal. Based on what I've heard from Hikari and what Nanase has told me herself, I've got a guess as to why she fainted like that yesterday. I don't know if I'm right or not, though. Watching Nanase has been giving me déjà vu. I didn't know what it reminded me of before, but I've finally got it—it reminds me of when Miori couldn't pass to her teammates. Nanase resembles Miori from back then. This must be some sort of psychological issue.

As I was thinking that, I received a call. My phone lit up, displaying Hoshimiya Hikari on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Natsuki-kun."

"Is Nanase okay?"

"Yeah. They said her condition is stable. Do you want to go visit her with me?"

"Sure."

Although I knew she was safe and sound, I wanted to catch a

glimpse of her to give me peace of mind. Hikari surely felt the same as well. We arranged a time and place to meet, then promptly hung up, and I hurried out of my house.

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Hikari and I were at the largest general hospital in the area. The air was filled with the distinctive smell of medicine and chemicals. Someone led us to a room, where we knocked on the door.

"Come in," urged a gentle voice, and we slid the door open.

It was a private room. Nanase sat up in bed, her back leaning against the headboard. Miwako-san was seated next to her.

"Yuino-chan!" Hikari briskly walked to her side.

"I'm sorry for wasting both of your time," Nanase said, her eyes lowered in remorse.

Hikari shook her head. "Don't say that. More importantly, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm in good health. I hit my head on the floor when I fainted, but that's about it." Nanase forced a smile, her hand touching the bandages wrapped around her forehead. "This looks far worse than it actually is. It's only a minor bruise."

"I... I see... I'm so glad! I thought for sure you had some sort of serious illness or something." Hikari languidly sat down and rested her head on the bed.

"I'm fine. I'll be discharged today."

"Did you faint because of anemia or something?" I asked.

"It'd be nice if that were the case," Nanase replied with a sardonic smile.

"Then was it a psychological issue after all?"

She blinked in surprise. "Don't tell me... You noticed?"

"I had a feeling. Something seemed off about you."

Miwako-san opened her mouth. "Yuino, did you not tell your friends who came to watch you perform?" Her tone was somewhat stern.

Nanase averted her eyes and looked out the window. "I'm sorry for not saying anything. I didn't want to worry either of you."

"Yuino-chan, you dummy!" Hikari objected, raising her head from the bed. "You *should* let me worry about you. We're friends."

Nanase tried to pacify Hikari by gently stroking her hair. "I apologize. I thought I would be okay... I wanted to *convince* myself I'd be okay. That's why I invited both of you. I couldn't possibly fail in front of my friends—I wanted to pressure myself."

"Nanase. Will you tell us what's going on?" I asked.

A beat passed. "Yes. It's nothing significant...but it all started in my second year of middle school," she began, and dove into her past that Hikari and I hadn't been able to broach. "I've blundered many times at large piano competitions. I would make mistakes that I don't normally make... And naturally, I've never managed to actually win a large competition. While I was in low spirits after the first time I was unable to perform well, I knew there were plenty of times that I had failed to even make it through the preliminary rounds in the past, so I didn't let it get to me."

Well, no one can always perform their best in front of an audience.

"I thought it would be fine as long as I applied myself the next time... And yet, before I went to sleep, the disappointed gazes of the audience would be seared into my mind... My heart wouldn't stop pounding."

I can imagine that a major piano competition would have tons of people in the audience. I wonder how I would've felt if I'd flubbed onstage during the school festival concert... It would be nice if that scenario only ended with me becoming a laughingstock.

"I don't mean to brag, but many people had high expectations for me. Nevertheless, I failed horribly on the big stage. It was only reasonable for everyone to be disappointed in me—it made sense. Logically, I understood this, and I tried to sort out my feelings," she continued. "I kept at it, but I couldn't shake that vision from my head. I wanted to rid myself of those negative thoughts and continue practicing. When things first started going downhill, I thought that as long as I produced good results at my next competition, I would be able to overwrite that memory. I had failed only once, after all; there were still many people who expected

much from me, and I didn't want to betray their expectations."

Nanase's head remained down while she narrated her past. I found the way Miwako-san quietly listened to her daughter to be oddly striking.

"I was determined to succeed, so I entered another competition." She paused for a moment.

"What happened?" Hikari asked tentatively, encouraging her to continue.

"I fainted before my performance started and was carried to an ambulance."

I had half expected that answer.

"I don't remember it very well. However, when I bowed to the audience before I began and saw all those people sitting there, it became difficult to breathe... The next thing I knew, I was inside of a hospital room."

From beginning to end, Nanase's tone was matter-of-fact, like she was talking about someone else.

"I thought it was just a one-off incident...but since then, every time I've played piano in front of a large audience, similar symptoms have appeared... That's why I quit performing onstage," Nanase said, finishing her story.

"No, Yuino, I made you stop playing," Miwako-san softly said. "Forgive me. I hated seeing you in pain. I was afraid you'd collapse again. In truth, that was why I didn't want you to perform this time either."

It made sense for a parent to feel that way. I had been terrified when I saw Nanase faint out of the blue onstage. This was the second time Miwako-san and her husband had witnessed that happening. I couldn't imagine how they must have felt.

"Yuino, I was the one who taught you the piano. However, you don't need to stick to it. There are plenty of other enjoyable things in the world," Miwako-san pleaded. "If the same thing occurs again, I fear you won't come out unscathed next time. So please don't obsess over the piano. Yuino, you are our precious daughter."

Her voice and expression were filled with compassion, and I could tell she sincerely meant every word. When Nanase had collapsed

during the competition, her parents had rushed straight to her side. And for her part, Nanase always seemed beside herself with joy when she spoke about her family.

"Mom, thank you. I'm sorry for worrying you." Nanase's expression and tone showed just how much she trusted Miwako-san. However, she continued to speak. "But I want to play the piano out of my own volition. I entered that competition because I wanted to. I'd like to play on the big stage once again."

"Can't you continue as a hobby?" Miwako-san implored her daughter.

Nanase shook her head. "I want to compete in the same world you did."

That's what she means when she says she wants to be a professional pianist like her mom.

"That's a harsh world. I couldn't make a living and retired."

"I know. Even still, this has been my dream since I was young." Nanase's resolve was firm.

"It was. You mentioned it all the time up until our second year of middle school," Hikari said, her feelings mixed. She was glad that Nanase was serious about the piano again, but she also didn't want her friend to push herself. The conflicting emotions were blending together into a messy jumble.

Nanase giggled. "Right, I did tell you that." She patted Hikari's head.

"Yuino. Can you really continue? Can you keep going in this state?" Miwako-san asked, her face filled with pain.

Undaunted, Nanase nodded. There was not a trace of hesitation in her eyes. "I must overcome this issue. I resumed practicing in the fall, and I could play in front of you and Haibara-kun... I had convinced myself I would be fine."

I recalled the time she had played for me in the music room.

"But I was wrong. I was scared, and I avoided facing reality."

When she played for me, she did look like she was having a hard time, but she managed to make it through without any issue. I'm guessing she's okay in front of a small audience. Her symptoms probably compound the more people there are.

"I finally understood today. If I don't address the problem, I won't be able to achieve my dream."

It was a hard decision to celebrate, considering that Miwako-san was shaking her head with tears streaming down her face. "Stop. I can't support this. As I said before, I don't want to see you suffer any longer. If you continue, your heart will shatter."

I didn't find her misgivings to be an overreaction. We had all seen Nanase collapse onstage like the strings holding her up had been cut.

Nevertheless, Nanase was resolute. "Mom, I won't change my mind anymore."

"Why?! You don't need the piano to be happy!"

Perhaps that was the conclusion Miwako-san had reached. She had married, given birth to a child, and retired from being a professional pianist. Her words had weight to them because she was able to live happily without her world being centered around the piano she loved so much.

Right as Miwako-san shouted at Nanase, someone knocked on the door. "Excuse me." A nurse apologetically entered the room. "Could you lower your voices a little?"

"I'm so sorry," Miwako-san said with a gasp, and bowed her head. "I'll go cool off. Please take care of my daughter while I'm gone." With that, she hurried out the room.

Silence filled the air.

"You have a nice mom," I said earnestly.

"I really do. I'm blessed to have her," Nanase said in agreement, overwhelmed with emotions.

"But you still won't change your mind?"

"Your only job here is to support me." Nanase looked away sulkily.

I'm seeing a lot of new sides to Nanase today. I rarely see her act like a child. Her attitude towards Miwako-san was a novel sight too. She always acts like the group mom. "Of course I want to support you, but...I'm also worried."

"I'm scared as well. Nevertheless, it's your fault that I decided to face my fears."

"My fault? Don't you mean it's thanks to me?"

"Yes, it's your fault."

Apparently, I'm in the wrong here. And it is *true that I changed Nanase's life.* I thought back to what she had been like in my first life. I vividly remembered how her eyes looked when she'd given up on her dream. She had always seemed bored and somewhat lonely. Before we graduated, Nanase had gotten into UTokyo and everyone had raised a huge fuss and showered her with praise, but she hadn't seemed particularly happy to me. I didn't want her to end up like that again, which was why...

"Okay, but I won't be cheering you on."

"What?" Nanase's face fell.

I grinned and gave her a thumbs-up. "Instead, I'll help you out." *I should take some responsibility since I'm the one who changed her.*

I had thought her face would light up from that, but she shot me a dark look. "You are so irritating. I can tell by your smug expression that you think you said something clever."

"What?! Wasn't I pretty cool just now? What do you think, Hikari?"

"Well..." She hummed evasively.

Wait, was that creepy? If Hikari is beating around the bush even when she's blinded by love, it must've been pretty creepy!

"A-Anyway!" Hikari exclaimed in a blatant effort to change the topic.

Sorry that a high school debutant like me got carried away!

"Yuino-chan, let me help too." Hikari ignored my crushed heart and wrapped her hands around Nanase's.

"You two... I appreciate the sentiment, but I don't want to ask that much from either of you. I would be happy enough to know that you're supporting my endeavor."

Hikari cut Nanase off before she could say any more. "You should rely on us," she said. "I want to be your strength." That was something she had wanted to say for a long time. She had told me how she felt about Nanase during a phone call. "That's been my hope ever since you quit piano in middle school...but you didn't want to rely on anyone, right? And you still don't now. You want to confront your problems alone."

"The two of you are unrelated to my piano activities, though."

"So what? I'm your friend. I don't just want to cheer you on from the sidelines." Hikari's tone was much more forceful than usual.

"Agreed. I feel the same as Hikari," I said.

Nanase let out a resigned sigh. "Haibara-kun, you're the same as ever."

"What do you mean?"

"You always offer to help a friend in trouble."

"It's not like I'm doing it for any noble reason. I just don't want to have any regrets."

"I believe one's nature is revealed through their actions, not their words." Nanase giggled.

Cute! Err... Now is not the time to be thinking that, but her smile is just too destructively powerful! And Hikari is staring holes into me. Stop it!

"That being said, I won't let you have Natsuki-kun, okay?" Hikari hugged my arm, gazing at her friend warily.

I've never seen Hikari be guarded against Nanase before. I've seen her menace randoms, and sometimes her eyes have an unsettled glint to them when I talk to Uta or Miori, but she never acts like that towards Nanase, because she trusts her.

"If you cherish him that dearly, then be sure to hold on to him tightly." Nanase smiled playfully.

Hikari's cheeks puffed up into a pout. *From the looks of it, Nanase is back to her usual self.*

***

After our heart-to-heart with Nanase, Hikari and I went to a café near the hospital. It was around 3 p.m.—snack time. Hikari carefully scrutinized the menu.

Nanase was scheduled to receive a checkup after this, and if there were no issues, they would discharge her. She would likely be able to attend school tomorrow. As a side note, we gave her some fruit, a classic get well soon gift.

Hikari giggled gleefully. "I'll have a parfait. What about you?"

"Just coffee for me."

"Do you want to share a large parfait?"

"Hmm, I'm not big on super sweet things." *I don't hate them, but I don't really like them either. Also, I'd hate to get fat. I love chicken meat and protein. At any rate, I'm impressed Hikari can eat calorie-dense foods like parfaits all the time without gaining weight. I feel like every time we go on a date, she eats a parfait or some pancakes, and it's not like she exercises much either... And yet she maintains perfect proportions.*

"I-Is it me, or are you leering at my body?" Hikari, who had been blissfully devouring her parfait, noticed my gaze and hugged herself to cover up her torso with her arms.

Crap! She caught on to my staring. "Oh, I was just thinking that you never gain weight even though you don't exercise."

"I may not look like it, but I'm careful about maintaining my figure! On weekends, I go jogging and stuff."

"Huh, really?"

"Yeah. I do it to take a breather from writing or studying. Also, you seem to be misunderstanding something here. I may eat parfaits and pancakes on our dates, but outside of that, I usually refrain from eating sweets."

That's unexpected. So Hikari is the type that can hold back from the things she likes, huh. "Do you do that so you don't lose your position as the school idol?"

"Natsuki-kun, what do you think of me? Hello?"

It was an honest question, but she responded rather angrily.

"It's so that I'm always presentable to the person I like. That's all," she muttered under her breath. Given how close we were sitting, I could still hear her.

I see... I didn't think of that. I ended up making her admit something weird. Sorry.

Hikari hung her head, her face bright red. I was likely a similar shade. My cheeks felt hot. *Ah, crud. Now that she said that, my gaze can't help but be drawn to her body.* I closed my eyes for a bit to suppress my sinful thoughts. *I'm such a goddamn virgin that the mood has turned weird!*

"L-Let's talk about Yuino-chan!" Hikari clapped her hands and forced a topic change.

"Y-Yeah! Right!" And to the surprise of no one, I readily accepted the new topic. *I can't endure this mood any longer. I'm a virgin, after all.*

***

"Yips?"

"Her symptoms are pretty bad, but I think it might be something like that."

Now that Hikari had finished her parfait, our conversation had made a complete one-eighty into a serious topic.

The yips is a disorder where someone experiences motor impairment because of a psychological issue. The reason Miori couldn't pass to her teammates was probably because of that too. Basically, psychological factors are negatively influencing her body. Piano isn't a sport, and there might be a different name for a disorder that has severe symptoms like fainting, but it's something psychological for sure.

"Is there a way to treat it?"

I paused. "The quickest solution would be to eliminate the cause, maybe?"

I had experienced something similar to Nanase's and Miori's symptoms, although mine were far less severe in comparison. At the start of my second round, I'd suffered from an inferiority complex towards Tatsuya. I would overreact to every single thing he said.

That was probably closely related to the yips. Trauma isn't something you can control at will. I overcame it by beating Tatsuya one-on-one in basketball. Maybe she needs a spark like that. Or maybe yesterday's competition was supposed to be that spark.

"I see." Hikari stared at her phone, having pulled up an article on the yips. "Will she really get better if the root cause is gone?"

"I don't know. There are people who never recover, and in Nanase's case, her symptoms are grave." *For the time being, I don't want to encourage Nanase to do anything based on an uninformed*

guess. If she faints again, we should keep her away from the piano. "We have to make sure she doesn't overdo it."

Right now, Nanase was probably very eager to work her fingers to the bone.

"Yeah," Hikari replied.

Once she'd cooled down, Miwako-san had returned and talked things over with Nanase. They had agreed that Nanase would strive within reason to conquer her mental block. She would also begin seeing a psychiatrist.

In all honesty, we're at a point where amateurs shouldn't butt in. Since Nanase is facing her trauma with professional assistance, the only thing Hikari and I can do is help her where we can. We better bear that in mind.

***

Hikari and I parted and went home.

Back at my house, I made a phone call. "This is unusual. I can't believe you're calling me," was the greeting I received.

"Really? I think I used to call you pretty frequently," I replied.

"I'm talking about recently. But are you sure about this? She might think you're cheating on her," Motomiya Miori said teasingly.

I feel like I haven't heard her voice in a long time. "I called you because I don't want to make Hikari anxious." *We live so close that it'd be easier to drop by her house and discuss this face-to-face.*

"Riiight. I think you're underestimating Hikari-chan a little."

Huh? I'm being pretty vigilant, though. Am I still too naive?

"So, what's up?" Miori cut the small talk short and jumped straight to the point. She was being thoughtful by trying to keep the conversation brief.

"I wanted to get your opinion on something. It's about Nanase."

"Yuino-chan? Did something happen?"

"Actually, Hikari and I went to watch Nanase play at a piano competition..." I described the symptoms that afflicted Nanase in detail.

"When did my incident happen again?"

"Last year during the rainy season. I thought her symptoms kinda resembled what happened with you."

"And that's why you think I might know what to do?"

"Yep, that's right."

Once I'd finished explaining the situation, Miori's tone sounded troubled. "Hmm... Everyone's got different problems on the inside."

Yeah, Miori is Miori, and Nanase is Nanase. I know that. "I'm just looking for some kind of hint."

"And why's that? What reason do you have to go that far for her?"

I didn't understand what she was getting at. *Miori is supposed to know me well, so why did she ask me that?* "I need to take responsibility for changing Nanase."

"If that's your reason, then I don't want to answer."

"Huh?" I said in a dumb voice. It hadn't even occurred to me that Miori might decline to help. I was tired of that part of myself.

"Because... Yuino-chan was influenced by your performance, and now she's opposing her mom to go down a dangerous path, right? You shouldn't encourage her thoughtlessly." Miori rationally stated her opinion, and every point was extremely sensible. "Think about it. She faints when she tries to play piano. That's not a normal symptom."

There was no room for any sort of rebuttal.

"I only struggled to pass to my teammates. You're better off not comparing her case to mine."

I felt like I was being doused in freezing cold water.

"If you want to take responsibility, then you should put her back on her original path."

She's completely right. Why didn't I do that? I don't want to watch Nanase faint again. I took a moment to reexamine my thoughts. *Why do I want to help Nanase? To take responsibility for distorting her future. No. That's just a front, isn't it? The truth is...*

"Regardless, I don't want Nanase to quit."

"Why?" Miori asked gently, as though she already knew the answer I had arrived at.

Assured by that, I was able to put my thoughts into words. "Even

if Nanase gives up on becoming a pianist, I'm sure she'll be able to live without issue." *She has high specs by nature, after all. I learned that very well during my first round.* "But every now and then, she makes this despondent expression."

Yeah, that's it. I finally realized it.

"I don't want to see Nanase like that."

My thought patterns are extremely simple, and always the same.

"I don't want her to have any regrets."

I was someone who had experienced regretting his own drab and gray youth, after all. I wanted my dear friends to live without regrets.

Miori giggled. It sounded like she was smiling on the other side of the phone. "So it's not about taking responsibility. You simply want to do it, right?"

"Yeah. I just want to help."

"Then stop saying weird, snobby things. It's so not you!"

I couldn't refute that and simply grunted in pain.

"Honestly, Yuino-chan already has medical professionals helping her out; I don't think nonexperts like us can contribute much even if we put our heads together."

"You're definitely right about that. Virtually every move I make is going to go nowhere." I had known this from the get-go. At the very least, I wanted to avoid doing anything that would have adverse effects.

"Guess I've got no choice." Miori sighed. "If that's what you want to do, then I'll lend a hand too." She prefaced her next statement with "This is just my opinion, though," and then continued. "She might be avoiding something that she doesn't even realize."

"Something she doesn't realize? Like something buried in her unconsciousness?"

"That's how it was for me. When I heard my upperclassmen trash-talking me behind my back, I convinced myself I would be fine because I was strong. I didn't realize that I was actually hurt by it."

The girls' basketball team's feud had taken place over half a year ago. Time sure had flown.

"I kept lying to myself and lost sight of how I truly felt." Miori

spoke slowly, recalling her emotions from back then. “Before I knew it, I couldn’t bring myself to give the ball to anyone else.”

Memories of our awkward passing practice flashed through my head. At the time, the way she passed the ball had been unnatural.

“I was scared. I thought that if I passed, the ball would never come back to me. I think I was afraid to see their distrust in me reflected in their actions.”

Miori is sorta different now. She doesn’t hesitate to expose her weaknesses like this anymore.

“It’d be nice if she had the opportunity to face whatever’s in her heart. I don’t mean she should dive right into fighting the root of it all... Just something she can work on little by little, step by step, like how you and Uta practiced with me until I could make a pass.”

“I see...” I had reached a similar conclusion to Miori’s. I didn’t have a concrete idea yet, but this was the direction I would head down.

“Hey... Remember what I said earlier? About how nonexperts like us can’t help her when she’s got professionals on her side?” Miori said hesitantly.

“Yeah. What about it?” *I don’t think there was anything wrong with that statement.*

“Thinking again, that might not be so true, surprisingly.” It was unlike her, but she mumbled the words out embarrassedly. After a pause, she inhaled and then said in a measured voice, “Back then, I was able to face my fear because you were there.”

Shocked that she’d said that out of nowhere, I was at a loss for words.

“No one else would’ve worked. I could fight because you stayed by my side.” Her warm tone conveyed her genuine feelings.

I pretended not to notice the loneliness mixed in with her words. It was all I could do for her. “I also—” I began, but then stopped.

I knew it. I should keep calls with Miori as short as possible. It’s still too soon for us. Feelings don’t subside cleanly like they do in fiction. “You’ve changed, Miori. The old you never would’ve admitted that,” I teased her instead.

“Well...there’s no point in acting tough anymore. Everyone knows

everything I did, and I published a super cringe and immature post on Minsta. Ugh, this is the worst!" Contrary to her gripes, she sounded relieved.

Ah, so she's aware how cringe and immature her post was...

"Even now, people taunt me, saying that I lost even though I was dealt the strongest card of being your childhood friend."

"A-Are there really people that brutal?"

"Do you know how scary girls are? I don't regret it, though."

Yikes, that's terrifying! I'd cry if anyone ever told me that.

"I hear some gossip too, obviously. Still, this is what I wanted, and I should take responsibility for what I did in the first place. I'm simply receiving my just punishment," she said resolutely.

That's the conclusion Miori's arrived at, so nothing will come from disputing it.

"That said, this is still way better than before. Actually, I've been getting close to Hasegawa's group lately, and I'm having a lot of fun with my classmates, so there's nothing to worry about."

"I don't really like Hasegawa, though."

"Right, you're the type to hold grudges..."

Say what you want, but sorting out your feelings isn't that simple! I hate what I hate! I'm honestly amazed Miori doesn't have even a teeny-weeny little chip on her shoulder after what happened.

"Even though I forgave her?" she asked.

"Just because you forgave her doesn't mean I did."

"Moooron."

"Why're you insulting me?!"

Miori giggled at my shocked reaction. *It doesn't make sense!*

"Sorry, we're off topic. Anyway, I wanted to say that for Yuino-chan, having her friends' help might actually be crucial. Frankly, I'm in a different class, and I'm not all that close to her, but...you and Hikari-chan are different, right?"

True. I don't see Nanase and Miori chat, just the two of them, that often. I've been in the same class with Nanase for almost a year, so our relationship would certainly be closer.

"This goes double for Hikari-chan. They've been together since they were kids, after all. I'm sure she's important to Yuino-chan,

maybe even *the* most important person in the world," Miori said firmly. "I think having someone like that supporting Yuino-chan will definitely help."

Yeah, she might be right.

"A-Anyway, that's pretty much it. I've said my piece." Out of nowhere, Miori began to talk rapidly.

What's wrong all of a sudden?

"Okay, I'm going to take a bath and go to bed. See you at school!"

Did something happen? I didn't understand why, but she promptly hung up. *At any rate, I got a lot of useful food for thought. I better thank her later.*

***

The day after my long phone call with Miori. Monday.

I entered my classroom a little earlier than usual. Despite that, over half the class was already present. Nanase was among them as well. When she noticed me, she gave me a small wave. *Her complexion looks fine, at least. That's a relief. Her gestures are cute today as well.*

I walked up to her and said, "I'm asking just in case, but nothing's wrong with your health, right?"

She smiled. "Right. As you can see, I'm bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

"'Sup, Natsuki. I heard what happened," Tatsuya said.

Our usual group congregated around Nanase.

"Did you tell everyone?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I was unsure how to approach the situation, but Hikari persuaded me."

"We'll help, of course, but wouldn't it be better to discuss next steps with everyone?" Hikari asked her. "Besides, all of us are Yuino-chan's precious friends, right?"

Uta gave a thumbs-up. "No duh!"

"If there's anything we can do, we'll help," Reita said, gentle as ever.

"Hell yeah, we will," Tatsuya said brusquely.

"Th-Thank you." Nanase appeared somewhat abashed.

She's usually the one doing the protecting, after all.

"Although, it was all news to me—I was shocked!" Uta glowered at Nanase.

"I-I'm sorry."

Now she's shrinking back. I'm seeing all sorts of new sides to Nanase lately. Then again, she's never been vulnerable with us before.

"Well, Yuino-chan rarely spoke about the piano," Hikari said, covering for Nanase by attempting to placate Uta.

"Hmph... Fiiine!" Uta, whose cheeks had been puffed up, perked back up when Hikari patted her head. In response, Nanase patted Hikari's head out of habit.

Look at this precious moment... We're close to world peace like this.

"By the way." Nanase turned her gaze on me. "Haibara-kun, there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Sure," I said with a nod. *Did she think of a solution?*

"Only Natsuki?" Tatsuya interjected with a small frown.

"Nagiura-kun?" Nanase blinked at him in surprise. Everyone else wore the same expression as her, silently staring at him.

"Wh-What? Don't look at me like that." He awkwardly turned away.

Nanase broke into a smile. "You're right. I'd like to discuss something with all of you, not just Haibara-kun."

Reita smirked and slapped Tatsuya on the shoulder. "Good for you, Tatsuya."

"Shut up." Tatsuya scratched his head as though he were trying to hide his embarrassment.



Come to think of it, Nanase and Tatsuya are pretty close. I heard she was a major player in improving his grades. They make a pretty unexpected duo, though.

"Huh, Tatsu. Nicely said," Uta chimed in, grinding her elbow into his side. Although her tone and expression were playful, her eyes somehow seemed kinda unhappy. "Hmm? Natsu, something wrong?"

Because I had found her reaction odd, I'd been staring at her. She tilted her head at me questioningly. *She looks the same as usual now. I guess it was just my imagination.* "No, nothing." I shook my head and drove away the doubt. Then, we all waited quietly for Nanase to organize her thoughts.

"What I'd like to discuss," she began slowly, "is how to go about conquering my condition."

I expected that would be the topic.

All of our expressions turned serious, and we nodded.

"I spoke to a psychiatrist about the particular symptoms I'm exhibiting, and according to them, if I'm experiencing hyperventilation due to anxiety and fear, I should first attempt mental training to overcome those negative images. Currently, memories of times I've failed onstage are imprinted on my mind, so when I'm in the same position, I recall that intense anxiety."

"I see..." *Thought so. Now that we have an expert's opinion too, we know it's even more likely that the root of her problem is something psychological.*

"Is it difficult for you to ignore those thoughts?" Uta asked.

Nanase nodded. "Yes. This part depends on a person's personality...but in my case, the more I try not to pay attention to it, the more I think about it... It ends up consuming my mind."

"Which means it actually gets worse when you try not to think about it?"

"It may be even worse than that. Given my personality, this may be an impossible task. My doctor said a more effective treatment would be to practice under the same conditions but with a different mindset."

Yeah, she wouldn't be struggling if she could just stop thinking about something when told to. People aren't so simple. Everyone

seemed to understand that, because we all listened to her attentively.

"Practice in the same environment but with a different mindset? That's a bit scary," Hikari remarked, worried that Nanase might faint again.

"To begin with, it would be difficult to recreate the environment of a piano competition multiple times," Reita pointed out, calm as always.

"That's...true." *Even if we set aside our concerns for Nanase, if she keeps causing an uproar like last time, her reputation as a pianist will not only fall, but she might even be banned from entering piano competitions altogether. And in the case where she doesn't faint, she might not be able to perform at her best either. We can't repeat that in front of an audience over and over again.*

"I agree. I would also like to avoid having multiple breakdowns at competitions. Partially because of my pride...but I also feel awful about distressing the audience."

"Then... Hmm, what're our options?" Tatsuya grumbled.

"I think I should start small and take baby steps from there." Nanase suggested the same thing I'd secretly been thinking.

"Take baby steps? How?" Uta asked. I could practically see the question marks floating over her head.

"When I play piano alone, I don't exhibit any of the symptoms."

"I see," Reita said. "You could gradually increase the size of your audience or change the location. With that strategy, you can train your mind as you get closer to an actual competition environment."

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Shiratori-kun. That's exactly right."

Reita anticipated the plan perfectly. As usual, he's great at making reads.

Nanase nodded, and with great difficulty continued. "Therefore, if you could help me, I'd like to play the piano in front of you all. It would take up your time, though, and I'm sorry about that."

The first to respond was Uta. "I'm totally down to do that for you, Yui-Yui!"

"Honestly, I really want to hear you play," Reita added.

“If I don’t have practice, just say the word and I’m there. I’ll even keep you company after practice too.” Tatsuya’s tone was gruff, but his words were full of warmth.

“Count me in too, of course! I’m your best friend, after all!” Hikari put on her brightest smile and made a peace sign.

“I don’t have to repeat my stance again, right?” I asked.

Nanase looked like she was close to tearing up as she smiled. “Thank you, all of you. I’m over the moon. I really am,” she said through sobs, her voice trembling ever so slightly.

She covered her face with her hands, and no one teased her for it.

***

And so, Nanase’s special training to overcome her condition commenced.

“I decided to take a break from work for the time being.”

She had reduced her shifts to prepare for the competition, but now she had elected to completely drop all of them. By way of repaying everyone’s kindness, she wanted to pour all her concentration into the piano.

“Leave Café Mares to me!” I said.

Our job wasn’t a particularly hectic one in the first place. Recently, we’d even gained a new hire, so we had enough staff. Covering for Nanase wouldn’t be a huge issue, nor would there be a need for me to take on too many shifts either.

“Okay, so Hikari and I are going to your place to listen to you play today,” I said.

We were increasing our number of spectators with caution. After all, it would’ve been terrible if Nanase fainted again.

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“Just checking, but are you sure you’re okay starting with two people instead of one?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve already confirmed that I’m capable of performing in front of one person.”

True. When Nanase played for me in the music room, there were

no issues with her performance. She did look a little distressed, though, so she shouldn't push it.

"Well then," she said. "I'll return home first to prepare, and then you two can join me once I'm done. How does that sound?"

"Sure thing."

That's how it was decided that Hikari and I would go to Nanase's house together. *Now that I think about it, I haven't even been to Hikari's house before. I never thought the first girl's house I'd visit would be Nanase's... Oh, Miori's house doesn't count, by the way.*

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"Whoa. It's massive."

Hikari led us to a two-story house located about ten minutes from Takasaki Station on foot. The place was huge and had a spacious yard to boot. It looked like it was twice the size of my home.

Gunma may be a relatively cheap prefecture, but it would still be pretty expensive to own property near Takasaki Station. And yet they have one house in a space that could fit two? They must be rolling in the dough!

"You think so?" Hikari tilted her head.

"Don't tell me—is your house also around this size?"

"Hmm... I think ours is bigger."

Holy moly, they're rich! As expected of a company president's daughter. Though, Sei-san is still only the vice-president for now.

"Natsuki-kun, your house isn't particularly small either, you know."

"Yeah, but we live in the middle of nowhere. You can't compare it to prime real estate like this."

"Huh, really?" Hikari wore a puzzled expression as she opened the gate without knocking and entered the front yard as though she'd done it a million times. There was an empty parking spot in one corner of the yard; perhaps Nanase's parents were still at work.

Hikari rang the doorbell, and the door swung open.

"Welcome," Nanase greeted us, now dressed in casual clothing. She looked great in the simple dress she wore. "Come in."

"Thanks for having us!" Hikari said.

Nanase guided us to the second floor. There was not a single speck of dust in the hallway, and the walls were decorated with expensive-looking paintings.

"This is the music room. Over there is my room."

"You have a room specifically for music in your house?" *That's crazy!*

Nanase smiled wryly. "My parents are both in the music business, so our case is special." She was about to show us into the music room when Hikari stopped her.

"Hey, Yuino-chan, since we're here, why don't you show Natsuki-kun your room?" Excitement was written all over her face.

"Huh? N-No. That would be embarrassing." Nanase clearly was not on board.

I can understand why a girl would be reluctant to have a guy poking around her room. That's why, right? It's not because you hate me specifically, right? Right?!

"Whaaat? But you have sooo much cute merch! You should show him since he's here!"

"Cute...merch?" I questioned.

"Yeah! Like idol posters!"

Oh yeah. Come to think of it, Nanase does love idols. So she keeps merch of them in her room? Now I'm a little curious. Honestly, I just really want to see my oshi's room.

"Natsuki-kun, come this way!" Hikari tugged on my hand with a mischievous smile.

"W-Wait, Hikari! You can't just—?!" Nanase became uncharacteristically flustered, but Hikari didn't stop.

Me? I can't defy my girlfriend when she's pulling on me so hard! What else can I do?

Hikari opened a door at the corner of the second floor and marched inside. "See?! Isn't it amazing?!"

The room she had taken me to was...certainly amazing, to say the least. There were posters and pictures of female idols stuck to the walls, acrylic stands were displayed on top of her desk and dresser, and her bookshelf was practically overflowing with photo books and CDs. She even had a kinda lewd body pillow.

That's pretty explicit. So she buys that sort of stuff too... I'm also an otaku, so I can relate to some degree, but this is mind-blowing! Well, I'm the type of otaku that gets attached to the story first and foremost, so I don't own that much merch. I do collect all the limited edition short stories for light novels that are exclusive to each distributor, though.

"H-Hey! You should've let me prepare if you wanted him to see this!"

"When you invite people over to your home, shouldn't you prepare a bit beforehand?" Hikari said brazenly.

She is merciless!

"I hadn't intended to bring him in here!" Nanase rebutted as she hastily hid her body pillow under her blanket.

Ah, so you didn't want me to see that? I've seen all of it now, though. Nanase looks cute when she's getting red in the face, and it's surprising how many knickknacks she has scattered about. I surveyed her room, marveling over how unexpected everything was, when a pair of red underwear caught my eye. I decided to pretend I hadn't seen that.

"Step outside for a moment, okay?" Nanase said threateningly, blushing like mad. I obediently left her room. I could hear the clatter and rustle of her tidying up her room, and after a few minutes, I heard her and Hikari whispering to each other.

"Whoa. Yuino-chan, you own underwear like this? That's bold..."

"Stop touching everything... What're you going to do if Haibara-kun overhears?!"

Um, I can hear you guys whispering. In fact, I can hear it very well.

"Huh? Yuino-chan, you own this kind of thing?"

"H-Hey! No, that's not mine... Anyway, don't touch it!"

H-Huh? What on earth does she own? I'm... I'm so curious! I fought off the urge to suddenly throw open the door, until it finally opened on its own.

Nanase's breathing was ragged. She looked exhausted. "You can come in now... Actually, is there even any point in going this far to show you my room?" Although she questioned her own actions, she

beckoned me in anyway.

Her disorderly room had been straightened out in mere minutes. Her wall was still covered in posters, though, so my impression of it didn't change much. "Huh, Nanase, you really love Shiratani from Shinozaka41."

Shinozaka41 was a female idol group that Nanase adored.

"W-Well... I like her to some extent?" Nanase replied as she twirled her hair around her finger.

"Uh, this goes way beyond 'some extent.'"

There was merch of Shiratani everywhere. She had merch of the other members of Shinozaka41 lying here and there too, but eighty percent of it must've been Shiratani merch.

"Right? Isn't it amazing?" Hikari said proudly.

"Yeah. I feel like I'm in a different world in here."

Nanase dug her fist into Hikari's head.

"Ow?! Th-That was mean, Yuino-chan!"

"You're the mean one here. You better reflect upon what you've done." I could practically see manga-style sound effects rumbling behind her intimidating expression.

Hikari drooped and bowed over and over. "S-Sorry..."

"Good grief." Nanase let out a long sigh and opened a bottle of water.

"You know, if you look closely, Shiratani resembles Hikari," I remarked.

"Ulp?!" Nanase coughed, choking on her water.

"Y-Yuino-chan? Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes. Water went down the wrong tube. That's all..."

What's with her all of a sudden? Nanase sure is all over the place today.

"I, I don't particularly see the resemblance," Nanase said quickly. She refused to make eye contact.

"Really? What do you think, Hikari?"

"Hmm. Do I really look like an idol?" she asked, pleased by my observation.

As expected of a self-proclaimed school idol. Look at that high self-esteem!

"E-Enough! You didn't come here to fool around!" Nanase pushed us out of her room.

Very good point.

This time, she successfully herded us into the music room. There was a grand piano sitting in the middle of the room, and on one end there were other instruments, like a guitar, resting on their stands. The walls were lined with soundproofing material.

"Wow, this is awesome." *It feels like a music room, all right. It's bigger than Nanase's room.*

There were already two folding chairs set up near the piano. A matching foldable table was situated in front of them, with cups and plastic bottles of tea placed on top. As she had stated earlier, she was all set here. We sat down in our seats.

"Okay, I shall begin. You can drink tea as you please; I don't mind," Nanase said, as though she were collecting herself.

"By the way, what song are you going to play?" I asked.

"For the time being, I don't have any plans to perform for any competitions or recitals," she said. "Do you have any requests?"

Hikari's hand eagerly shot up. "Oh, then can I suggest a song?"

"Yes."

"Yay! Then, to start, I'd like to hear Liszt's 'La Campanella'!"

"That song isn't at a difficulty you'd typically start with...but no matter." Nanase smiled sardonically.

She faced the piano and placed her fingers on its keys. She took a deep breath, and then began to play. Her fingers moved so fast that it was honestly terrifying.

***

Nanase played without any issue in front of us.

"How was it? Do you feel anything?" I asked.

"No, nothing abnormal. I naturally feel some postperformance fatigue, but otherwise I'm fine." Nanase nodded, her hand on her chest as though to ascertain her own feelings.

It doesn't look like she's pushed herself too hard. Seems like an audience of two is manageable. "Then should we add one more

person next time?”

She lowered her head. “Yes. I’m sorry for making you keep me company...but please do.”

“Gotcha. You don’t need to be so deferential,” I replied, purposefully keeping my tone light. *I get to listen to such stellar performances for free. If anything, I’m the grateful one.*

“Would tomorrow work for our next session?” she asked.

“Yeah. We’ll grab someone after they’re done with practice,” I said.

After that, everyone coordinated their schedules, and we gradually increased the number of spectators one at a time. When there were three and even four people watching, Nanase could play without any issues. I thought her skill was actually improving because of all the consecutive days of practice. She didn’t seem to be under any sort of strain either.

“Yuino-chan?!”

The first time Nanase’s performance clearly became unstable was when we hit five people. It was 8:30 p.m. We had gathered after the others finished club practice, and for the sake of everyone’s convenience, we had borrowed the school music room.

Right when Nanase was about to play, she suddenly began to breathe heavily, her shoulders heaving up and down. Hikari immediately rushed to her side. Nanase didn’t seem to notice her presence and simply stared at the keys in a daze.

“Nanase, stop for a sec,” I said.

Her eyes flew to me with a start and focused there. She looked like she was about to cry.

“It’s okay. Calm down.” Without thinking, I pulled her hands away from the keys and grasped them tightly. “Take a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale,” I instructed, trying to keep my voice gentle so she’d feel at ease.

She inhaled clumsily. Her breath trembled ever so slightly upon exhaling. However, repeating that a few times helped her breathing return to normal. After taking a few more deep breaths, she managed to calm down.



Although the color had returned to her face, her expression was despondent. “I’m sorry... You all came here, and I couldn’t even put on a proper performance,” she said guiltily.

“There’s nothing to apologize for. We’re here to help you overcome your problem.” I glanced behind me—Uta, Tatsuya, and Reita were frozen in shock.

“Yui-Yui...are you sure you’re okay?” Uta said, her face laden with concern.

Of course, we had explained Nanase’s symptoms to them. However, even though they’d known what to expect in their heads, it was still a shocking sight to witness firsthand. I understood how they felt. Hikari and I had been able to jump into action when we saw her behaving abnormally because we had seen Nanase faint at the piano competition.

“I can’t believe your symptoms are this bad,” Tatsuya said.

“I understand why your parents want to make you stop playing the piano now,” Reita said.

They both looked perturbed.

The atmosphere in the room was heavy, but Nanase somehow wrangled her breathing under control. “Yes... I’m all right now. May I resume?” she asked, trying to change gears.

“Huh? I think that’s enough for today,” Hikari said as she rubbed her friend’s back.

“If I bellyache over just this much, then my condition won’t improve,” Nanase asserted firmly.

She must’ve been terrified enough to want to run away. I could tell from the way she hadn’t loosened her grip on my hand this whole time.

“Yuino-chan,” Hikari said with a conflicted expression, “don’t you think you should let go of him first?”

“What do you mean?” Nanase tilted her head, puzzled.

“You’ve been holding Natsuki-kun’s hand...”

Nanase’s gaze—still appearing confused—fell down. She turned to stone when she saw that her hand was clutching mine. For a few seconds, the room was blanketed with awkward silence. *Is it just me, or is Uta trying really hard not to laugh?*

“I-I’m sorry!” Nanase yelled louder than I’d ever heard her before and backed away from me in a flash. She stared at her hands like she couldn’t believe what she’d just done, her face red as an apple. “Huh? U-Um... How long have I been...?”

“You’ve been holding on to Natsuki-kun’s hand since he rushed to your side.”

I couldn’t glean any emotion from Hikari’s face. *Scary. To be fair, I was the one who grabbed her hand first, but it’ll be bad if I mention that, so I’m gonna keep my mouth shut.*

“Gosh, Natsu... This is the problem with you, you know?” Uta narrowed her eyes at me and shrugged. It was the first time she had ever looked at me with such exasperation.

***

That day, Nanase tried to play the piano only once more. On her second try, she was able to finish an entire song, albeit a little shakily.

“I really appreciate you all for coming today.” She stopped walking and bowed to us again when we’d reached the school bike parking lot on our way home.

Needless to say, it was already pitch-black outside now that it was past nine. There wasn’t a single cloud in the night sky, where the stars twinkled brightly. The temperature was low enough to make me shiver even though I was wearing a coat, and my breath was white.

“You don’t need to keep bowing,” Tatsuya told her.

“We’re here to help however we can,” Reita added.

“Yeah!” Uta exclaimed. “It was a treat to listen to!”

The bike commuter trio said their goodbyes and went home first.

“Yikes. Papa is angry.” Hikari grimaced when she looked at her phone. She sighed.

“He’s just worried. You should text him that you’re on your way home now,” I said. *I understand how Sei-san feels. It’s already past nine, after all.*

“Okay, okay. ‘I’m on my way home now.’ There.”

And so, the train trio—Nanase, Hikari, and I—started off for the station.

"I'm sorry for making you stay out this late, Hikari."

"Don't worry about it; I wanted to stay." Hikari's lips spread into a radiant smile. "More importantly, Yuino-chan, isn't this great? You showed some symptoms during your first attempt, but you were able to play the second time. Maybe you've conquered your anxiety!"

"This was certainly one step towards overcoming my condition." Nanase nodded in response to her positivity. "However, I still don't know if I've surmounted it completely."

"Nanase, what do you think happened? Did something change between the first and second time?" I asked. *We don't really understand her condition, so if she were to mysteriously overcome it without grasping why, it wouldn't surprise me if she relapsed one day. Why was she able to play the second time when she failed at first? It'd be better if she could put her feelings into words.*

Nanase placed a hand on her chin and pondered the question. "Hmm... I'm not sure why, but I felt like I could play with more ease the second time compared to the first. I was extremely anxious the first time; the memories of when I'd failed at the piano competition kept replaying in my mind. The next thing I knew, I couldn't see in front of me...but then, before I realized it, you two were next to me..." Fragmented sentences formed slowly on her lips as she reflected upon what had happened.

Anxious, huh? Like I thought: Her symptoms are triggered when she feels anxious like the time she underperformed at the piano competition.

"I believe a large part of why I was able to succeed the second time was probably because my audience comprised close friends. When I saw the concern on your faces, I felt safe."

I ruminated over her words. *In that case, is the key to ensure that Nanase feels safe?*

"I'm sure that...if I had played before strangers, my heart would've been filled with anxiety. That's what I suspect. I mean, merely imagining that makes me tremble with fear," Nanase admitted as she hugged herself.

Her fingers that peeked out from beneath her coat sleeves were shaking, and it wasn't because of the cold either.

***

That night.

After I got home, ate dinner, and took a bath, Hikari called me.

"What's up?"

"Hello, Natsuki-kun." It sounded like her voice was echoing in the background.

"It's time for good kids to be asleep." I glanced at the clock—it was already eleven.

"I'm a bad girl, so I won't sleep yet!"

I heard a splash of water. *Huh? Oh my, don't tell me...* "Uh, Hikari? Where are you right now?"

"What? I'm in my bathroom. I worked on my novel after I got home, so I ended up taking a late bath."

Which means she's completely naked right now. Don't you dare imagine anything weird! I heard more splashing, and it made for some vivid imagery. *I'm begging you, please stop. Are you underestimating how horny a teenage boy can be? I've leaped through time; my body has returned to its golden age!*

"Natsuki-kun? What's wrong? Are you shaken up?" Hikari giggled.

She talks like that when she's doing something on purpose. It vexed me that she knew I had lost my composure, so I changed the topic. "Huh? No? Anyway, did you need something?"

"Hmm?" She sounded dissatisfied with my response but moved on to the topic I had expected. "Well, I wanted to talk about Yuino-chan. If we believe what she says, then our next step is to round up an audience of strangers, but..." Her tone had turned completely serious.

"It's hard to do, from a practical standpoint," I finished for her.

Finding complete strangers to sit with us would be difficult. Not to mention, the only places Nanase could perform in were her home and at the school music room. We couldn't let strangers into her house, nor were unaffiliated people allowed into the school. Renting

a music studio could help us get around that issue, but it would be costly. Plus, we'd likely need to hire random people to use their time to listen to Nanase play. It wasn't very realistic for a bunch of high schoolers to put all the moving parts together.

"Besides, don't you think it's a little dicey for Nanase to suddenly jump into playing in front of strangers?"

"What do you mean?"

"We should also take baby steps in regards to who her audience is. Nanase might only have been able to play today because it was for us, her friends. But replicating that in front of a bunch of strangers is too big a change. I think it's important that Nanase racks up small successes." *Just like how Miori overcame her fears by passing a ball around with Uta and me.* "That's why a more realistic suggestion would be...asking our classmates to be her audience."

I'd simply expressed the first idea that had come to mind, but it actually sounded like a pretty good next step. Most importantly, it was something we could actually manage to pull off. I had a feeling most of our classmates would readily agree.

"So we want to find people she has some connection to, but who aren't super close friends." Hikari sounded like she was on board with my plan. "Yeah. I think that's a good idea. Of course, it's up to Yuino-chan in the end."

"Let's ask her tomorrow. If she's down, then we can discuss it with the rest of our classmates." *Who would be good to ask? Hino and Fujiwara are easy choices. I bet Onozawa-san would come if it'd help Nanase play again.*

While I was busy mulling over who to ask for help, Hikari began to slowly talk. "You know, this is just speculation on my part, but I don't think that Yuino-chan is scared of failing."

"What do you mean?"

"I think she's scared of disappointing others." Hikari sounded fairly certain. "Today, after she couldn't play, remember how crestfallen she looked and how she kept her head down? I think she was scared to see our faces. That's precisely why she was relieved when she saw that we were only worried about her. She felt assured that we wouldn't abandon her." She spoke in a prosaic manner, as if

she were possessed by someone else. “And that’s why she could play the second time.”

Hikari is able to come up with this theory because she’s spent so many years with her childhood friend. Or maybe she’s terrifyingly good at reading people due to the perception she’s developed as an aspiring author. Perhaps it’s both.

“Natsuki-kun, I think you’re right that she needs to experience success, but I have a feeling she won’t be able to overcome her condition if we don’t root out the core of her fears.”

“Assuming you’re right, do you think Nanase is aware of that?”

“No. I don’t think she has a good grasp on her feelings. Yuino-chan is skilled at appearing calm on the surface, but she’s masking her inner confusion.”

Hikari’s description of Nanase conflicted with my impression of our friend. However, Hikari was very persuasive. If Nanase were the type of person who could control her emotions, she probably wouldn’t have been suffering from these symptoms. Also, there was no doubt in my mind that Hikari knew Nanase the best.

“Let’s talk about the details tomorrow,” Hikari said.

“Yeah. It’s late, after all.”

“My bath ran longer than I wanted to. I should get out.”

“All right. Good night.”

“Yeah, good night.”

I was about to hang up when my phone screen suddenly changed.

“Ah?!” she yelped.

What?! As soon as I thought that, a flesh-colored rectangle appeared on my screen.

The delicate curve of her neck and shoulders, damp skin covered in water droplets... And two large, round shapes dangling from her chest shook along with her panicked movements.

“Sorry... I think I misclicked?! D-Don’t look!”

Evidently, Hikari had accidentally clicked on the video button. *How?* “I-It’s okay! I didn’t look!”

“Shoot! Um, uh, huh? Urgh...”

She was so flustered that it took her much too long to turn off

the video. All the while, the camera bounced around, capturing her body.

"D-Don't worry! I'm not looking! Calm down!" I didn't take my eyes off the screen. *My video isn't on, so she won't catch me even if I lie! Is my new age of lucky lecher events here? I got to see something good.*

***

The next day.

When Hikari arrived at school, she punched my shoulder.

"Wh-What?" I was flustered, without question.

"You looked." She regarded me with a cold gaze.

Wh-Why does she suspect me so strongly? She couldn't have found out! "I— I told you I didn't look!"

"You looked. Didn't you?" She stared into my eyes.

"Nope! Like I said already, I didn't." I reflexively dropped my gaze down and ended up looking at Hikari's body. Because of that, memories of yesterday's spectacle flashed through my mind.

"You definitely saw! It's written all over your face."

"I... I didn't! Show me the proof! Go on!"

"I can't believe a real live human just said something only a criminal from a mystery novel would say." She shot me an exasperated look.

Don't say that! "For argument's sake, even if I did see something, it wasn't my fault!"

"Aha! You admit it! You *did* see! Stuuupid!"

Hikari and I walked into the classroom while we squabbled.

"What in the world are you two doing so early in the morning?"

The next thing I knew, Nanase was standing next to me, wearing an indescribable expression.

"Ah! Yuino-chan, listen to this! Natsuki-kun saw me naked!"

Our classmates—who had been watching us from afar while thinking "Those stupid lovebirds are at it again"—all snapped their wide-eyed gazes on me.

"Hey! You can't just say that! You're going to cause a

misunderstanding!" I protested.

"Why don't you explain yourself? In detail." Nanase, Hikari's guardian, exuded rage.

How did this become my fault? Supposed I did see. Is it really a problem, since we're dating? However, it didn't look like that argument would fly in this atmosphere. *Inconceivable.*

***

Lunch break.

"Huh? You want *my* help?" Fujiwara Kanata tilted her head, puzzled.

After Nanase had finished lecturing me with stuff like "It's too soon for that sort of thing while you're still in high school, blah blah blah," we had discussed our next step, and then agreed to ask our classmates for help.

"Actually, it's about Nanase and the piano..." I started explaining the situation to our class leader.

"I see. That's why she wasn't eager to be the accompanist for our choir." Fujiwara nodded once I'd finished, her expression grave.

"I'm sorry," Nanase said. "It would cause trouble for everyone if I were suddenly unable to play."

"Oh no, don't worry about it. It's fine. I don't want to force you either," Fujiwara replied quickly. Then she smiled, trying to put Nanase at ease. "Of course I'll help out, though. How many people should we grab?"

"How about five or six," I proposed. That was about the same number as when our friend group had watched her perform, but the goal this time was to see how she fared in front of people she was slightly less familiar with.

Nanase nodded. "Could you help us?"

"Yep! Do you need them for today after school?"

"That would work for me...but can you gather six people on such short notice?" Nanase asked, bewildered.

"What are you saying?" Fujiwara scoffed exasperatedly and tapped Nanase on the shoulder. "We'll all get together no problem if

it’s for you, Yuino.”

After that, Fujiwara reached out to the other girls in our class and explained the situation to them. At the sight of nearly all the girls huddled together, the boys’ faces flickered with curiosity, so Tatsuya, Reita, and I gave them the lowdown. After all, we might need to ask them for help in the future. Naturally, we had received permission from Nanase to bring them up to speed.

“Hey, uh... It’s fine. It won’t affect my everyday life, so there’s no issue. Okay?”

Nanase felt bad about taking up our time, so everyone tried to assuage her worries. *She’s popular as always. Nanase likes to look after other people, so the girls in our class rely on her a ton.*

“Everyone... Thank you,” Nanase said, surrounded by all the girls. “Since you’re all helping me, I better do my best too.”

Her tone sounded somewhat stiff when she added that. Hikari observed her all the while.

***

I couldn’t accompany Nanase today since I had work after school. In all honesty, I wasn’t in the mood to go, but I couldn’t skip my shift. I continued to cook while suppressing my desire to pull out my phone and check my notifications.

When the dinner rush had abated, someone called out to me. “Natsuki, is something wrong?” Mei asked from across the counter. He was in charge of the front today.

Oh yeah. I’m on shift with Mei today. I’ve been so out of it that it slipped my mind. “Sorry. There’s something I’m a little worried about.” For a split second, I waffled on whether I should divulge Nanase’s situation to Mei. However, I hadn’t asked her if I could talk about it outside of our classmates.

“Is it about the music fest?” he asked.

Not gonna lie, I completely forgot about that.

“Looks like no.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t. Sorry, I need to think about that too.”

Mei peered at me coldly. “It’s written all over your face that you

don’t think it’s important right now.”

“That’s not true,” was what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t refute him. It was a fact that I had been putting it on the back burner, which showed just how much the music fest meant to me.

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to attack you. I do think that you should decline sooner rather than later, though. It’s rude to raise Hondo-san’s hopes only to make her wait.” Mei wrinkled his nose and made a weird smile.

While I’ve been thinking about Nanase, he’s had the music fest on his mind. That’s why he’s a little irritated to learn I haven’t given it any thought. “You’re right.”

He’s right about everything. Before I spend all my time worrying about someone else, I should settle my own problems. Do I want to appear in this festival? What do I want to achieve as part of this band? There’s no point in practicing when I’m full of hesitation. If I don’t figure it out, then—

“If you’re worried about Yuino, then focus on her first.” Serika’s voice suddenly rang out of nowhere.

I turned towards its source to see she was sitting at a table drinking coffee. “Serika...”

“I had a feeling you hadn’t noticed she was here.” Mei smiled bitterly.

Looks like I haven’t been paying attention to my surroundings at all today. “Sorry, Serika.”

“It’s fine. We’ll put band practice on hold for a while.” Serika spoke with her usual blasé attitude and downed the rest of her coffee. “If you rush to find your answer, you’ll definitely regret it.”

“So carefully agonize over it,” she seemed to imply.

“Are you sure you’re okay with that? We’ll lose practice time for the music fest,” Mei said.

“It’s not like we’ll die if we don’t participate in this event. It’s more important that we have a clear picture of our future direction. And I think we’ll need time for that.”

Serika always seems weirdly mature in times like these. It’s as if she can see right through me.

“Besides... The answer might be tied to helping Yuino,” she said

with a profound smile, and then left the café.

Right when I thought she was gone, she cracked open the door and came back in.

"I forgot to pay."

Nope, she's the same old absent-minded Serika.



***

After my shift, I messaged Hikari over RINE that I had made it home. As soon as my text was marked as read, she called me, and I picked up. What she reported to me was not what I'd been hoping to hear.

"It was a no go?" I said.

"Yeah. She tried to play a few times, but...she started exhibiting those symptoms. I'd calm her down before she looked like she was about to faint. I didn't think we were getting anywhere today, so we stopped."

"I see... How does Nanase look?"

"She felt guilty towards everyone who came, and apologized over and over. When we went home together, she was depressed the entire way back... She acted tough on the outside, though." Hikari then described everything that had taken place.

The audience had consisted of five girls, all of them our classmates: Fujiwara, Onozawa-san, Terai-san, Kiyosato-san, Minoura-san, and Kiyoshi-san.

"Besides Onozawa-san, the rest of them chat with Nanase relatively often, right?" *Incidentally, they're all either part of the go home club, or in a culture club, which is probably why they were easy to recruit.*

"Yeah. Onozawa-san said she likes Yuino-chan's music, which is why she wanted to help."

On top of those five, Hikari was there too, bringing the count up to six people total. That's basically the same number of people as last session, but this time she failed to play no matter how many times she tried. "Does her relationship with the audience make a big difference after all?"

"It's an issue of her mindset in the end. Everything depends on whether her memories of failure are superseded by her desire to succeed. I'm just repeating what Yuino-chan's doctor said, though."

"You talked to her doctor?" I asked.

"When I went to her hospital, I picked up a few bits of info."

I could well see that Hikari's desire to help Nanase was genuine. Lately, she had been studying psychology before bed too.

"Natsuki-kun, there's something I want to try." What she suggested next was rather shocking.

"In that case, Hikari, I also have an idea to add to that..."

***

Lunch the next day.

"I can get four or five people today, but..." Fujiwara cast a worried glance at Nanase and asked, "What do you want to do?"

Last time, we picked five people from ten volunteers, but we've got fewer today. We'll have days like this, since people's schedules aren't always open.

"To be honest, some of the girls are scared and can't bear to see it again. They think you should stop," Fujiwara continued quietly.

I had a feeling she was of that same opinion. *I understand where they're coming from. There's a huge difference between the shock you get from hearing what happens versus actually experiencing it firsthand.*

"I... I..." Nanase's face twisted miserably when she heard that. "If that's...what everyone says...then..." Her voice trembled, and although she had said she didn't want to give up, her head was hanging now.

Hikari cut her friend off and firmly declared, "It's okay. Yuino-chan."

"Hikari?"

"Yuino-chan, as long as you're facing this problem, then I'll be there with you," Hikari said encouragingly.

"Hikari..." Fujiwara was speechless. "Are you telling Yuino to struggle, even if she has to suffer?" she asked, her tone thick with disbelief.

Hikari nodded. "Yeah. I don't want her to lie about how she feels."

I definitely couldn't be so forceful about this. As long as Nanase wants to fight, the only thing I can do is give her the little push she

might need.

"But if I continue, I'll only be inconveniencing everyone," Nanase said.

"If you lie to yourself, you'll regret it," Hikari replied.

Yeah, I can't grab her by the hand and blaze a trail the way that Hikari can. Why? Because I can't take responsibility for the dangers that might come with it. But for better or worse, none of that matters to Hikari.

"You want to get on the stage and play the piano again, don't you?" she continued.

But it's because Hikari is like this that her words will reach Nanase's heart.

Tears spilled from Nanase's eyes, drawing a line down her cheek.

"Plus, you've only practiced a few times. It's too soon to give up!"

"Yes. You're right, Hikari," Nanase said through sobs.

The sight made Fujiwara lower her head remorsefully. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Oh, don't apologize. I know you're all worried about me." Nanase frantically shook her head.

"Also, no one thinks you're an inconvenience," I added. While we were on the subject, I had to make that very clear. "Right, guys?"

I opened up the floor to our classmates who had been listening in. We were having such a serious conversation in the middle of lunch break; obviously, we'd caught the others' attention. On top of that, pretty much all of them were aware of Nanase's condition. How could they have ignored us?

"Of course!"

"Leave it to me. I'm weak to a woman's tears!"

"We'll help too! You're not an inconvenience!"

"Nanase is our class mom, after all!"

"Yuino-chan always helps me out!"

"Yeah! I'll lend a hand anytime! Also, please go out with me!"

Supportive voices rose up one after another in response to my question. *Hold on... Did someone confess just now? Or did I imagine it?*

"E-Everyone..." Nanase was stunned by our classmates' reactions.

She's pretty unaware of how much clout she's got, even though she's one of the key members of our class. "Hey, Nanase. Why don't you try being our accompanist for the school music festival?" My suggestion was what Hikari and I had discussed yesterday. We actually needed to start practicing soon, and we hadn't chosen an accompanist yet.

"Huh?"

We had about two weeks until the interclass choir competition. Between now and then, we could use music class and time after school to get in ample practice. We wouldn't need to scramble to find people like we were doing now; instead, we'd organically be able to rehearse.

"Now that you mention it... I never gave an answer."

"I think it's a perfect way to take your practice step by step." *And the last step will be performing in front of the entire student body, but unlike a piano competition, Nanase won't be the star of the show. She'll only be the accompanist. There shouldn't be as much attention on her.* "It's up to you, of course."

"But... I don't feel like I can do it right now. Although I don't intend to give up on overcoming this, if I botch our performance, I'll have ruined our chances at winning." Nanase shook her head with a frown. "The school music festival is the product of everyone's efforts; it's not for my selfish needs."

Her argument was so sound that there was no room for rebuttal. "Hmm. That's true." *My suggestion amounts to misappropriating a school event. It makes sense she'd be unwilling.*

"I-If!" Onozawa-san blurted out loudly. "If it doesn't look like you can do it, then I'll take your place. We should try it with you as our accompanist first, Nanase-san... It'd make me happy, because I adore listening to you play."

Although Onozawa-san was clearly intimidated to have everyone's attention on her, she expressed her opinion. She didn't seem like the type of girl who'd speak up during a situation like this, so I was surprised.

"If Onozawa-san is willing, then why don't we give it a shot?" Fujiwara said mildly.

"But..." Nanase hesitated.

"Nanase, what do you want to do?" *We haven't asked that crucial question yet.*

Her eyes widened.

"Forget about the circumstances and situation. Do you want to do it or not?" Hikari added.

Nanase looked at me, her expression full of unease. I nodded, wordlessly trying to convey that it would all be okay.

"Of course I want to play. Being the accompanist for our choir sounds fun," she finally admitted.

"That's the spirit!"

We all smiled. Her cheeks flushed, and she began fiddling with the tips of her hair shyly. *Cute!*

"Haibara-kun, you talked big, but is this decision even yours to make?" Nanase asked in an accusatory tone, her lips forming a pout.

"It's okay. According to Fujiwara, I'm the class leader."

I glanced at Fujiwara, and she flashed her pearly whites along with a thumbs-up.

It doesn't feel real, but somehow I've ended up in this position. I may have annoying tasks dumped on me thanks to this, so I might as well put my authority to use.

"Quite the dictator you are."

"Maybe I am."

Nonetheless, we had already confirmed that no one else wanted to volunteer to be the accompanist. While our discussion had been underway, the rest of our classmates had gathered to listen. Lunch break was almost over, so the kids who'd left the room to eat were back now. That meant everyone was in the loop. On top of that, the atmosphere in the room was very warm and kind.

That's right! Our class is one unified group right now!

"Is it just me, or is he getting kiiinda cocky?"

Hey, Hino, I can hear you. You sure are loud for someone trying to shit-talk behind my back! And here I was, finally basking in the glorious high school event of a class becoming unified in spirit.

"Who gives a crap about the choir competition, anyway!"

Hey, Tatsuya, you're being too blunt! Stop vocalizing what all the

boys are thinking!

"You can use this chance to practice as much as you want. I don't care what happens day of," Okajima-kun of the soccer team said.

Hey, guys, stop nodding in agreement! You're making it obvious that we're way less enthusiastic about this than the girls!

"Excuse me, boys?" Fujiwara glared at them. "There's only one music festival a year. You *want* to win, right?"

"Yeah. You boys better practice hard, or else you'll hold us back!"

"Having Nanase-san as our accompanist is actually our trump card."

Seeeee? The group of diligent girls that Fujiwara leads are shooting icy glares at the jock guys like Tatsuya! God, what happened to class solidarity?

***

After school that same day, in the music room.

We'd grabbed three of our classmates to assist us in Nanase's training.

"Thank you all for coming today. I appreciate it." Nanase stood in front of the piano and bowed deeply.

The group consisted of Onozawa-san, Shimizu-san, and Mamiya-san. Shimizu-san and Mamiya-san were members of Fujiwara-san's group of tryhard girls. They were both in the wind ensemble. The two of them were taking the music festival quite seriously, so they were here not only to help Nanase, but also because they wanted to produce good results at the choir competition. Plus, they didn't have ensemble practice today.

Since our last practice session hadn't gone very well, after discussing it with Hikari, we had decided to reduce the audience count by one. Including Hikari and me, there were five of us in total.

"Let's get to it, then." Nanase was about to sit down, but Hikari stopped her.

"Yuino-chan, can I talk to you for a sec before you start?" Hikari asked, and then turned to me. "Natsuki-kun, can you come over here too? And, girls, can you wait here for a moment?"

Hikari took Nanase's hand and led her outside the music room. *She's going to try her idea out now.* I followed behind them.

The hallway was empty. There wasn't typically any traffic around the music room after school. Though the wind ensemble's clubroom was nearby, they didn't have practice today. The second music room that my band had constantly borrowed to practice for the school festival was also up here, but no one was using it today. The light music club's room was a bit of a ways away. We could faintly hear the sports clubs shouting outside.

"Hikari? Wh-What is it?" Nanase asked, confused.

"Yuino-chan, will you let me try something without questioning it?" Hikari stared at her with a serious expression.

Nanase nodded. "Okay. I trust you."

With one of her hands, Hikari picked up Nanase's hand, and then she grasped mine in the other.

"Huh? *Huh*?" Although Nanase trusted her friend, Hikari's intentions were so unclear that it perplexed her.

Hikari continued anyway and linked Nanase's hand with mine. I touched her hand—it was unexpectedly cold and trembling slightly.

"E-Excuse me, Hikari?!" Nanase instinctively tried to retract her arm, but Hikari held firm.

"Natsuki-kun," she said.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah." She nodded.

I gripped Nanase's hand, enveloping it in mine as gently as I could.

"Wh-What's going on?" Nanase didn't squeeze back and simply froze in place, her face scarlet.

That's what I want to know. I'm holding another girl's hand in front of my girlfriend because my girlfriend wants me to... Honestly, what is this situation? But Hikari was serious about doing this, so I didn't make fun of her idea.

"Come on, Yuino-chan, hold his hand properly."

I had been so shocked last night when Hikari told me her suggestion. The thought of ending up like this was simply too weird. I recalled our discussion from yesterday.

***

"I want you to hold Yuino-chan's hand before she plays piano."

I was shocked speechless, understandably so. Honestly, I never would've expected Hikari to suggest such a thing, given how deep her jealousy could run. "Huh? Why me? Why am I holding hands with her?"

"The other day when she couldn't play the first time but managed to the second time...she held your hand, remember?"

"Y-Yeah... That was because she was shaken up, though." I recalled how she'd unconsciously been holding my hand. She'd been clenching quite hard but hadn't noticed it at all.

"I think that's the biggest difference between practice sessions."

"Are you sure? I thought you agreed that the biggest factor was that she saw how concerned we all were. Don't we think she succeeded because we weren't disappointed in her?"

"Yeah, I think that's right. But I also think that the main contributor to letting her feel secure and perform was that she held your hand."

I had no idea why Hikari was so convinced about that. She always saw things that I couldn't.

"In the end, when she plays piano, she'll have to fight on her own, though," Hikari continued.

It's very like Hikari to describe playing the piano as fighting. There's no doubt that Nanase is fighting against herself right now.

"If you hold hands, maybe she'll feel like she's not alone," Hikari said.

"By that logic, can't you hold her hand?"

"I tried that already today," she whispered. "I held her hand before she started, but it didn't work."

"Well, I guess that's not it, then." *Holding hands doesn't affect Nanase's mentality.*

"No, it just doesn't work with me." Hikari refuted me firmly.

"Why do you think that?"

"Hmm... I don't want to tell you why." She sounded awfully lonely. "Anyway, try it. Do it for Yuino-chan."

Just trying it wasn't a huge deal, so I agreed to her plan.

***

"O-Okay." Although Nanase was flustered, she gripped me back. Her icy, slender fingers touched my hand as though she were checking that it existed. "Haibara-kun, your hand is warm."

"That's because your hands are freezing." *Hikari always tells me that I have cold hands. It just goes to show how cold Nanase's hands are if she thinks mine are warm.*

We stayed like that for almost a minute. Nanase's tensed shoulders relaxed over time.

"H-Hikari... Can we stop?" Nanase asked.

"Hmm... Yeah, this should be enough for now. How do you feel?"

"How do I feel? Um..."

"Do you feel safe now that you've held his hand?" Hikari continued to question her.

Nonplussed, Nanase averted her gaze and locked eyes with mine. Her cheeks turned even redder. "I...might, yes," she answered, covering her face with her hands.

Seeing her react like that made my own face heat up too. *Why does Nanase seem so ashamed? I feel bad.*

"Okay! Give it your best go, then!" Hikari opened the music room door and nudged Nanase back inside.

"Y-Yes, okay."

Onozawa-san and the other girls turned puzzled looks on Nanase. Though Nanase had been gone for only a few minutes, she had returned to the room with her cheeks crimson; of course they'd be confused. Their gazes followed Nanase as she took her seat in front of the piano.

"I'm sorry for keeping you. Now we'll start." She took a deep breath.

I gulped. My nerves were running wild just watching her. After all, I had to stop her if I felt like anything was off. All of us monitored her every move closely.

Nanase placed her fingers on the keys and then suddenly

remembered to look at us. Her gaze swept across each of our faces, landing on mine last. The corners of her eyes softened, and her lips widened into a smile.

Then, she began to play a famous melody. It was Beethoven's "Für Elise." She was very familiar with this song because she used to play a lot when she was younger. The main goal was for her to be able to perform in front of an audience, so we'd had her choose something that would be easy for her.

Nothing about Nanase's behavior seemed abnormal. With no time to even feel relieved, I became sucked into the world of her music. Minutes felt like a mere moment. The next thing I knew, everyone in the room was clapping their hands. We all praised her:

"Amazing!"

"You did it."

"That was super good."

"Good for you, Yuino-chan." Hikari smiled at her friend.

Nanase looked back at her friend with a conflicted expression.

***

After that, Nanase continued to play, increasing the difficulty level with each song, but she showed no sign of changing. When her fatigue became visible, we stopped.

"I'd listen to her play anytime."

"Right? I feel like I should be paying to watch this."

"I mean, doesn't it seem like she can play without any problem?"

"Yeah. Better no problems than having issues, I say."

Shimizu-san and Mamiya-san chatted jubilantly as they left.

"Thank you both," Nanase said, waving to them.

"I'll get going too, then." Onozawa-san gave us a small bow.

"Yeah. Thanks for coming two days in a row," I told her.

"I'm glad that she could play today," Onozawa-san said haltingly. After she'd witnessed yesterday's failed attempt, today's success had allayed her worries.

Nanase hurried over to the rest of us. "Thank you as well, Onozawa-san."

"N-No, don't say... I simply wanted to listen."

"And I'm truly grateful for that."

"Ha ha, I'm glad I got to listen to you play, Nanase-san."

Their exchange was heartwarming to watch. *I feel like the nerves have left Onozawa-san and her attitude has loosened up. They both play the piano, so they'll be good friends before we know it.*

"By the way, when the three of you went out to the hallway, did you do something?" Onozawa-san asked.

"O-Oh... Um..." Nanase became noticeably flustered.

I didn't know what to say either. Even though Hikari had given her stamp of approval, I was hesitant to tell the truth. Doing so might cause weird misunderstandings, and explaining everything from the beginning would take a while.

"I-It's a secret," Nanase said.

She had arrived at the same conclusion and placed her pointer finger over her lips. She glanced at me. *Stop! Making eye contact like that is way too suggestive.*

"Huh? Don't tell me..." Onozawa-san covered her mouth with her hands when she saw how suspicious Nanase was acting. Her face reddened, and she cast alternating glances at me and Nanase. "Don't tell me you...the three of you did it?!" Her eyes were sparkling with joy for some reason.

"Did what?!" Nanase exclaimed.

"I-I'm sorry. That was a strange question! It's a secret! Yes, a secret after all!"

"W-Wait, hold on a moment! I think you're operating under some sort of misunderstanding," Nanase said, pressing her palm against her forehead like she was fighting an oncoming headache.

"Huh? But... With the way you sent each other those knowing looks, you definitely did it..."

"Again, did what?!" I quipped.

"S-Something lewd?" Onozawa-san whispered.

That's a crazy misunderstanding! There are too many retorts I could make here. "The three of us?!" I questioned. "In the span of a few minutes?!" *Sure, Nanase was acting weird, but your imagination made some huge leaps and bounds!*

"Extrovert-sans are truly incredible," she murmured.

Onozawa-san, don't you think you're putting extroverts on a pedestal there? And why did you add "san" to that?

Her eyes twinkled. She was making subdued squealing noises for reasons I could not fathom.

I did not *expect you to be the prime example of a teen girl with off-the-wall fantasies!*

"Y-Your secret is safe with me! Well then, I hope the three of you enjoy yourselves. Take your time!" Onozawa-san, radiating excitement, ran out of the room like she was fleeing.

"H-Has she got some kind of wild misunderstanding?" I asked.

"Indeed, she does."

Onozawa-san didn't seem like the sort of girl to spread rumors, but we couldn't leave her with that misconception. We were about to chase after her when someone called out to us from behind.

"What did you guys talk about while I was in the bathroom?" Hikari asked, inquisitive eyes on Onozawa-san scampering off.

"Who knows..." I said.

"I'm really not sure myself," Nanase added.

We laughed dryly, trying to deflect the topic.

A question mark floated over Hikari's head. *Let's fix this misunderstanding later.*

***

After school the next day.

This time, including the classmates we'd summoned, we had a total of eight people. Nanase put on a flawless performance and received extremely high praise. And like yesterday, I held her hand before she played.

The days passed one by one, and her audience grew in number. Throughout the process, there were times when her face would contort with pain. However, each success built up her confidence, and eventually she could play in front of twelve people.

This process was taxing on Nanase's mind, but she didn't complain once. She only ever thanked us for helping her practice. All

of our classmates were convinced that she had overcome her condition.

The only people who knew that Nanase was holding my hand before each session were me, Hikari, and Nanase. We kept it between the three of us to avoid any misunderstandings.

Although our plan for Nanase to overcome her trauma was working and she seemed to be making good progress, her expression became more somber with each passing day. I couldn't say I didn't know why.

Then, our practices during music class for the choir competition began. We would use class time to rehearse for the festival right up until the day of. Our motivation levels were all over the place. The girls were relatively serious about it, but a lot of the boys seemed to lack interest and spent most of the time chatting. There were a few enthusiastic guys, though.

"Hello, boys. We're going to start practice now, okay?" Fujiwara—who stood in front of the room as our conductor—admonished them angrily.

However, their leisurely attitudes didn't change, and some of them even mocked her.

"We're singing 'On the Day of Departure.' We'll split into our respective parts and practice...but first, let's listen to the song."

We had picked our song during a class meeting led by Fujiwara and me. It was a popular tune usually played at graduations, so I expected everyone knew it; however, it was still important to listen to it again to refresh our memories. Our music teacher played the song on a radio cassette player and explained the part splits as deemed necessary. After that, the class divided up into three parts—soprano, alto, and tenor—and began to practice.

Because the others cajoled me with compliments like "You're good at singing" and "It's gotta be Natsuki," I wound up forced into the role of leading the tenor section. *Well, I guess I don't mind. Going all out for events like this gives you a strong dose of vitamin youth (according to my research), so I want us to put together a good choir.*

We practiced while the indifferent boys noisily jabbered away.

“Practice a little longer in groups, and then let’s try putting all the parts together once. We’ll call it a day after that,” our teacher said.

I glanced at the clock, amazed at the way time had flown by. We only had ten minutes of class left.

“Now’s our chance... Yuino-chan, Natsuki-kun, let’s step outside for a second,” Hikari furtively called out to us.

She intended to have us perform our usual ritual (can I call it that?) before Nanase played the accompaniment. However, Nanase shook her head.

“Huh?” Hikari looked at her in confusion.

“I want to try playing without relying on Haibara-kun today.” Nanase’s face was steeled with grim determination.

“But playing in front of this many people all of a sudden? It’s a huge difference compared to what we’ve been doing,” Hikari said hesitantly.

Nanase remained firm, though. “Please, Hikari.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.”

“Hellooo? You three over there, we’re starting,” Fujiwara called out to us.

“Yes, coming.” From the beginning to the end of our little exchange, Nanase hadn’t looked at me once. Was that on purpose?

She took her place in front of the piano. No one was worried about her. Of course they weren’t. She had just put on an immaculate performance for an audience of twenty of our classmates the other day, and she hadn’t failed to play during any of our recent practice sessions. Word was spreading that she was fine now, so the atmosphere was lax.

“Okay, okay! Quiet. Yuino, are you ready?” Even Fujiwara had shed her concerns and now had full faith in Nanase.

There was the slightest pause, and then Nanase replied, “Yes. I can start at any time.”

I was sure that Hikari and I were the only ones feeling uneasy. Fujiwara, without an ounce of fear, raised her hand to conduct. The intro of the song rang out—Nanase had begun to play. Her fingers were certainly moving on top of the keys, which was why—

“Nanase?!”

—the only people who noticed something was clearly wrong were Hikari and me. I pushed past our classmates and ran towards her. The music suddenly stopped. She wobbled and then collapsed like a puppet whose strings had snapped, and I caught her in my arms. Hikari was by her side only a few seconds after me.

Nanase was panting, her breathing irregular. Her complexion was pallid, and she looked like she was in pain. Her hand shakily groped in the air.

"Natsuki-kun!" Hikari cried.

I grabbed Nanase's hand and squeezed tightly. I didn't know if I had done it because of Hikari or out of instinct.

"Haibara...kun?"

"It's okay, Nanase. Calm down."

The rest of our classmates and the music teacher were dumbfounded. Nanase leaned her head against my chest, and slowly her breathing returned to normal.

Our teacher—who knew nothing about Nanase's condition—finally snapped back to life. "L-Let's get her to the infirmary first!"

"Yeah," I responded. *She looks like she's settled down, but she should lie down and rest just to be safe.*

Nanase stopped me and stood up. "I'm sorry. Sensei, I'm okay now."

"R-Really? Um." Our teacher hesitated. "Are you feeling ill?"

"I just...felt a bit anemic. I can play."

While Hikari and I were busy hemming and hawing, Nanase pushed the conversation along.

"Then... I suppose I don't need to be too worried. I'll allow you to continue." The music teacher gave Nanase a once-over and then decided she was fit to keep going. Our classmates couldn't contain themselves and broke out into an unsettled buzz.

"Are you really okay?" I asked.

"I'll be fine. After all, you've held my hand already." There was a smile on her face, but she looked like she was about to cry.

Unable to get another word in, Hikari and I returned to our respective rows. We had a hunch she really was okay.

"Y-Yuino? Are you sure you can continue?" Fujiwara asked her

nervously.

Instead of answering, Nanase began to play. The intro to the song that had been interrupted began to fill the air once more. Every single person in the room had their gazes glued on her.

She took her fingers off the keys. “Yes. There’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine now.” She had played a few bars to prove it, and as she was playing, the tense mood had gradually dissipated.

“Th-Then...we’ll start, okay?” Relieved, Fujiwara waved her hand and began to conduct.

Nanase pressed note after note until they weaved into one strand of melody. Her performance was so entrancing that the sopranos and altos entered their part a little late. However, Nanase trusted Fujiwara’s lead and continued without hesitation.

Some students only had a vague recollection of how the song should go, some were off beat, and some didn’t sing at all. This was the obvious result since it was our first practice, but we weren’t a good choir by any means. In sharp contrast, our top-tier accompanist stood out.

“Th-That was marvelous! Nanase-san, what a truly excellent performance!” praised our starstruck music teacher. “However, the choir part still needs a lot of work. Keep practicing, okay?”

“Okaaay,” we replied weakly.

“She looks fine.”

“Yeah. I was shocked when she fell over, but I’m glad it worked out.”

I heard some girls whisper among themselves. Everyone seemed relieved, but Nanase’s expression was dark.

***

Once school ended, Nanase left her bag at her desk and disappeared somewhere. Since we had practiced during music class today, we hadn’t scheduled an after-school session. The kids going to their clubs streamed out of the room. Even after everyone besides me and Hikari had left, Nanase still hadn’t returned.

Hikari tugged on my sleeve and said, “Natsuki-kun, go look for

her.”

I had also been debating whether we should search for her, so I wasn’t against it, but... “Hikari, are you not coming with me?”

“I want you to find her. I have an idea where she is.”

I don’t get what she’s thinking. If she knows where Nanase might be, shouldn’t she go? “Why me? I think it’d be better if you—”

“Right now, Yuino-chan needs you,” Hikari interrupted. Her expression was awfully solemn.

“Okay,” I said reluctantly.

“You don’t need to think about me right now.” Her tone was cold and somewhat sad. “Help Yuino-chan.”

I decided not to ask her what she meant.

“She’s probably...on the roof,” she said.

***

I climbed up the stairs to the roof. When I opened the door, I immediately spotted a lone girl with her back to me up ahead. Her long black hair fluttered in the wind as she gazed out at the town.

“Why did it turn out like this, I wonder,” she murmured without turning around. She’d heard my footfalls approaching her. “All I wanted was to move people’s hearts with my piano.” Her voice trembled. “I didn’t want to give up on my dream. That’s all.”

A drop of water landed by her feet. Nanase was the tallest among the girls, but right now she seemed so small.

“This isn’t what I wanted...and Hikari is being so considerate to me too!” she yelled as she whirled around, wearing an expression I’d never seen before.

“Nanase...”

“Because I’m weak, I was scared of fighting alone. When you said you’d help me, I was overjoyed! The moment I thought it was okay to rely on you, I immediately began to take advantage of you—I became dependent and terrified that you’d leave.”

Have I messed up again? There was probably a better way I could’ve handled this for Nanase’s sake.

“And now I can’t even play piano onstage without you!”

I didn't want her to have any regrets. That was my only wish. But this is the result: a girl crying right in front of me.

"I'm sorry... I don't want to lash out at you," she said, wiping her tears with her sweater sleeve. She continued, her voice filled with remorse. "It's just... The methodology was wrong. In the end, a pianist fights alone, so I shouldn't have depended on all of you. When you offered to help me, I should've declined."

She looked like a lonely, frightened child.

"It's not too late to start now," she continued. "I think we should distance ourselves so that I can play piano without you. I'm sorry for pushing you around, but..."

I had a feeling I shouldn't let her complete that sentence.

"You don't need to think about me right now."

All right, I trust you, Hikari. "You're still not alone, Nanase." I grabbed her hand and squeezed it, just like I did before she played the piano.

Her face crumpled, and teardrops dampened the ground. "Stupid... It's because you do things like this that I can't help but impose upon you." She leaned her head against my chest.

"That's fine. I'm the one who said I'd help. You might not be able to stand on your own yet, but you can play in front of everyone now. You've made it this far already, right?" *I think that's concrete progress.* "Our special training isn't wrong."

She mumbled something along the lines of "I-If you say that...I'll keep depending on you..." with her head still buried in my chest.

"And what's wrong with that? You can depend on me until the very end."

"What?!" Nanase looked up at me incredulously, her face scarlet.

"Holding your hand before you perform isn't that big a deal. It doesn't bother me."

"It bothers *me*! Do you not understand that you're Hikari's boyfriend?!"

She says that, but she's the one hugging me. It doesn't seem like she's aware of it, though. "If you still need to use me as a mental crutch, then just stop needing to hold my hand to accomplish that."

She blinked at me in surprise. Apparently, she hadn't thought of

that.

"Nanase, I don't think a condition you've had for multiple years is something you can overcome that quickly or easily. I said I'd help, so I don't care if that means I have to spend a lot of time on you."

Her long black hair swayed in the wind and brushed against the bottom of my neck. It tickled a bit.

"After all," I said, "we're friends. Right?"

Nanase tapped her head against my chest. Then she wrapped her hands around my back and hugged me. "I really can't forgive you." They were tough words, but her tone was so very gentle.

Looks like she's calmed down. I didn't think she was going to jump, but given the location and how mentally unstable she's been, my heart was pounding. Whew, that was a dangerous persuasion game. Well, you could certainly say our conversation was dangerous, but isn't our current state pretty dangerous too? I doubt anyone will come up to the roof now, but if someone saw us, then—

"Huh?"

I heard someone's voice at the exact moment I heard the door open. *This is bad!* I could practically hear the blood draining from my face. Nanase also sensed someone appear, and froze with her arms still around me.

It would've been great if we had pulled apart the moment the door opened, but both of us were a beat slow in realizing—it was too late. My back was facing the rooftop entrance, so I didn't know who had come up. Nanase probably couldn't see either since her head was against my chest.

I'm begging you—turn around and leave! My wish was not granted; I could hear their footsteps approaching us.

"Natsuki! You should stop flirting in places like this, you know?" she teased me.

That's Miori's voice. This is really bad! Very, very not good (my vocab is dead).

"Hikari-chan, that goes for you too. How long are you going to hug him for?" Naturally, she was under the misconception that I was embracing my girlfriend. "Anyway, what were you guys talking...about... Huh?"

Miori's footsteps halted. Nanase's black hair was flapping in the wind again. Hikari had light-brown hair, not jet-black like Nanase's. I decided it was impossible to dupe Miori and pushed Nanase's shoulder, separating us.

When I turned around, Miori's eyes had become two small, surprised dots. I glanced to my side—Nanase was pale and sweating bullets. It felt like the awkward silence had lasted an eternity.

"Um, Motomiya-san. This, uh, isn't what it looks like," Nanase tried to explain.

What doesn't it look like?

Miori stepped back. "I-It's okay. Sorry for interrupting. Um. I... Uh, I... I didn't see anything. I saw nothing... So don't drag me into this, okay? I didn't see a thing, got it?"

"Wait, Miori. There is a *huge* misunderstanding here," I said.

"I, I got it! I understand you very well! See ya!"



Without understanding a thing, Miori fled the scene.

"We better give her a proper explanation, right?" Nanase asked.

"Do you think she'll believe us even if we do?" *No matter what we say, it'll just sound like an excuse, given what she witnessed.*

"I'm sorry, Haibara-kun. When did I even..." She trailed off. Apparently, she had hugged me completely unintentionally. She looked surprised at herself.

"She's not someone to spread rumors, though," I said.

"That might be true, but... Are you okay with leaving the misunderstanding unaddressed?"

Eh, it's not a big deal if the price I have to pay is Miori's opinion of me plummeting. We were still in the middle of discussing what to do when the door opened again.

"Miori-chan was acting very dodgy when she saw me. Did something happen?"

Miori and Hikari were together.

"Um, I haven't told her anything, okay?" Miori said.

After that, Nanase and I frantically explained what had happened and somehow managed to clear up the misunderstanding. Hikari had a smile pasted on her face from beginning to end; I had no idea what was going through her mind.

Third Interlude

Our choir improved with every music class. I didn't want to worry my classmates any further, so I held hands with Haibara-kun before each session. As of late, I could still play in front of our class without any issue even if some time had passed since we had held hands. Nevertheless, no matter how many times we've done it, it still mortifies me so much that I want to tear my hair out!

To begin with, it's preposterous that I can't play the piano unless we hold hands. I'm not a child. Not to mention, he's my best friend's boyfriend. This is the worst! Unforgivable. What is wrong with me? I don't think I like him in that way either. I simply chose someone who was easy to depend on without thinking—that's all. I made sure it was someone who'd let me exploit them. I'm the worst kind of woman.

Despite my behavior, Haibara-kun and Hikari continue to treat me kindly. And that scares me. I'm always taking advantage of my precious friends' compassion. I'm forcing them to accompany me. What is Hikari feeling as she watches me? I was walking home alone, deep in thought, when someone called out to me.

"Huh? It's Yuino." The owner of the voice was Hondo-san. "You look like something's weighing on your mind." She was also on her way home; her backpack and guitar case were on her back. She pointed at a nearby bench that was next to a vending machine. "Hey, let's chat over there."

She immediately headed to the bench, without giving me time to refuse. It didn't feel pushy to me, though, likely because she had intuited my answer before taking action.

"Want a drink?"

"Um." I hesitated. "Coffee, please. Oh, I'll pay for mine."

"It's fine. I'm the one who invited you." Hondo-san tossed me a can of coffee and chose corn soup for herself.

We sat side by side beneath the winter sky. Night was falling, and the chill was rising. The warm drink suffused throughout my body. I exhaled and watched my white breath waft up and disappear into the sky.

After I confided my worries to Hondo-san, she said, "It's plain to see what Hikari's thinking," as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"You know what she's thinking?"

"Of course. Hikari's turned on by the idea of getting NTRed by her friend."

I almost spurted my coffee out through strangled coughs.

"Huh? Yuino? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"D-Don't you 'what's wrong' me! Of course that's not what she's thinking!" *I wondered what she'd say, but I did* not *expect such a wild, thoroughly lacking in common sense remark... Does she think Hikari is a pervert?* "And in the first place, I am not NT... I'm not NTRing her!" *What on earth am I saying? I have to dispel the misunderstanding, though.*

Hondo-san quickly checked the nearby vicinity. "Yuino, you shouldn't say things like that so loud. People will stare."

A passerby who looked like an office worker on his way home was watching us with a face that practically screamed, "Good grief, kids these days talk about the craziest things!"

"Anyhoo, jokes aside," Hondo-san said breezily.

She was as composed as ever despite having ruffled my feathers so much. It was at this moment when I was certain that I would never be able to win against her. *I mean, her tone is always so equable that it's difficult to tell when she's joking.*

"Okay, serious talk. I think she simply trusts Natsuki."

Oddly enough, I found myself believing her inference. *Why didn't that occur to me when I'm the one who's known Hikari for far longer?* "Trusts that he won't cheat on her?" I asked.

"That's part of it." Hondo-san stared into the distance and continued. "Natsuki helped her, so she believes he can do something for you too." For some reason, it sounded like she was referring to herself. Then her mouth softened into a teasing smile. "They say a

girl in love is blindly devoted. She's convinced her boyfriend is a hero." A hint of embarrassment uncharacteristically colored her voice. "Well, I don't think you need to worry about Hikari. Point is, she cares about you a ton, which is why she's asking the person she trusts the most to help you. It shows how important you are to her."

As someone who knew Hikari very well, I found Hondo-san's deduction to be very convincing. "Do you...really think so?" The words came out haltingly. "I'd be very happy if that were the case."

I felt a little relieved. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought it would be fine to let things continue as they were. With Hikari's approval, I could touch Haibara-kun. In all honesty, it was an image that I found just a tiny bit attractive.

"You're definitely acting like a baby right now," Hondo-san said after observing me. Her voice was as matter-of-fact as ever.

Until this point, everyone had treated me with great care, but now I felt like she'd stabbed a knife into my heart.

"Yuino, from the start, I've thought you were the same type of person as me."

After the school festival concert, I also thought we were similar. I'm not as perceptive as Hondo-san, though, given that she's felt that way from our very first meeting.

"I can only live through music. Without this, I can't express my feelings." Hondo-san lightly touched her guitar case, which leaned against the side of the bench. "I keep playing because I like it."

The mood shifted. It was already frigid outside, but I felt like the temperature had dropped even further. There was something incontrovertible about her words.

"I hold on to the belief that my music can change the world."

Compared to her, what is my goal? I want to be able to play piano in front of everyone. However, that's just the prerequisite. What do I want to do beyond that? I don't know. What is music to me?

"You've become overly dependent on Natsuki because you're lost. You should do some soul-searching," Hondo-san said. "Yuino. Using the piano, what do you want to convey and to whom?"

Chapter 4: Courage Grasped Tightly in the Palm of Your Hand

The day of our school music festival had arrived; it was being held in one of the gyms. The entire student body gathered there and filed into the seats that had been set up in advance.

The program would start with performances by music-related clubs like the wind ensemble and light music club, and then the second-years would kick off the choir competition. For the record, third-years didn't participate since they were busy studying for college entrance exams. Timewise, because it was almost graduation, the choir competition also functioned as a send-off for the third-years.

In the lead-up to today, our class, 1-2, had practiced quite hard. We'd held sessions not just during music class, but also after school. It goes without saying, but there were a lot of kids who had club meetings, so only those who could make it had come. Although it was optional, a lot of students had taken a day off from their clubs yesterday to attend.

I think our class is the most pumped about this competition. At first, most of the boys weren't motivated at all. If I'm not getting ahead of myself, I think me being the tenor leader and doling out instructions had a little something to do with it. But Nanase was the biggest factor of all. Though she looked shaky at times, she played the piano with everything she had. I think watching her inspired everyone. That's why their demeanor gradually changed.

"If we're going to do this, I wanna win."

"I mean, isn't first place awarded gold? And second gets silver; third gets bronze."

"That's it? We're working our butts off, and we're not even going to win an actual prize? Talk about demotivating."

It was morning in the gym. There was a little more time before the festival would start. I could hear my classmates chattering around me. The air was restless.

Well, it's the novelty of this sort of event that makes it fun. Not gonna lie, though: I'm not in any position to be enjoying myself. I'm more nervous than anything. I hope this ends without incident.

"Natsu, you look kinda pale," Uta said.

"My stomach hurts," I replied.

"Already?! You know we're not going on for a while, right?"

It depended on how smoothly the event ran, but we would likely be up after lunch. *My body won't hold up if I'm nervous all day. I know that, but...*

"I... I have a stomachache," Hikari groaned weakly.

"H-Hikarin! You too?!"

Compared to us, Nanase blankly gazed at the stage.

"Oh, looks like it's starting."

A teacher walked onto the stage, and the buzz that had filled the gym faded away until it was completely silent. Over the microphone, the teacher said, "Now then. The seventy-sixth Ryomei High School Music Festival is about to begin."

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Roughly one hour in, we were given a fifteen-minute break. The wind ensemble and light music club performances had just ended. The light music club had been represented by a band of second-years who I only knew by sight, but they were pretty skilled and had amped up the crowd. *At the very least, they're twice as good as me. Then again, they're repping the entire club, so it checks out.*

"Sitting the whole time made my shoulders sore," Reita said as he rolled his shoulders.

"Yeah. And I'm getting sleepy." Tatsuya yawned. "Natsuki, is your stomach feeling better?"

"It is. I just went to the bathroom, so I'm a little better."

We walked down the hallway while chatting and quenched our thirst at the water fountain. Since the entire student body was

gathered in the gymnasium, all the nearby halls were packed during break. Amid the hustle and bustle surrounding me, I felt someone tap my back.

"Natsuki-kun."

I turned around to see Hikari. She looked worried.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?" She led me to an empty classroom where Nanase was staring out the window.

"You called Haibara-kun over," Nanase observed.

"I thought we should do a check first." Hikari locked eyes with Nanase before continuing. "Yuino-chan, you're going to play in front of the entire student body today. The number of spectators is incomparable to what we've been doing until now. This might even be more people than the piano competitions and any previous school recitals you've performed at. It might be too late to ask now, but...are you going to be okay? Do you feel any changes in your condition?"

"Yes, I feel fine. As for my health, the two of you seem to be doing far worse than me." Nanase giggled.

"Sh-Shut up. I'm nervous!"

"Whose fault do you think that is?" I complained.

"I'm sorry," Nanase said with a smile. "Say, you two." She seemed bright and cheerful today. It was a big difference from the uneasy and lost expression that had plagued her recently. "Will you listen to what I have to say?" she asked.

Our short fifteen-minute break was close to over. We wouldn't make it in time unless we started heading back soon. The din in the hallway had already quieted.

Despite all that, we chose to listen to Nanase. "In the beginning, channeling my feelings into my songs was fun. I didn't have a reason to play the piano. I simply enjoyed expressing myself. I was happy when my mom praised me, and those little pleasures were what fueled me to keep practicing."

Nanase spoke as though she were reminiscing about the past.

"I participated in recitals and competitions at my mom's suggestion, and to be honest, rather than playing in that nerve-racking environment, I enjoyed myself much more when I could play

as I liked at home."

She shifted her attention to Hikari.

"No matter how many times I experienced it, I couldn't bring myself to like competing. But that suddenly changed and became a happy memory thanks to you, Hikari—it happened the day you came to one of my piano recitals and complimented me."

"Huh? Really?" Hikari tilted her head.

"This happened a long time ago, so I doubt you remember." Nanase smiled wryly. "'That was amazing!' you'd gush. 'I was so moved, I want to hear you play again.' I thought playing on the big stage once more wouldn't be so bad if I could hear you say that again."

"Yuino-chan... You never told me that before."

"Indeed I didn't. This is my first time admitting it." Nanase fiddled with her long hair like she was trying to hide her dismay. "Because...it's embarrassing."

Hikari smiled gently at her.

"Because of that day—the day I botched my performance at a big piano competition—playing became an unpleasant memory, so I tried not to think about it... Recently, however, I looked to the past to help me overcome my condition. And when I did, I realized something. I wasn't worried about disappointing the audience... Well, I *was* scared of that too." Nanase's voice trembled as she remembered what had transpired. "But what scared me the most was seeing my mom apologize."

I'm sure Nanase is facing her past now. She's confronting memories she didn't want to remember and had turned away from.

"I don't know who she apologized to; they might've been big shots in the music industry. My mom told me not to worry about it, but I got scared when I saw her apologize. I thought that if I failed a performance, it would cause trouble for her. That had never occurred to me before."

This is the answer Nanase's arrived at on her own.

"I wanted to make her happy, but if I was going to be a nuisance instead, then wouldn't it be better not to play?"

That was what Nanase had once unconsciously believed. Those

worries had caused her to become afraid of taking the stage until they had eventually manifested as visible symptoms.

"Holding Haibara-kun's hand made me feel safe because I knew he wouldn't be inconvenienced if I relied on him. Because...he said we were friends."

"Well, yeah," I told her.

"And the reason it didn't work with Hikari is..."

I gulped without thinking. I hadn't expected her to touch on that subject. The question had been weighing on my mind all this time. Why couldn't it be Hikari? I'd been hesitant to investigate. Perhaps it was conceited of me, but when I looked at Nanase, I was worried the answer might affect her relationship with Hikari.

However, Nanase's answer differed from my conjecture. "Because if I relied on you, Hikari, it wouldn't matter if I put on a good performance."

"It wouldn't matter?" Hikari questioned, puzzled.

"Because I want to play the piano for you."

Hikari blinked at her.

"And I can't depend on someone I want to play for."

"H-Huuuh?!" Hikari yelled, her face flushing madly as she finally understood the meaning behind Nanase's words.

"Remember how I said I admired Haibara-kun's band? I thought that was why I wanted to pick up the piano again... Of course, that was partially true, but there was another reason." Then, she dropped an unexpected statement. "I was frustrated."

It was so out of the blue that I didn't understand what she meant.

"Frustrated about what?" Hikari asked.

"That a performance that wasn't mine had moved your heart."

"Huh?" Hikari uttered.

Funnily enough, that answer resembled what Hikari had told me about Nanase.

"On the day of that concert, Hikari cried next to me. Then, she kept praising how amazing your band was, even though that privilege used to belong to only me in the past."

"Wait, Yuino-chan... It's supposed to be a secret that I cried!"

Hikari frantically tried to stop her, but Nanase continued without a care.

Then, Nanase flicked her gaze to me, now cleared of all the things that had been weighing her down. She pointed at me and declared, "In short, you are my rival."

"Nanase... So by your standards, a rival is someone you depend on?" I questioned.

"Sh-Shush! It's fine. This is you we're talking about, after all."

That's not much of a counterargument... I shrugged. "Looks like you'll be fine on your own, huh."

"A certain someone remonstrated me," Nanase said. "So I reevaluated my feelings."

Who? As soon as I thought that, a certain face came to mind. *Despite how she comes off, she likes helping others. I'm guessing she gave Nanase a hand.*

"Hey, um... Y-Yuino-chan?"

Nanase had pulled Hikari close to her, and they were now staring into each other's eyes. Hikari kept glancing at me, her cheeks dyed a vibrant scarlet.

"Hikari, I wanted to tell you that I can play again," Nanase said, their noses practically touching.

Am I being excluded right now?

"The piano playing that you love... I want to show you it again on the best possible stage."

"Y-Yes... Please do..." Hikari's head bobbed up and down. She looked ecstatic.



Um... What the heck are you guys showing me*?*

"And then," Nanase said shyly, "if I play perfectly, I want you to praise me."

I feel like a new door is opening within me. Stop! That is the one door I must keep closed!

"Hee hee, Yuino-chan, you're so cute." Hikari cupped Nanase's cheek and turned her head so it faced her. "All right. From now on, I'm going to praise you lots, okay?"

"I, I haven't played yet!"

"Then once you kill it at the music festival, let's go home together—just the two of us."

Hey, um, could you maybe not forget that your boyfriend is right here?

***

Our class's turn was right after lunch. By the way, yes, we got caught skipping part of the festival, and the three of us had received a good tongue-lashing. Because we were pulled aside for that, we'd missed our chance to eat lunch. Then again, I was so nervous that I likely wouldn't have been able to stomach anything.

"All right. Everybody ready?" I asked my classmates, who were gathered behind the stage.

They nodded in reply. The relaxed atmosphere they'd been giving off before was replaced with preperformance jitters. While we waited for our turn, I spoke to Nanase in a low whisper.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. This time, I really am fine."

We hadn't performed our hand-holding ritual today. All that ran through my mind was the memory of Nanase collapsing in music class. Playing for a school event was a lot of pressure, and it had to be anxiety inducing.

"If I can't overcome this, then there was no point in receiving everyone's help." The way she carried herself right now made me feel like I could believe her. "Besides, even if I can't do it, you'll help me like before, right?" she whispered into my ear. Her hair tickled

the base of my neck.

Hikari leered at us with a small frown. “Yuino-chan...”

“Wh-Wh-What is it, Hikari? I didn’t do anything!”

“Can I rank you as the number one girl I don’t want my boyfriend to be friends with?” she said harshly.

Nanase covered her face with her hands.

“Natsuki-kun, you’re no better. I can’t believe you’re smiling bashfully at a girl who isn’t me.”

“I’m not smiling bashfully! Hikari, you’re the one who urged Nanase to come to me for help.”

“That... That may be true! But now I feel like my danger alarm is going off!”

I’m not one to talk, but your danger alarm is way too slow.

“Hikari, you were also the one flirting with Nanase a ton earlier.”

“That’s fine! We’re both girls, after all!”

I’m not sure about that. The vibes you two had going on there felt like you’d overcome the gender barrier.

“Hey! Class 1-2, you’re up,” our music teacher said, interrupting our conversation.

I scanned Nanase’s face. She gave me a reassuring nod.

Fujiwara tapped my shoulder with her conductor’s baton. “Why don’t you say a few words?”

I turned around. The entire class was watching me. “Um... All right, guys, let’s give them the best choir performance ever!” I couldn’t think of anything clever, so I just delivered a very basic one-liner.

Nevertheless, everyone responded with an enthusiastic “Yeah!”

We walked onto the stage and filed into our respective rows. Fujiwara stood in front of us with baton in hand while Nanase took her seat at the piano. The gymnasium was crammed full of students seated in chairs. It was an overwhelming sight. I hadn’t had this much attention on me since the school festival concert.

Back then, I was feeling reckless, so I didn’t register how many spectators there were. But I’m pretty calm now, so I can make out each kid’s face fairly well. The trade-off is that there are more butterflies in my stomach.

Fujiwara raised her baton, and the faint chattering died completely. The gym was filled with several hundred people, but it had fallen completely silent. They were all focused on our choir—or not. It was only because they'd be scolded by a teacher if they talked too much.

From here, I could see the students' faces clearly. The kids who were giving us their full attention were actually in the minority. Most looked bored, and there were a decent number who were stealth sleeping.

We just have to make them understand with our music. Isn't that right? I glanced at Nanase. All her focus was on the piano keys. *Looks like I've got nothing to worry about.*

Fujiwara waved her baton. At the same time, the grand piano sounded with powerful yet delicate notes. It was an accompaniment that conjured up vivid images in my mind. The postlunch drowsiness that had filled the gymnasium was painted over. Heads shot up.

I began to sing—in a way that wouldn't ruin our accompanist's quality. Everyone projected their voices loudly, and it felt like we were all in the zone. Nanase's piano guided our chorus. The beautiful yet heartbreaking melody supported a host of voices.

The first part ended, and I took a breath. When I looked at Nanase, her fingers continuing to move across the keys, I saw that she was smiling. That gentle smile was more charming than any other expression I had ever seen on her before.

***

Our performance passed by in the blink of an eye. Before I knew it, we were enveloped in the sound of applause. I had been so focused on the song that it took me a while to process that we had finished. When I finally returned to reality, everyone was wearing happy smiles.

Among the applauding third-years, more than a few of them were crying. Our song was a classic graduation number, so I had figured it might have an effect on some people, but this was more than I expected.

We bowed deeply and left the stage.

"We've definitely clutched first place, right?"

"Yeah! Heck, I bet the guys going on after us are suffering from a case of cold feet!"

Tatsuya and Okajima-kun had their arms around each other's shoulders as they laughed with glee. They were definitely getting ahead of themselves, but perhaps the rest of us all felt the same, because no one stopped them.

"You'd almost forget that they were the ones who said they didn't care about the choir competition." Fujiwara let out an exasperated sigh. However, she appeared content.

"Yuino-chan!" Hikari raised her hands.

Nanase, uncharacteristically, beamed at her and gave her a double high five. A satisfying smack rang out. Then they intertwined their fingers without hesitation.

"I knew it! Yuino-chan, your piano is the best!" Hikari said, euphoria evident all over her face.

In contrast, tears flowed down Nanase's cheeks. "Thank you, Hikari! I'm over the moon."

"W-Wah?! Yuino-chan, don't cry!" Hikari pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped Nanase's tears.

Our class watched the pair from afar. Uta was the first to approach them. She went up to Nanase and hugged her from the side.

"That was awesome! Yui-Yui, we've definitely clinched victory thanks to you!"

Fujiwara also walked up to Nanase and, with a smile, said, "Yes. It really was all you, Yuino. Thank you!"

The next to timidly inch towards them was Onozawa-san. "I... I was so moved! Nanase-san, I truly do love your piano!" That opened the floodgates, and everyone began to shower Nanase with praise.

"Y-You're all exaggerating," Nanase rebutted shyly and then continued. "Besides, our song was a product of all our efforts, remember? This wasn't only because of me."

Uta, still clinging to Nanase, grinned joyfully. "That's true. We all gave it our best too! Right? Hikarin!"

"That's right. I wasn't very good...but I think it turned into something wonderful," Hikari said, as though she were basking in the joy of our performance.

"Well, didn't we all try pretty hard?"

"Yeah, it just sorta happened, because a certain idiot took practice way too damn seriously."

Reita and Hino wore smirks as they stared right at me.

Well, sorry I'm an idiot. "I thought if we're going to do this anyway, it'd be more fun if we put on the best choir show ever." *I didn't have any intentions beyond that. If I had to put it into words, I just wanted to foster an environment that would make it as easy as possible for Nanase to practice.*

"That's our Natsuki! You're so young!" Hino teased me.

"We're the same age," I shot back. *On second thought, we're not actually the same age. Sorry my mental age is so low! This is how I wanted to live my salad days!*

"Really?" Nanase said. "He can be weirdly cynical, which makes him seem awfully grown-up."

Her words struck a chord in my heart. *Thanks a lot, I mean it.* "Okay, we should get going." We'd spent a long time talking and needed to return to our seats.

"Right. The next class is about to start," Fujiwara said.

Before we could give the instruction to move, Nanase spoke up. "Um. May I have a quick moment?" When the class's attention was on her, she bowed deeply. "Thank you all. I was able to recover due to everybody's help."

The others didn't know that she hadn't been able to play without relying on me. They were all under the impression that she had overcome her anxiety a long time ago, so their reactions were lukewarm, like they thought she was making much ado about nothing. At least, they were for a bit until...

"Are you okay without holding Haibara-kun's hand now?" Fujiwara asked—immediately, her hands flew to her mouth, accompanied by a small "Ah."

The cozy and warm atmosphere that had enveloped our class froze over.

"Holding Haibara's...hand?"

"Come again? What does that mean?"

"Now that you mention it, wouldn't she go outside with Haibara before she played the piano?"

"Huh? But didn't Hoshimiya-san go outside with them most of the time?"

"I wondered what they were doing, but hand holding?!"

"What? So they were having an affair?! Right in front of his girlfriend?!"

"A-Authorized cheating?!"

Our class exploded into conversation. *We didn't say anything because we knew this would happen!*

Fujiwara had a face that said, "I messed up!" Our eyes met, and she stuck her tongue out with a small "Tee hee."

Hey! I don't fault you for noticing what we were doing, but don't mention it now*!*

"I thought those three were aaawfully close lately," Uta said, turning an icy gaze towards us. Towards me.

Stop it! Don't look at me like that!

"H-He wasn't cheating on me! Don't worry! Actually, I'm the one who told them to do it!" Hikari interjected quickly, but she had clearly let her turmoil take the wheel.

That was a bad move, Hikari!

"So it *was* authorized?!"

"A... A debauched relationship?!"

"D-Does that mean the three of them do it together?!"

"So Hoshimiya-san gets turned on by those kinds of fetishes..."

Everyone was just saying whatever they wanted. Things had already spiraled out of control.

"W-Wait! I'll explain everything properly from the beginning! Don't misunderstand!" Nanase exclaimed, on the verge of tears. She was bright red all the way up to her ears. "H-Haibara-kun, you say something too!"

Saying anything would've only added fuel to the fire, so I remained silent. *Honestly, I'm kinda dubious that explaining everything from square one will clear up any misunderstandings.*

We were making such a racket behind the stage—not to mention we hadn't returned to our seats yet—that a teacher got mad at us. Rightly so. *This is my second lecture of the day...even though this is my second round of life!*

***

"Th-That was an awful experience."

We were in our classroom after school. Nanase flopped on top of her desk, exhausted.

"You went through a lot," Hikari said, forcing a smile. She sat down at the seat next to Nanase's.

Class 1-2 had defeated all the other classes, even the second-years, and snagged a shiny gold prize. That's right—we had cinched first place. Earlier, our class was celebrating, but now it was just the three of us. The others had gone to their clubs.

"Good work," I said.

After Fujiwara had slipped up, Nanase had frantically explained everything from start to finish, and somehow cleared up the misunderstanding that there had been "authorized cheating" going on. *Well, it looks like it's been dispelled on the surface, but I'm dubious that everyone took her word at face value.*

"I explained everything, but there are clearly still people who are suspicious... How vexing." Nanase was enveloped in a dark cloud. It was hard to believe that she'd been the linchpin of our win.

"Suspicious of what?" Hikari asked.

"That Haibara-kun and I are having an illicit love affair." Nanase raised her head and pursed her lips together in a discontent pout.

Yeah... There's definitely going to be people who think that. This is what happens when you give people excess info.

"You're asking the impossible. That misunderstanding isn't going to disappear just like that," Hikari remarked.

"I mean, at one point I thought you might've had feelings for me too," I said.

Nanase's mouth flapped open and closed.

Hey, of course I'd get the wrong idea! It'd be weirder if I hadn't,

given how much you depended on me!

"H-How could you both say that?!" Nanase exclaimed.

"Um, well... You would feel safe after holding his hand. That'd normally only happen if you liked him, right?" Hikari pointed out, exasperation tinting her voice.

Hey, stop it! You don't need to flex your mighty powers of observation against your best friend! No, wait, she's not even using her powers of observation. There are some mysteries in this world that are better off left unsolved, though.

"Th-That's not it! I don't have romantic feelings for Haibara-kun! I just..."

"You just?" Hikari repeated.

Nanase squirmed for a while, extremely reluctant to complete her sentence. Then, she glanced bashfully at me and whispered, "I just thought that if I had an older brother, it'd feel like this..."



Older brother... It's because I'm like an older brother? Oho, onii-chan, am I now? A beautiful girl who's my oshi considers me an older-brother figure, huh?

While I was turning her words over in my head, Hikari looked like she was trying her best not to laugh. "I-I'm sorry, Yuino-chan... It seems it really was a misunderstanding."

Nanase covered her face with her hands. "Just kill me already."

Absolutely not. I won't allow my younger sister to die! "From now on, call me onii-chan!"

"I've had enough! Please, kill me! I can't go on any longer!"

"You'll get along well with Namika."

Nanase burst into a bawl and moved to open the window, but Hikari hastily stopped her.

"Y-Yuino-chan, calm down! And Natsuki-kun, what are you saying?"

Ack! What on earth did I just do? It was like I drifted off into a dreamworld. I don't know what happened, but one thing's for sure: Hikari's giving me a subzero stare.

***

Hikari and I walked home alone together for the first time in a while. The sky was dyed with the colors of sunset. As night drew closer, the temperature gradually fell as well. Nanase had left on her own in a hurry, exclaiming, "I don't want to feed the misunderstanding any further!"

Also, apparently she doesn't want to see me right now. How cruel! Even though I'm her older brother...

"You look like you're thinking about something stupid," Hikari said.

"Don't be mean. I'll have you know I'm thinking of something very sacred." *Yeah, me declaring that I'm Nanase's older brother? Apparently that wasn't a dream.*

Hikari quietly stared at my face for a moment and then sighed. "Well, a lot happened, but I'm glad we resolved it all safely."

"Yeah." *Looking back now that it's over, our choir was a huge hit,*

and we won gold! It looks like Nanase's overcome her condition too. A bunch of sacrifices had to be made along the way (like Nanase's image), but we got good results. "The next thing is to see if she can play in a competition."

"I think she's probably fine," Hikari said hesitantly, "but that'll depend on Yuino-chan."

With today's success in hand, Nanase would consult with her psychiatrist. The decision of whether or not she could attempt a piano competition would be up to her doctor's discretion.

"I'm sorry, Hikari."

"Huh?"

"You left her in my hands because you trusted me, but you must've been conflicted about it." *To be honest, I didn't know what the correct course of action was. I want to help Nanase as her friend. I want to treasure Hikari as her boyfriend. Both desires were constantly on my mind, and I was indecisive. Then Hikari gave me a push.* "I feel like I took advantage of you."

In hindsight, there was probably a better way to handle the situation. The distance between Nanase and me has shrunk too much. Hikari might feel uneasy on the inside.

"That's not true. I'm the one who took advantage of you." Hikari hung her head apologetically. "I didn't have the confidence that I could help her on my own, so I leaned on you. I figured you wouldn't be able to intervene if I didn't ask you to."

As usual, her assessment of my psyche was spot-on. If she hadn't given me permission, I would've prioritized being a good boyfriend.

"That's why, Natsuki-kun, I want to thank you for helping my best friend." Hikari smiled brightly at me.

"It wasn't just because of me. Our class helped too, and you're the one who came up with the hand-holding idea. Plus, Nanase worked the hardest of all. I didn't—"

"'Do much'? You shouldn't be so humble!" She jabbed my shoulder with her fist.

"I don't think I'm being humble, though." *In truth, I wish I had come up with a smarter way to resolve this. For example, utilizing my previous life's experiences to formulate a spectacular solution!*

Maybe someone who isn't me could've done that if they had traveled back in time. But the fact of the matter is that I'm the one who's here, an unremarkable college student. That's why I can't become some almighty hero.

"I think I have an idea of what's going through your head."

Huh?! Did she realize that I'm a time traveler?! Nah, no way.

"I'm going to say something girlfriendlike now. It's embarrassing, so I'm only going to say it once, okay?" Then she took a deep breath. "Natsuki-kun, you're my hero!" she yelled loudly and slapped my back.

She had seen right through me.

"Thank you, Hikari."

On top of that, her words gave me courage.

"I've gained a little self-confidence."

I can't always handle problems flawlessly. However, if I want to live without regrets, then all I can do is do whatever I'm able to in the present, with everything I've got. "By the way, can I ask you something that's been on my mind?"

"Hmm? Sure, you can ask me anything!"

"Hikari... Did you kinda enjoy making me and Nanase touch each other?"

"Whaaat?!" She had shouted so loudly that she began to cough.

"S-Sorry. Of course you wouldn't, right?"

"O-O-O-O-O-Of course not! Why would you say such a stupid thing?!"

Wh-Why is she so shaken up? "Huh? Did you actually?"

"N-No... No, I didn't! I won't admit it! I'm not into that sort of thing!" The way she shook her head with such desperation seemed comical for some reason. She looked like a criminal frantically denying their crime with "Show me the proof! Where's your proof?!"

We both fell silent.

"Um, well..." Hikari eventually said.

"Yes?"

"Remember how you left me and ran off to look for Miori-chan when she disappeared?"

I hadn't expected her to bring up that episode. Hearing her

mention it stunned me silent.

"I... I don't want to admit it, but..." she continued, cheeks flushed, "th-that time...my heart ached a ton...but it also felt a little good."

I was taken aback. *What is this well-to-do young lady saying?*

"I-It's your fault, okay?!" Hikari cried out, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said haltingly. "Hikari, it *is* my fault."

"Stop it! Don't look at me like I'm a pervert!"

Evidently, I have awoken a wild kink in the girl I love.

Final Chapter: Valentine's Day

One week after the school music festival.

Today was February 14th, the acclaimed day known as Valentine's Day. *I feel like the boys have been antsy since the break of dawn. I mean, there are several guys here who'd make you go, "Huh? He doesn't normally get to school at this time." Don't mysteriously loiter around in the classroom! Me? Oh, uh, well, I just happened to wake up early...*

"Goood morning everyone!" Uta cheerfully greeted us as she strolled into the room after morning practice.

Okajima-kun nonchalantly whistled as he walked in front of her. *You're being too obvious, dude.*

She shot him a strange look, a question mark practically floating over head, and then placed her bag on her desk.

"Guess what? I made chocolates for everyone!" she said, holding up the paper bag she'd been holding.

The boys whooped with excitement.

"Gimme one!"

"Me too!"

Uta stuck her tongue out at them and said, "Girls get priority," then joined a group of girls. As expected of the holiday, a lot of girls had made friendship chocolates and were exchanging them with each other. It looked like they were having fun.

"Don't take your eyes off of Sakura... Types like her throw chocolate to the crowd, so we'll get something for sure!"

"Yeah! The difference between zero and one is as vast as the distance between heaven and earth! It doesn't matter if it's just to fluff the number!"

Okajima-kun and Tachibana-kun stared at Uta, their eyes blazing with tenacity. *Terrifying.*

"Good grief." Reita sighed. He sat at his seat with his legs

elegantly crossed and shrugged. “Chocolate isn’t a tool to one-up others with.”

There was already a pile of chocolate—likely the kind that came with heartfelt feelings—on his desk. It was a cruel display of dominance. Of course Reita would show off like this.

“Y-You bastard...”

“So friggin’ annoying... Actin’ like that just because you’re popular.”

Okajima-kun and Tachibana-kun weren’t the only ones; other boys in the room were glaring resentfully at Reita.

“Right, Natsuki?” Reita patted my shoulder.

“Why’re you dragging me into this?! Don’t throw me under the bus!” *I’m not like you!*

“Tsk. Look at Mr. I’ve Got a Girlfriend...”

“That jerkface! Guess taking our Hoshimiya-san away from us wasn’t enough for him.”

“I’ll never forgive him.”

Look! Now they’ve locked onto me! I haven’t gotten a single piece yet! “Reita, do the girls who gave you those have crushes on you?”

“Who knows. There was just a line of them waiting for me after morning practice.”

“There’s no way they gave it to you because they felt obligated, then.”

“Well, everyone knows Miori and I broke up.” There was a hint of loneliness in his tone.

Hikari and I are a well-known couple, so I doubt I’ll receive as much chocolate as Reita. I might accept it from people who give them to anyone, though.

“Okay, I’ll give one to any boys who want one now!” Uta said after she’d finished exchanging chocolate with the girls. She was quickly swarmed by boys.

“It’s only a matter of time before she runs out, huh,” I remarked.

“Are you not going to ask her for one?” Reita questioned.

“It’d be a problem if I jumped into that crowd.”

He stared at me, his eyes narrowed slightly, and then forced a

smile. “Figures.”

“’Sup!” Tatsuya walked into the room, glanced at the flock of boys around Uta, and then dropped his bag off at his seat. “Hey, Natsuki, you know that manga you lent me the other day?”

I was about to respond, but Uta yelled over me.

“T-Tatsu!” She pushed her way past the crowd and ran up to him. “Here, this is for you!” She held out a paper bag that looked slightly different from the ones she’d been handing out.

Tatsuya blinked at her in surprise.

“It’s just obligatory! Don’t get the wrong idea!” she warned, pointing her finger at him. All the boys who’d been hounding her for chocolates watched mournfully.

“Mm-hmm,” Tatsuya said after a beat of stunned silence. His expression softened into a smile. “Thanks.”

Uta nodded and then returned to the swarm. “Okaaay! I’ll finish handing out my chocolate!” She went back to her charity work, puzzled as to why the boys seemed a bit less excited now.

“Good for you, Tatsuya.” Reita grinned at his friend who was gazing at the bag Uta had handed him.

“Natsuki, how many chocolates have you gotten?” Tatsuya asked after a pause.

“Oh, shut it. Zero,” I replied crabbily.

“Really? Looks like I’m winning right now.” He smiled triumphantly.

Oddly enough, I didn’t feel bad about it.

***

After that, our classmates trickled into the room one after another. Because it was the morning of Valentine’s, things felt more convivial than usual. The girls made merry and doled out chocolate to their friends. On the other hand, the boys were vying for dominance via the number of chocolates they received. Some bragged about their chocolate count, some preached about the difference between chocolate given out of pity and chocolate given out of romantic affections, some argued the chocolate they received

from their mom should count, and some (Reita) were convinced they were a king—there were all sorts of people here.

H-How unsightly.

Uta and Fujiwara were the only girls who'd brought obligation chocolates to give to the boys, but apparently they hadn't brought enough for everyone. Those who didn't receive any wore glum expressions. It was around that chaotic time when Hikari and Nanase arrived.

"Good morning, everyone!"

"Good morning. It's awfully boisterous today."

They placed their bags at their seats and immediately came over to mine. I had an inkling of what they wanted with me. Hikari had her hands behind her back, hiding something.

"Natsuki-kun, this is for you!" She gave me a radiant smile and handed me a chocolate in the shape of a heart.

The girls squealed gleefully while the boys aimed dark stares at me.

"Thank you, Hikari." *There's a ton of attention on us... This is really embarrassing. Nonetheless, my girlfriend gave me homemade chocolate! I'm on cloud nine!* I hadn't planned to join the battle for dominance among the boys, but I felt like I'd won with this one gift.

"Come on, Yuino-chan, you too! Didn't we make these together for this?!" Hikari urged her fidgeting friend and shook her shoulder.

"What? You want me to give it to him h-here?!" Nanase asked, flustered at being in the limelight.

"If you don't give it to him now, you'll miss your chance and never give it to him, won't you?!" Hikari replied forcefully.

Having no retort, Nanase timidly held out her hand. On it was a square box, wrapped and tied with a ribbon. I didn't need to open it to know that there was chocolate inside. I took it from her.

"Erm... This is a token of my appreciation for helping me. That's all it is!" Nanase blurted out rapidly, her face bright red.

I feel like this is going to revive everyone's misunderstanding. "I should be thanking you for this. Thanks, Nanase."

Hikari watched over us with a bright smile.

"That bastard..."

"The hell? He's got a flower in each hand?!"

"What's with that gross smirk on his face? Can I punch him later?"

As per usual, the boys were trash-talking me. *I can hear you guys. You're not even trying to do it behind my back anymore! You guys are simply insulting me to my face! Oh well, I know they're not being serious.*

"Reita-kun, Tatsuya-kun! I have some for you both too! Here!" Hikari gave them homemade chocolates as well. Unlike the one she'd given me, theirs were star shaped. Evidently, mine was special.

"I also made one for you, Nagiura-kun," Nanase said, handing him a chocolate.

"Huh? Oh... Thanks."

"Wait... What about me?" Reita pointed to himself, confused.

"Shiratori-kun, there's no need to give you one too, no? You're going to receive plenty enough, after all," Nanase said.

"N-No way... I can't believe I'm being treated like this just because I'm so popular!" Shocked, he cradled his head in his arms.

Oddly enough, I felt no sympathy for him.

***

"Utterly ridiculous! This is *me* we're talking about, and I only received five chocolates?!" Reita had his head in his hands again after school. Apparently, he'd maxed out with the batch he'd gotten this morning.

"How many did you get last year?" I asked.

"Didn't you get like twenty?" Tatsuya answered. "Rubberneckers would pass by and give him one on the spur of the moment. It was like a fad where all girls wanted was to give chocolates to a popular guy. You know what I mean?"

"And this year he got five, huh?" I remarked. "Well, high school is a different stomping ground."

"Isn't it because your reputation took a hit on account of your suspension?" Tatsuya pointed out. "You might've cleared up the misunderstanding, but that doesn't change the fact that you threw a

punch. Maybe there are a lot of girls who care about that."

"But didn't he hang out with a gang in middle school?" I asked.

"Having a history of hanging out with a gang and getting suspended because of a fight are different. If anything, being a former bad boy would actually be popular with the fangirls. You know, the ones into guys with a dark past." Tatsuya's reasoning was strangely convincing.

Reita remained despondent all the while, but I thought five chocolates was already a lot.

"Look at our classmates. A good number of guys went home without getting anything," I said.

"Could you not liken me to those plebeians?"

"Yikes, nasty personality you've got there."

He must've been joking, though, because he lifted his head and shrugged.

"Boys are sooo dumb." Uta shot us an exasperated look.

Nothing I *said was particularly weird! Don't lump all boys together!* "Anyway, don't you guys have practice today?" I asked. None of them seemed in a hurry to attend their clubs.

"Nope, the soccer team is resting today," Reita said.

"We can't use the gym today, so the boys' basketball team is off," Tatsuya said.

"Same for the girls' team! Apparently, the city is hosting some event there tomorrow!" Uta exclaimed.

"Huh? Then what about your weekend practice?" I asked.

"We've got a practice game elsewhere. The girls' team is going to the same place," Tatsuya answered.

"The volleyball club is probably coming too, I think," Uta added.

Now that they mention it, I think our teacher brought this up during homeroom at some point. The city's using the gym over the weekend for an event, which is why it's unavailable today while they're setting up.

"Since we've all got time for once, let's go home together!" Uta suggested, excited.

"The literature club doesn't meet on Fridays, so that's fine with me!" Hikari said.

"I'm not in a club, but I don't have any prior engagements today," Nanase added.

"I don't have band practice or work today either."

It was a rare occasion for all six of our schedules to line up. Usually we all had different things going on after school, so it had been a long time since we'd walked home together as a group. We streamed out of the school building and headed to the gate.

In the middle of our lively chatter, Hikari brought up a new topic. "By the way, the deadline's passed for handing in our future-track form. What did you all choose?"

"I chose humanities!" Uta exclaimed.

"Me too. I also chose the humanities track," Nanase said. Her future had diverged from my first round.

"Yuino-chan, you settled on humanities?"

"STEM would've been a safer choice, but I want to attend a music conservatory. Most of them focus on Japanese language and English for their entrance exams, so the humanities track will suffice, no?"

"A music conservatory?! So cool! You're going to join a piano program, right?!" Uta asked.

"Yes," Nanase replied hesitantly. "It's a dream I'd cast aside once, but I want to give it another attempt. I hope to be a pianist." There was light in her eyes, no sign of the resignation I'd seen on that day to be found.

Your onii-chan is so happy for you.

"What about you, Hikarin?" Uta asked.

"I chose humanities, of course. I'm not good at STEM subjects anyway."

"Heck yeah! Then all three of us are on the same track!" Uta slid between Hikari and Nanase, grabbed their hands, and swung them back and forth.

Nanase giggled. "Yes. We might be in the same class again come April."

"There are three humanities classes, right? A one in three chance is a little scary," Hikari said.

"I'll menace the teachers!"

"Uta, cut that out. They'll only reprimand you," Nanase scolded.

I figured Hikari would make a different choice from my previous life. Looks like she really has gone for humanities. "You're set on humanities, huh." *I bet Sei-san hoped she'd pick the STEM track, but she followed her heart.*

"I want to study things that will help me as a writer, so I can make it my career." There was not a trace of hesitation to be seen. Hikari hadn't consulted me for advice either. She'd likely had a serious discussion with her parents about which track she would take too. Every decision had been made on her own, without relying on me.

"It's impressive that both of you have a clear goal for the future. It's kind of dazzling," Reita said. His tone sounded a little forlorn, which I found surprising.

"Reita-kun, did you choose STEM?" Hikari asked.

"Yeah. I don't know what I want to be in the future yet. I figured STEM would keep more options open. Tatsuya, you picked it for the same reason, right?"

"Pretty much. Plus, these days I feel like I'm better at STEM subjects anyway."

"Whaaat? Tatsu, you're not going to become a pro basketball player?" Uta said.

"I'm not that good... Guys good enough to go pro are already playing for powerhouse high schools." Tatsuya's opinion was very realistic.

It's a fact. The best boys' team at Ryomei made it to the top eight in the prefecture. We're not weak, but we're not super strong either. Also, the top four schools are powerhouses on an entirely different level.

Still, Tatsuya is going to become Ryomei's ace player who'll take down those powerhouses. He's a diamond in the rough now, but he definitely has the talent to surpass his peers. He's still growing, and he has a great build. Maybe I'm biased because he's my friend, but I think he could make it as a pro.

"But you used to say you'd become a pro!" Uta pouted.

Tatsuya scratched his head, uneager to say his next words. "It's not like I'm *not* trying to become one. I just want a backup in case I

can't. That's why I chose the STEM track, because it's useful for job searching, and why I've been trying to get good grades. I'm going to a college that's good academically and has a strong basketball team. That's the most optimal, right?" Tatsuya explained pragmatically.

"So you *are* aiming to become a pro?"

Tatsuya frowned. "It'd be embarrassing if I failed when I hope to be one. That's why I didn't want to say it out loud."

Uta gave him a hard look, and then her lips curled up into a satisfied smile.

"Nagiura-kun, that's quite a coolheaded choice, coming from you," Nanase remarked.

"What kinda guy do you think I am?"

"It's a compliment. You've matured. You never would have thought this way at the beginning of the school year."

Despite Nanase's teasing tone, Tatsuya's eyes softened almost imperceptibly. "Yeah, guess you're right."

Tatsuya is another person whose decision differs from the first time—another person affected by my time leap. I just need to make sure it's a good change. At the very least, judging by the way he looks now, it doesn't seem like a bad one.

Everyone's gaze turned to me.

"Natsu, what about you?" Uta asked.

Oh yeah, I've been thinking so much about everyone else that I haven't talked about myself. "I chose STEM."

After the school music festival, I had stewed over the form. Ultimately, I made the same decision as my first round.

"That means all the boys are in STEM and the girls are in humanities," Hikari said.

"That's a pretty clear divide. We'll all be split up next year," I said.

"Waaah! I feel sad all of a sudden! I like our group of six!"

Uta's cry was followed by silence, but that silence wasn't uncomfortable by any means. Everyone felt the same. We didn't need to put it into words to know that.

"Natsuki-kun, you were waffling about which one to choose, weren't you?" Hikari remarked.

"Yeah."

"Was there a reason you chose STEM?"

"Pretty much the same reason as Tatsuya."

"Um..." Hikari gave me a puzzled look. "What do you mean by that?"

"I want to be more serious about my band," I told her. *Of course, that doesn't mean I can drop everything for it. I need to make Hikari happy. No, not out of duty, but because I want to. That's why I should reduce risk as much as possible while pursuing my desired ends.*



"I haven't thought about whether I want to become a pro yet. I just... STEM is what I'm good at, so while I continue down that safe path, I want to give the band a real college try."

There's no guarantee I'll succeed. It's more likely that I'll fail. Even so, now is the time to try what I want to do in earnest, and if I let this chance slip by me, I'm sure I'll regret it. So I've made my decision. I'm not cut out for a half-baked band. If I'm going to be a part of something, I'll give it my all! I believe that's part of experiencing the best youth, after all.

***

Time passed by, and the seasons changed. Our first year of high school ended, and we became second-years.

"Heyo, senpai! I enrolled, no sweat!"

As the cherry blossoms bloomed a second time, many things were changing.

Afterword

I've been addicted to murder mystery board games lately. It's fun to get a taste of what it's like to dive into the world of a mystery novel. I like being the culprit because it's thrilling.

Anyway, long time no see. I'm Amamiya Kazuki.

This volume was about Nanase Yuino. Volumes 5, 6, and 7 had pretty irregular structures, so it's been an unexpectedly long time since I wrote a book with a straightforward composition. How was it?

During the early stages of writing this book I thought, "That's it! Let's do authorized cheating!" A pretty awful turn of phrase. I feel like Hikari's proclivities got twisted because of that, but it happens sometimes.

It'll be Haibara's second year of high school starting in volume 9. If I were to split this series into parts, the first part would be volumes 1 through 4, the second, volumes 5 through 8, and the third, volumes 9 onwards.

In other words, we're in the final arc. I would be delighted if you read this story until the very end.

Now I'll pivot to my current status. These days, writing game scenarios has been my main job. I'm also the writer for a weekly LINE vertical comic called *Saikyou Ansatsusha, Kurasu Teni de Isekai e* (*The Strongest Assassin Gets Transported to Another World with His Class*, Japan only). It's super interesting!

For those who are thinking, "I want to read Amamiya Kazuki's other works!" I'd be honored if you followed me on X (formerly Twitter) @amamiya5235. I'm working on other projects as well, so I hope you'll look forward to it.

Now it's time for acknowledgments. I feel like I apologize to my manager, N-san, every single time, but this time I respected my deadline (respect it every time!). At first, I was full of fervor,

thinking, “I’ll finish this in no time flat! It’ll be easy-peasy!” Except, I handed the first draft in on the day of the deadline. Please forget that happened. Thank you always. Gin-san was once again responsible for the illustrations; thank you for the wonderful artwork as always. The Yuino depicted on the cover felt like she actually existed, which was just too good.

An enormous thank-you as well to everyone involved in this novel’s publication. It would be my pleasure as an author if this story resonated with you even a little bit. Well then, that’s all for now. I look forward to seeing you again in the next volume, or in another one of my series.

I gained weight recently, so I joined a recreational basketball club for adults. Through exercise comes better health!


"Sorry... I think I misclicked?!
D-Don't look!"
What?! *As soon as I thought that, a flesh-colored rectangle appeared on my screen. The delicate curve of her neck and shoulders, damp skin covered in water droplets... And two large, round shapes dangling from her chest shook along with her panicked movements.*
Haibara's Teenage
NEW GAME+


"H-Hey! You should've let me prepare if you wanted him to see this!"
"See?! Isn't it amazing?!"
The room she had taken me to was...certainly amazing, to say the least. There were posters and pictures of female idols stuck to the walls, acrylic stands were displayed on top of her desk and dresser, and her bookshelf was practically overflowing with photo books and CDs. She even had a kinda lewd body pillow.
That's pretty explicit. So she buys that sort of stuff too...


I grabbed her hand and squeezed it, just like I did before she played the piano.
Her face crumpled, and teardrops dampened the ground.

That Time My Oshi and Beautiful Classmate Became My Adopted Younger Sister

"Oh? Onii-chan, hey."

It was nighttime at Takasaki Station. The voice that called out to me belonged to my younger sister, Namika.

"On your way home from club?" I asked.

"Yeah. It went on longer than usual today. Did you just get off work?"

"Yep, I had a shift at Café Mares."

"By the way, is the girl next to you someone you work with?" Namika glanced at Nanase, who was beside me.

"That's right. She was on the same shift as me, so we're going home together."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Nanase Yuino." She introduced herself with a cheerful smile.

"Ohhh! *You're* Nanase-san! Onii-chan talks about you sometimes. I'm Namika, his sister."

"Namika-san, it's a pleasure." Nanase giggled. "So he talks about me?"

"Yeah, you're his oshi, after all. You really are drop-dead gorgeous!"

Dumbass, don't say that to her face! It absolutely must not get out that I stan Nanase!

"O-Oshi? What do you mean?"

"Ha ha ha! Nanase, forget what she said. Namika's just talking nonsense," I answered, trying to dodge the question. I furtively hit my sister in the back, out of Nanase's sight.

"Ow!" Namika uttered quietly, and then glared at me.

"Namika-san, is something the matter?"

"Oh no... Thank you for always taking care of my brother." Namika bowed.

Hey! What's that look for?

Nanase giggled and put on a mature smile. "You're very welcome."

Seeing her like that made me want to tease her a little bit. "If anything, I'm the one taking care of her these days. I'm Nanase's big brother, after all." I grinned smugly.

"H-Hey! Haibara-kun!" Nanase said in protest, surprised.

"Huh? Onii-chan, what the heck are you saying?" In contrast, Namika shot me a flabbergasted look. Then again, that was usual for her.

"Listen, Namika. Nanase thinks of me as her older brother. Which makes her your older sister, in theory. Are you picking up what I'm putting down?"

"Not one bit. All I'm picking up is that you're a big moron."

"N-Namika-san? Please don't take what he said seriously, okay?"

"Of course I won't. I'm the only one who could put up with a brother like him."

"R-Really? Don't you think...that may not be true?" Nanase ventured.

"In the first place, there's no way a girl who's his classmate would see *him* as an older brother."

Nanase spluttered and coughed.

"If there were one, she'd be bad news. She'd have to be a pretty spoiled brat. Someone who doesn't have one mature bone in her body. And don't get me started about how bad her taste must be to want to depend on *this* guy!" Namika effortlessly threw out insult after insult, and she seemed to enjoy it greatly.

Why do you look like you're having a ball?

"I-I'm sorry..." On the other hand, Nanase had taken critical damage and was now depressed.

"Stop it, Namika. Don't hurt your older sister."

"Huh? Uh... What?" Namika took a long, hard look at the gloomy Nanase.

I could practically see the question, "Does this kind of thing actually happen outside of light novels?" written all over her face.

"So, like, something titled *That Time My Oshi and Beautiful Classmate Became My Adopted Younger Sister*?" she said.

"How about we add 'And Competes with My Biological Younger Sister for the Position of One True Sister' as the subtitle?" I suggested.

"That's so creepy."

"You're the one who drove the conversation down this path, though!" *I hate having the ladder pulled out from under me, Namikaaa!*

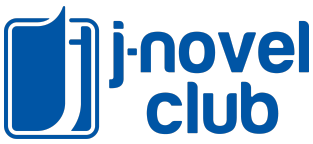
"Anyway, there's no reason such a beauty would ever idolize you like an older brother!"

"There is! And that's why she calls me 'onii-chan!'"

"I, I have never called you that once!" Nanase, who had shut down while Namika and I were squabbling, finally rebooted and cut in. "I just— There was a period of time when my mind played tricks on me. Yes... It was merely a lapse in judgment!"

Namika glanced back and forth between Nanase and me, and then timidly suggested, "Um, so, should I call you Yuino onee-chan?"

"Y-You don't have to call me that!"



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