

Shibuya (Part I Novel 4)

My name is Hidaka Mitsuki. I come from a so-called musical family; my mother is a famous pianist and my father is a DJ.

However, my father's day job is as an aircraft mechanic. I don't know how good he is as a mechanic, but he has a good reputation as a DJ. He hasn't been very active in the public eye for as long as I can remember, but is said to be a legendary DJ in the dance music world.

But- all I remember is the sight of him fiddling with his turntable and mixer on small occasions like home parties.

I asked him about it once. I'd been wondering why he had quit DJing.

'I'm not quitting. This is how I spin the decks for my family.'

That wasn't what I had asked. The question was why he wasn't performing professionally on stage and attracting a large audience anymore.

'Because, I want to play music freely.'

Freely?

'I don't like music that someone else wants to make me do. Making music my job got all kinds of things mixed up for me. More constraints, more weight to bear. You aren't able to do the things you want to do in the end.'

My father said this bitterly.

'Music is really important to me, so I want to be free within it.'

This time, my mother looked bitter.

...He was just running away from it.

'If I become a musician as a profession, I'll be made to do things that I don't want to do. That means I can't be myself anymore.'

...You aren't a child any more, alright? You're an adult, so give it some more thought. Also, you never know when your job as a mechanic will disappear, do you?

'If I keep on working as a musician, maybe I'll eventually grow to hate music someday. That's what I'm scared of.'

...But, if you have so much talent and opportunity, why waste it?

At that point in time, my mother and father were arguing a lot. We were a very closely-knit family.

I like my family. I like this house. My mother, father and sister too.

Yes, I have a twin sister. We aren't very similar though, and have very different personalities and appearances. My sister is not as good as me. She doesn't do well at school, and has no musical talent.

At that time, my sister and I were being taught classical piano by our mother. My mother used to praise me a lot and convinced me that I had talent too.

However, my sister was pitifully untalented. She was terrible at it and showed no signs of improvement. My mother gave up on her early on.

It helped that my sister had a cheerful and positive personality. Well, she isn't exactly the smart one, so maybe she didn't realise what that meant.

Neither my father nor my sister can meet my mother's expectations. I'm the only one who can. If I achieve what my mother wants, her pent-up frustration will decrease, and her irritation won't turn into an angry outburst.

On the other hand, if I don't do my best, my family might fall apart. I must protect my family and this house.

If I meet or possibly exceed my mother's expectations, the atmosphere in the house will remain peaceful. My sister won't be forced to play music.

It's hard to be forced to do something you can't do, and it would be good if she could find an interest outside of music. I inherited my father's and mother's talent, so I will follow the path of music. As long as I do that, then my sister will be free to find what she likes and follow her own path.

That's what I'd thought.

But- on that day. The day of our elementary school music recital. I was... shocked.

Everyone was instructed to perform on whichever instrument they could play well. I had already won a number of piano competitions at the time, so this was child's play for me. I was annoyed that I even had to participate.

Nevertheless, I played the piano in the music room. The piano itself sounded fairly terrible, but I played as well as I could. I'd show the class what I was made of. However when I finished playing, what caught my eye were the bored looks on everyone's faces.

When I started playing, I'd hear childish 'you're good' comments, but these became less and less common throughout the piece. I thought they were impressed by my performance, but they weren't. They got bored of it pretty quickly.

I didn't show it on my face, but- I was fuming with anger.

They don't deserve music, I told myself. Understanding music requires knowledge and education. You also need a good ear to hear subtle differences. Only a select few can hear these differences, understand their meaning and properly enjoy them.

No matter how incredible the music is, if the recipient is incompetent, then it's like giving coins to a cat or pearls to a pig. It's a waste of treasure.

I managed to keep my composure and returned to my seat, but soon after... something happened that disturbed my mind.

My sister took out two boomboxes and started DJing. It was probably the only way my musically inept sister could perform for this recital. In my eyes, it was a pretty sad effort. It was a pitiful attempt by my untalented sister to somehow survive the recital.

But-

Everyone in the class cheered for her, and made such a big fuss over the songs she played. I was the only one stunned by the frenzy over her performance.

I felt left behind.

My sound did not reach the class, but my sister's did. She made them feel happy and enthusiastic. I don't know how to describe what I felt at that moment.

Was it frustration at not being understood?

Was it sadness at being treated unreasonably?

Was it anger at the foolish masses?

My sister came up to me, cheered on by everyone in our class. She was like a puppy running with its tail wagging, and the smile she wore seemed to anticipate something.

Something red and black emerged out of my depths like lava and flowed through my mind.

'That isn't music.'

I told Reina.

♪ ♪ ♪

Not long after that day, our parents divorced.

I was taken in by my mother's side of the family, and my name changed from Hidaka Mitsuki to Seto Mitsuki. My dad took Reina and left.

Since then, my mother's expectations of me became even stronger. My family had split in two, but I continued to live up to my mother's expectations. I won several competitions.

My mother was a very sensitive person, and now I was her only emotional support. I resented my father for not agreeing to my mother's wishes and abandoning me with her, and hated Reina for leaving with my father.

...But.

I guess Reina and my dad must really want to live together. I don't know where they are now, but if I keep trying, maybe one day my sound will reach them.

And then, we could return to how we were...

My mother became more and more depressed. Eventually, it got so bad that she was no longer able to perform in concerts and was sent abroad by her doctor to recover.

In the end, instead of getting back together, my family was completely torn apart. I was left living alone in the house that four of us once lived in.

The house that was once lively and full of warmth now felt like a cold, lonely box.

Only the memories remain. They drift around like ghosts, like graves sinking into a deep ocean.

...I wonder what Dad and Reina are doing right now? My mother and I are suffering so much. But, surely those two are also having a hard time.

I searched for something to cling to.

The video that came up in my search was an outdoor festival in Hokkaido. There, I saw my father and Reina DJing. They were taking turns spinning the turntables in front of a huge audience.

Both of them had such dazzling smiles. I'd never seen them smile so brightly, not even when we used to live together. Their audience were so enthused. Ten, no twenty times more enthusiastic than the audience at the competitions and presentations I participated in.

White clouds crossed the clear blue sky. I could almost smell the forest trees and beautiful green meadows through my screen.

Naturally, I felt tears welling up.

...Why?

Why do you look like you're having so much fun?
I'm all alone in this cold house.
I'm in so much pain.
Everything is so hard.
I've almost forgotten how to laugh.
How can you have such a carefree smile?

I sobbed.
I hadn't cried even once since my parents divorced.
I bawled as if something inside me had just broken.

I smashed my fists into the ground.
Nothing I cared about mattered. People didn't give a shit about what I valued.

My supposedly precious hands and fingers didn't matter. I slammed them down to break them once and for all.

A dark, scorching, all consuming fire was unleashed from deep within my soul, burning to the core of my very being.

This is real anger.
This is real hatred.

I hate my father.
I hate Reina.
I even hate my mother right now.

And I hate DJing, the cause of all of this.

Put headphones over your ears, and the noise cancelling creates absolute silence.

Yet, all the noise in my mind couldn't be quietened.

'I wish that... everyone would just disappear.'

♪ ♪ ♪

Neucom Entertainment STACKBATTLE LEGEND- also known as New Legend.

This wasn't just a STACK battle competition, but an event organised by Neucom Entertainment, a major manufacturer of DJ equipment and other audio equipment. The main purpose of the event was to display and promote Neucom's new products, but there was also, of course, a STACK battle.

It wasn't a tournament, but a lone battle, and was organised in an ingenious way. Although nowadays it was mainly for the sake of advertising, it was a historic and honourable event that could be traced back to the first ever STACK battle world championships. It was an important event for Neucom, and a legendary event for DJs.

Today, only a week before New Legend, press interviews were being held at the venue for the participating Denonbu members of Sotokanda Literary High School and Teion International High School. Desks and chairs were arranged on the stage, on which the six members of both Akiba and Shibuya's Denonbus were sitting in a row. In front of them were over a hundred members of the press.

As expected, Reina was wearing a very nervous smile.

'W-wow...'

'It's a huge event. Very high profile, and the comparison of powerful Shibuya and unknown Akiba make it even more of interest.' Kazune did not seem nervous and responded easily to journalists' questions.

In contrast, Reina was temperamental and gave incoherent answers, which drew laughter from the audience.

And Futaba was-

‘Yaaaaaay~ this is such a massive venue, I’m getting so hyped! All you guys gotta come see me on stage, ‘kaaay?☆’

...A double-piece for the camera.

Due to being in front of hundreds of the press, the usual Futaba had long since retreated. However, when the idol Futaba came out into the open, she was invincible, in a sense. The press seemed satisfied with the easy-to-use material that Akiba provided.

Next up was the strongest of them all, Shibuya.

‘Seto Mitsuki-san, I’d like to ask something. I’ve heard that you and your opponent, Akiba’s Hidaka Reina-san, are sisters, twins even...’

The audience buzzed with questions from entertainment news websites.

‘If that’s true, would this be a sister vs sister-’

‘What’s the point of this question?’

A sudden voice, sharp as a knife, shot through the reporter's question. He was taken aback by Mitsuki’s immediate eye contact. The look in her eyes was murderous.

‘That’s a stupid question that isn’t worth answering. DJ events don’t seem to have much coverage anyway.’

The hall went quiet, as if hit by a flood. Mitsuki shot up out of her seat, ploughed through the silence and walked out of the hall. Reina’s eyes followed her back with a worried gaze.

‘Onee-chan...’

A few reporters came to their senses and rushed after her. The audience was disturbed, but the MC quickly regained his composure.

‘Yes... next is a first-year student from Teion International High School, Taiga Lucia-san.’

‘Hello~’

Lucia responded cheerfully, waving her sleeves at the audience. The MC couldn't help but smile at her cuteness.

'Could you tell us about your ambitions for New Legend?'

'They're the same as always! I'm reeeaaaally looking forward to the battles!!'

Lucia replied excitedly, in a childish way. This combined with her childlike appearance helped the previously stormy atmosphere in the audience become almost completely relaxed. The journalists felt all warm and fuzzy watching her interview.

'Ah, I can always rely on you. You really like STACK battles, isn't that right, Lucia-san?'

'Yeah, love them! Hunting prey is so much fun!'

A shiver ran down the MC's spine at this answer, as Lucia's eyes turned from cute to those of a beast looking for prey. The MC blinked, and forced his facial muscles into a smile.

'Erm... now let's talk about Akiba, your opponent-'

'Akiba? What's thaaaat?'

'Err, well...' The MC's smile faltered.

Is she joking? She must be, right? He told himself.

'Your opponent in New Legend, Sotokanda Literary High School in the Akiba area.'

'Are they any good!?'

The MC worriedly glanced over to the three Akiba girls. Following his gaze, Lucia also began staring at them.

'You lot? You don't look too tasty...'

Lucia's free-spiritedness meant her answers in interviews tended to be mismatched. The MC looked puzzled.

'I'm telling you, you can't expect Lucia to give you a straightforward answer.'

Karin smiled coldly, sitting on the edge of her seat.

‘Huh?’

‘She just comes to these to sniff the bait.’

‘A-ahaha, by bait do you mean... sweets? Well then, it’s cute she got caught in the act! R-right?’

Karin didn’t care about the MC’s efforts to get the interview back on track.

‘I mean our STACK battle opponent is the bait. This one’s a battle junkie, y’know.’

Lucia suddenly jumped out of her chair in response to Karin. She spun around in the air, and jumped onto the table in front of Karin like a little cat.

‘After all, Lucia wants to fight Karin! Let’s go Karin! Right here, right now!!’ Lucia gazed at Karin with glittering eyes.

Her eyes were those of a predator staring at its prey. She smiled happily, almost drooling with little canine teeth peeping out of her mouth.

‘W-well now, Lucia-san. You can’t be on the table like that.’

Lucia glared at the MC after hearing him scold her.

‘Shut up, bitch.’

‘.....Gh!?’

This time, Lucia’s murderous intent was clearly directed at the MC. There was no longer any cuteness to her expression, it had now become ferocious. She was a predator, and her instincts told her to hunt prey.

‘Interrupt Lucia, and you’ll be eaten.’

She smiled viciously, baring her fangs. Lucia’s murderous spirit seemed so genuine that the reporters present at the event started to wonder if she would actually bite the presenter’s throat, shuddering at the thought.

As the MC backed away, Lucia turned her terrifying smile back to Karin.

‘Karin is still the best, better than any other enemy! Lucia wanna defeat Karin and eat up all her DJ skills! That sounds amazing, right?’

Karin snickered at Lucia, who was about to bite her, as if she felt nothing more than just a gentle breeze from the murderous spirit that Lucia gave off.

‘Beat me? You aren’t able to do that, Lucia.’

Lucia moved her face right up close to Karin’s, and continued to stare at her from a very close range.

‘I can!!!’

The phoenix’s eyes glared back, straight into the eyes of the wild beast.

‘You’ve never beaten me before.’

‘Ahahaha! I don’t remember that far back!!!’

There was a hint of madness in Lucia’s glistening eyes.

‘Lucia has gotten stronger since then! This time I’ll make Karin cry!!’

‘So you say. But really, you’re just a little kitten pretending to be the ruler of hundreds of beasts.’

‘You’re just Lucia’s bait, little miss bird.’

The two were engaged in a war of murderous stares, each trying to kill the other using their deadly gazes. Everyone at the event felt their bodies tremble with the tension. Now, they were close enough that their foreheads almost touched. Karin grinned.

‘Is that right... well, if you can beat those Akiba girls, maybe I’ll battle ya.’

‘Really!? YAYYY!!!’

Lucia’s eyes lit up and she jumped up and down, expressing her joy with her whole body. It was as if she’d suddenly changed from a ravenous beast to an adorable kitten.

Lucia ran across the table, the three Akiba girls bracing themselves as she slid in front of them.

‘You bitches better battle Lucia! Right now!! Let’s go go go!!!’

‘U-um... in three days time-’

‘Can’t wait can’t wait can’t wait!! NOW!! Right here right now!!’

As expected, Teion officials rushed on stage and restrained Lucia.

‘What are you doing to Lucia!? Leave me aloooone! Leave me alone! I’m warning you motherfuckers, Lucia is gonna EAT YOU!!’

In the end, it took four people to get her out of the hall.

‘That’s Teion’s No.3 for you...’ Kazune sighed, sounding tired. They could still hear Lucia yelling in the distance.

The Teion Denonbu reigned over every other school’s, as expected of a Denonbu belonging to such a prestigious academy, but in reality, its representatives were far from what that title suggested.

Media rumours suggested Houou Karin was uncontrollable, but at the moment she appeared to be fairly calm. She was next in line to be interviewed. Karin leaned back in her seat, looking like she was about to give the interviewer some more trouble.

‘I’m going home too. See ya.’

After all, she too seemed a little too free-spirited.

‘P-please wait! Your interview is just about to start, Karin-san, erm... expected of Shibuya’s Teion, I suppose? They’re certainly beyond common sense, I’d say... even amongst teammates, that is... f-friendly rivalry, maybe?’

The MC somehow managed to paint the story in a good light. Karin however, frowned at his words.

‘Huh? The hell do you mean by ‘friendly rivalry’?’

‘Er.... I-I mean, teamwork is the same...’

‘Ain’t no way.’ Karin replied, bored. ‘Teion don’t need friends or teamwork. What we need is-’

The eyes of the phoenix glinted, and landed on Reina.

‘The strongest enemy we can find.’

A shiver ran down Reina's spine at this. Karin immediately turned her attention back to the MC.

'Whoever is closest to us is our most dangerous enemy, and that's why Shibuya are the strongest. STACK battles may be team battles, but really it's a matter of each of us winning our own turn individually. I don't need friends, or teamwork. I don't need a close friend.'

The MC was completely speechless. He could no longer do anything but listen in silence to what Karin had to say.

'In Shibuya, everyone wants to be at the top. They springboard off of whoever's near them and drag down whoever's above them. Those on the top relentlessly kick down those who get too close to them. They shatter those other people's dreams to achieve their own. If you don't have that kinda determination, you ain't gonna survive in Shibuya.'

Reina began to observe Karin. She got the impression that she wasn't trying to show off or put on a show, but was just stating the facts.

'For example, when we battle Akiba in 3 days time, maybe a lot of Shibuya will support them instead of us, I think?'

'Huh...?' Reina couldn't help but squeak in confusion. Karin's eyes shifted to her.

'If any of us lose... we'll lose our ranking. That'd leave spots open. Everyone's in this for their own success. They don't care if anyone else isn't happy.'

After saying this, Karin left the venue, and the press interview ended in an unresolved state. The Akiba girls, the only Denonbu members left on stage, were so stunned they forgot to even move for a while.

'So they're... the Shibuya girls...' mumbled Reina, shocked.

Previously, she'd met Karin briefly in Harajuku. However, she couldn't really talk to her at that time, and was unsure of her personality before. Having listened to her again today, Reina was once again overwhelmed by her presence and singularity. It was as if she was an entity outside of usual societal occupations.

With a frightened gaze, Futaba glanced at the seat where the three Shibuya girls were sitting earlier.

'Y-you know... aren't these Shibuya girls too unhinged...'

Kazune stood up, looking tired.

‘Yes, but not to the point of criminality or a lack of common sense... they seem like a bunch of outlaws to me.’

‘I-I can’t go up against those insane people in a STACK battle... I’m scared...’

Kazune tried to soothe the tearfully complaining Futaba by putting a hand on her shoulder.

‘They’re indeed a prestigious school that reigns over every other... but honestly, given their reputation, that’s hard to imagine.’

Reina dropped her gaze and stared at a spot on the table.

‘You ok, Reina?’

‘Huh? Yeah... I’m fine.’

Kazune’s heart ached thinking about how Reina must have been feeling. ‘You were more shocked than we were, weren’t you...’

‘...Thanks, Kazune-chan. Thank you for checking in on me.’

Reina also got up from her seat and, together with Kazune, helped Futaba to the exit.

‘I’ve already made my mind up about my sister... but...’

Futaba turned her head. ‘But?’

‘I’m curious about what Karin-san said...’

‘Oh, you mean what she said about the Shibuya team theory?’

Kazune shrugged.

‘We don’t need to worry about that stuff. They’re too different from us.’

‘Right... I think so too... I like our Akiba team as it is right now. I can’t imagine being with people other than you guys...’

Kazune hugged Futaba, surprising both of them.

‘A-ah!! Futaba, you have no idea how cute you are right now!!’

‘K-kazune-chan, this is embarrassing...’

Reina looked up suddenly as if she’d come up with something. ‘Our team... yes, that’s it!’

‘What is it, Reina?’

‘Let’s do a training camp together!’

Kazune and Futaba looked at each other.

‘.....A camp?’

♪ ♪ ♪

[The training camp event is a bonus stage where the player can increase their bond level with the heroine character. Dream scenarios where her bare face and appearance can be seen and unadulterated scenes can be unlocked as the reward!]

‘...I thought I was about to experience one of those...’

‘What is it, Kazune-chan?’

‘Oh, nothing... this is just a little different to the sort of camp I had in mind.’

For some reason, the three of them were at Reina’s, building plastic models. The model they were building was a real robot that had appeared in an anime.

‘...You know, like going to the hot springs or going to the beach and staying over, that’s what I thought a training camp would be like.’

‘That sounds fun, but it would be a bit hard to do that now.’

New Legend was 6 days away. It would be difficult to plan that trip now, plus have time for practice.

‘...I guess.’ Kazune’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

‘So, I thought it would be ok if we just gathered in my room.’

‘Y-yeah! After all, this is the first time I’ve been invited to your room, Reina, so there’s no need for me to be disappointed! This is even more of a bonus stage!!’

Kazune took a deep breath, as if to inhale the scent of Reina's room.

'I'm glad you're feeling better, Kazune-chan~' Reina smiled happily at the delighted Kazune. Meanwhile, Futaba was looking around Reina's room curiously.

White plastered walls. Wooden flooring. The only furniture in the room were a wooden desk, a small, snug DJ booth and a single wardrobe. The room was simple and unadorned, and wasn't very girly at all.

'It's kind of cool and mature... I thought you would have a cuter looking room, so I'm a little surprised.'

'The design might be influenced by her father, since it seems to be furnished quite naturally.'

'Eeh... I see.'

Reina's desk looked like a study desk, but she was more likely to use it as a workbench for plastic modelling. Knives, files and paints lined it. However at the moment, Reina was also sitting on the floor with her guests. Sheets were spread out across the floor, as the three of them worked on building the robot.

'Umm... by the way, could I ask why we're making plastic models?'

As soon as Kazune and Futaba entered Reina's room, she handed them a box of plastic model parts and said,

'Here's a load of plastic!'

They opened the box, unfolded the instruction manual and started cutting the parts from the runners.

'Despite what Karin-san said, I think teamwork is very important for us. So I thought it would be nice for you two to get to know me more... outside of being in Akiba's Denonbu together.'

Kazune and Futaba were happy that Reina expressed her feelings of wanting to be closer to them.

'I get you... well then, let us create a masterpiece.'

'Right!'

They looked at each other and smiled, then went back to concentrating on building the plastic model. Once the parts were removed from the runners, they were assembled. No glue was needed. Besides, the parts were already coloured and looked pretty good with just the bare assembly.

Kazune held up her finished plastic model high in the air. It was the first one she'd ever completed in her whole life.

'I did it! What do you think!?'

'Oooo!! That's amazing, Kazune-chan!!'

'Huh, really?'

Futaba also gazed at the plastic model made by Kazune, similarly impressed.

'That really is amazing... as for me, Reina-san did most of the work on mine...'

Reina looked closely at Kazune's plastic model, scouring over the details.

'Yeah... the parts are cut out beautifully and assembled perfectly... just as I expected of you, Kazune-chan! You really can do anything!!'

I really can do everything.

'You really can. Kazune-chan has been amazing at everything she does since we were kids. You're incredible... and so different from me. I envy you.'

I'm incredible.

'Hmm? What is it, Kazune-chan?'

'Oh, it's nothing. However-'

Kazune stood up and approached the DJ equipment in Reina's room.

'Haha, are you curious about that?'

'Well, yeah. Isn't this the stuff you took with you to the Azabu match?'

'Yeah. It's my dad's old DJ equipment.'

An old analogue mixer sat between two silver turntables. It had a different vibe compared to the latest DJ units. You could sum it up as retro, but there was a bizarre sense of importance to it.

‘You don’t seem to have many records.’

There were only a few records propped up under the DJ booth. Kazune was sure Reina brought way more to the Azabu match.

‘Ah, they’re from my dad’s secret basement. I put them back there after we beat Azabu.’

‘Secret basement!?’

After the three of them had explored Reina’s house, they went down to the basement.

Half terrified, Kazune and Futaba opened the door to find a lot of plastic model stock, and a considerable amount of machines. They couldn’t even begin to think of what they were used for.

A large collection of analogue records were crammed into rows and rows of ceiling-high shelves. It looked a bit like a library. Kazune and Futaba were overwhelmed by the sheer size of Hidaka Reia’s record collection.

After Reina’s house was fully explored-

‘My turn next. Let’s all go to my place.’

Reina and Futaba followed Kazune to the arcade where she lived.

Once they were there, Kazune spent an excessive amount of time showing off her gaming skills. She seemed delighted at the heaps of praise she received from her two guests.

After spending time at Kazune’s arcade, the three of them left to visit the live house where Futaba lived.

‘My favourite idol group are in the middle of a show right now!! I’d love for you both to see it! Please, come watch it with me!!’ Futaba said excitedly, handing penlights to Reina and Kazune. ‘These are the usual penlights that the audience have!’

‘Huh... what’s this?’

‘It’s a penlight!’

‘So cool! It’s like something out of a sci-fi show!! Do you fight with it?’

‘I guess it’s like a fight in a way, if you support them seriously enough!!’

After a poorly understood exchange, the three of them stormed into the live house.

There, Reina and Kazune were witnesses to-

‘WOOOOOO!!! MIINA-CHAAAN! JUST LIKE ALWAYS, YOU’RE THE CUTEST EEEEERRR!!!!’

Futaba was incredibly hyped up. Reina and Kazune thought her other personality had emerged, just like it did when she DJed under enough pressure.

‘Reina-san! Kazune-chan! Aren’t they great! I don’t think either of you know any calls, but let’s wave our penlights together with the rest of the audience! It’s ok if you’re a little slow!!’

‘S-sure...’ Reina replied. ‘Hey, is this how Futaba-chan usually is?’ she whispered into Kazune’s ear.

‘I think so... I thought that how she gets when she DJs was a completely different personality, but...’

The two of them enjoyed seeing Futaba in such high spirits, and felt a strange sense of unity between the fans and the idols.

Futaba excitedly looked back at Reina and Kazune with a bright smile. ‘Are you guys ok!? Can you both keep going!?’

‘Yeah! I’m having so much fun!!’

‘Yes. Since we’ve come all this way, I’d be missing out if I wasn’t enjoying myself.’

Kazune had already gotten used to changing colours on her penlight and the patterns for waving it. The three of them waved their arms in the air together, and called out in unison.

In terms of Denonbu matches, they each entered the DJ booth alone.

The three of them were good friends. Supportive friends. They had a loving and precious friendship between them.

However during matches, they were on their own.

What Karin had said at the interview suddenly came back to Reina.

‘Teion don’t need friends or teamwork. What we need is- the strongest enemy we can find.’

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Reina felt like she understood Karin’s way of thinking.

But... in the end-

‘Hey, guys- this song is super intense! It’ll make you want to jump!!’

‘I hope it will~’

‘Yeah!! It makes me feel like flying into the sky!!’

They jumped along with the audience, as sweat flew. Together, the three friends followed the sound.

It felt as if three hearts had become one.

♪ ♪ ♪

Akiba had finished their mini training camp. Kazune expressed her thoughts.

‘Aah... really, I never thought I’d be surprised like that... I’m glad to be alive~’

Kazune was relaxing in hot water up to her shoulders, looking up at the night sky.

The three girls were bathing in the onsen of an urban resort spa, accessible two stops from Akiba, adjacent to an amusement park and a baseball stadium. Visitors were sparse, and the open-air bath was almost empty apart from themselves.

Kazune gazed at the upturned faces of Reina and Futaba, who were soaking in the hot water right beside her.

I can’t believe I’m in a hot spring with Reina and Futaba... is this a dream? I thought this was a family friendly version, but maybe this is more of an adult-like training camp! It definitely feels that way!

‘I had no idea this place was so near Akiba, huh~ thank you for bringing us, Futaba-chan!’

‘I was worried about what to recommend... and I’d just got a visitor’s invitation from this place, but I thought it would be hard to come here by myself...’

I’m bathing in this hot spring with two gorgeous girls with beautiful skin chatting away... aah... this is too precious... I’d love to turn my memories into data if I could, but- of course cameras aren’t allowed here. AAA! Why hasn’t mankind achieved the technology to record directly from sight into physical data! Because of developers’ laziness, I’ll just have to watch from a distance and burn it into my brain... hehehehehehe.

‘Um... Kazune-chan, you’ve been mumbling about something for a while now....?’

‘And she’s been grinning the whole time.’

‘Eeh!?’

Kazune was suddenly flustered, as she realised that she’d been speaking her thoughts out loud.

‘But, I understand how you feel, Kazune-chan!’

Oh my god!?! Reina too!?! Are we like-minded? Or, are we... in love with each other!!?

‘I had so much fun today, I can’t help smiling when I remember it.’

‘Y-y-yeah... right!’

Reina’s innocent smile! It’s so dazzling!

Kazune responded guiltily, trying to keep a straight face.

‘After all, we’ve achieved our goal of better understanding each other. That’s more than sufficient.’

‘It really is. I feel like it was a great training camp.’

‘The rest is down to our skills as individuals-’

When Kazune suddenly stopped talking, Reina looked at her inquisitively.

‘What is it?’

‘Uh, uhh... I mean, that issue has to be solved as well...’

‘Kazune-chan?’

‘Ah, It’s nothing. Never mind.’

Despite her saying this, Reina worriedly looked into Kazune’s eyes.

‘But we’re a team that helps each other out, right?’

Kazune’s heart thumped. Although she seemed like an airhead, Reina was very sensitive to people’s emotional responses. Perhaps that was why Reina could always sense the atmosphere of the floor when she was DJing.

Should I be honest?

‘...It isn’t a big deal, really. I just feel like my setlists always end up being too similar.’

I still can’t tell her.

Is it because I’m embarrassed? No, that’s not it. It’s a problem that surely can’t be sorted out by other people. I don’t think I can compose myself enough to tell them.

‘Hmmm, maybe try including some different genres than usual?’ Reina responded, giving her some genuine advice.

Does she believe me, or is she trying to get me to talk?

‘If that’s the case, the DJ unit can recommend more songs to fit in with your setlist. How about using that?’

‘I’ll give it a go. Thanks, Futaba.’

‘Ehehe... it’s kind of embarrassing to be thanked by you, Kazune-chan. I’m absolutely useless when it comes to DJing...’

‘I don’t think you are? I think you always do great.’

...Oh, that’s right. Futaba can’t help but be jealous of me.

‘Eh... but, I can never remember anything from when I’m on stage...’ Futaba smiled in annoyance at herself.

‘But, Futaba-chan. You remember the idol concert we went to today, right?’ asked Reina.

‘Of course I do!’ Futaba replied immediately.

‘In that case, I think you can definitely handle it.’

However, Futaba shook her head in denial.

‘Today and when I perform are completely different. Watching idols perform live is like watching angels sing and dance, but to have people watch you DJ is like a public execution.’

‘An... execution?’

‘Surely... that’s a bit of a stretch, Futaba...’

Futaba squinted at them, seemingly unaware of the elephant in the room.

‘So, I make sure to remember every performance I ever see! To see such a beautiful performance and then just forget about it... that’s too awful.’ she said with a happy smile.

♪ ♪ ♪

I first discovered her in autumn last year.

That day, I was just lying there like a corpse, in the Teion Denonbu clubroom that was really more like my own personal bedroom. Whether I was just sleeping here or actually dead, no one cared. I mean, there was no one in Teion who would be worried about anything happening to Houou Karin.

From the latest DJ equipment to vintage synths, equipment was scattered around the club room at a rate where it’s almost filled with stuff. There was other crap like video games, toys, furniture and training equipment that I’d impulse bought online, but most of it was still in the cardboard boxes. My clothes were left out everywhere because I couldn’t be arsed putting them in the wardrobe. I don’t even know what’s what or where it’s from- companies that have sponsored me or I’ve done advertising work for and brands I’ve never heard of keep sending me things that they want me to wear.

At first I thought it would be helpful, but now I just find it annoying as fuck. I get sent an unnecessary amount of samples and gifts, not just clothes. It’s a pain throwing

them away, so I just leave them. Thanks to that, this clubroom, which was supposed to have a ton of space, could now be either a storeroom or a mountain of trash.

When you're collapsed in a room piled with so much stuff, you really do feel like you're dead.

It was some time after I'd entered Teion. I started to feel worse and worse with every passing day. I never felt like doing anything, I wanted to smash up everything, I wanted to start just completely fucking up the way I DJed, I wanted to make crazy songs to feel like I was beating the shit out of everyone, and I had no idea if I had any motivation at all to even carry on.

But now I just felt like a corpse.

I didn't want to see or hear anything for the time being.

'Teion International High School from Shibuya is the winner of this tournament! It seems we have an unprecedented situation where a single DJ has won every match!'

Shut the fuck up.

'And she is the strongest DJ of our time, the pride of Shibuya, Houou Karin.'

And it's me. Is this targeted harassment??

The building where all the Teion clubrooms are located had a big screen and speakers. A digest of the previous tournament was being played.

That was such a boring tournament.

I thought high school would be so much better than this. Seriously. Is this how Teion really is? Sure, a lot of kids here are talented, but they're all small and uninteresting. I thought it'd be teeming with monstrous kids. To win against such monsters, you'd surely have to reach the throne first, but to me it felt like I was sitting on the throne without really doing anything.

Such empty victories. It felt more like a chair made of air rather than a throne.

So, that's why I've been feeling so down lately.

I expected so much more from you, Teion.

But could I aim higher? I could fight a generational war against my old man... but, I dunno if that old geezer would play along.

Just like a student, you could revisit your youth through Denonbu... you shitty old bastard.

‘And here’s what some fans who came to the event had to say.’

‘That was the best kind of hype ever!! I had so much fun~’

‘Karin’s insane! She’s too good, right?’

‘Love you Karin! I’m getting all emotional here!’

‘Karin has amazing taste in clothes and stuff, doesn’t she? Feels to me like she’s Shibuya’s fashion leader.’

Literally where.

I started to get irritated listening to all that, so I got up.

I went to the window, and opened the curtains. Before I even knew it, the sun was already starting to set. The darkening streets of Shibuya were cluttered with holographic advertising neon lights.

Large, drone-like things flew among them. Those were AI speakers. Everyone says they have special particles that let them fly around Shibuya, but the DJ unit also floats.

What makes them so useful outside of Shibuya? I once asked. The answer I got was that it's easier to fill a sealed box with those particles and stuff. The particles are said to have a purifying effect on the air, and air conditioners and air purifiers are spitting them out or something. I dunno much about it.

The AI speaker stopped over the scramble intersection and directed the lights and speaker downwards. There, two girls were staring at each other in front of a DJ unit. This intersection and the roads stretching in all directions are where the free-for-all STACK battles happen. Because of that, the roads are usually closed. I looked down the road and saw a couple of other kids having a STACK battle.

Those battles are always so mid, though.

If you’re a good DJ, you can get anything you want in Shibuya. Money and status.

‘...I got all that, but... I just can’t get any real enemies.’

At that moment, my phone rang from somewhere.

As I walked towards the sound, light leaked through the piles of clothes on the floor. I dug through them and eventually my phone fell out. The screen showed the name of a teacher at Teion.

I tried to ignore the call, but the vibrations of my phone made too much noise on the floor. I accidentally touched the screen whilst picking it up, accepting the call involuntarily. The other side connected.

‘Ah! Hello, Karin? Where are you right now?’

Angry at myself, I took a while to reply.

‘The clubroom.’

‘Huh? The awards ceremony is about to start, hurry up!’

‘What are you on about?’

‘The awards ceremony for the first semester! How many times have I told you now that the best students receive awards!? Come quickly, it’s almost time for it to start!’

‘Ah- I’ll pass.’

‘You can’t do that! It won’t start without you there!! This time there’s a top prize-winning student who specialises in classical music. Are you trying to cause trouble!?’

‘...Fiiine.’

‘You have that dress I gave you the other day, don’t you. Be sure to come wearing it properly.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ I carelessly replied, and hung up.

A dress?

I looked around at the tower-like stacks of cardboard boxes. I’m sure it’s in here somewhere, probably.

I picked up the first jacket I saw on the floor and put it on, and put my feet through the socks closest to me. Each were different lengths and colours, but I didn't really care.

After leaving the clubroom, I headed up the road to the venue. Ah, looks like I wore different shoes on each foot as well.

The teacher who had called me had a devilishly angry look on her face when she saw me arrive, but she seemed to think it was better I was late than not there at all. I was immediately put onstage. The facilitating teacher read out all the reasons why I was awarded, as if she'd been waiting for me.

'Houou Karin-san won the last tournament by herself and brought Teion the championship with her overwhelming skills! She's unbeatable at school. Additionally, she has performed at festivals abroad this summer and is recognised as one of the younger generation's top and unique DJs. We are proud to present her with the Best Student award.'

...Unbeatable, huh? What's a victory without enemies worth?

What horseshit. I wanna play more on the edge, y'know. I want a life-destroying battle, like a real fight to the death, where you push your limits with everything you've got, with all your might, with all your strength.

I want an opponent like that to challenge me. Just gimme the strongest enemy, not stupid trophies and plaques.

I turned my attention to the Denonbu members who'd come to the ceremony. Some of them were on the same team in the summer tournament. They stared resentfully at me, wanting to be in my place.

Grudges and anger are strong energies. With those in mind, come and beat me. I just want an enemy, y'know?

If this carries on, Teion will one day fall to the ground.

Yeah, all of them are good at what they do. However, no one's stuck throughout it all. If we'd let some of the kids on the team DJ at the last tournament, we would've lost a few stars, but it wouldn't have affected Teion's win.

None of them are the strong enemy I'm looking for.

'Now then, this prize has also been awarded to a student in the classical music category. It is unusual for two students to be selected for this award!'

As this was said, I only just noticed that there was another student standing next to me.

...Who's this then?

She was dressed in a formal blue concert dress, and had long black hair. Her eyes seemed downcast and somewhat vacant. At a glance, I thought she looked like a life-size doll, partly because of her beauty and cute face.

'Seto Mitsuki-san! Known as a child prodigy from an early age, Seto-san has further developed her skills in high school. She also placed first in the Junior Classic Competition! Teion International High School is proud to present the next generation of classical music's greatest treasures!'

Only her eyes, on that doll-like face, moved. The look in her eyes reminded me somehow of myself.

Her eyes, that were like glass balls, suddenly came to life- wait- no.

A shiver ran down my spine.

No, it wasn't like she'd come to life. It was kinda more like something intense, something vicious started to shine through.

What the hell?

This girl... what the hell was she?

She might have had a doll-like expression, but her eyes were definitely different.

It was as if she was glaring at her parents' enemies.

'Ah- Seto Mitsuki, was it?'

'....'

'You were waiting for me cause I was late, huh? Sorry 'bout that.'

'I wish you hadn't come here at all.' Mitsuki replied in a flat, emotionless voice.

'Huh?'

'If that was the case, there would've been no awards ceremony.'

That was a bit surprising to hear. A lot of classical music students tended to be very uptight and serious. As for this girl, she looked like she'd be that way, too.

'You don't like it either? This kinda thing?'

'Yes. The fact that I'm treated the same as a DJ makes me want to vomit.'

'.....'

There's a bunch of other music courses, all of which see DJs as their enemy. But Mitsuki's disgust felt different to the rest.

'...Now, here is Seto Mitsuki-san. Please get ready to listen to her performance.'

I hadn't heard anything about it, but apparently Mitsuki was about to perform something. Just then, I noticed a grand piano on stage.

I ducked into the stage wings, and stood crossing my arms. From there, I could hear better and see Mitsuki's face more clearly.

What's she really like? What's underneath that doll-like face?

'...Heh.'

A chuckle escaped me. It's been a seriously long time since I've been interested in other people.

Her performance began. In no time at all, the audience was drawn into Mitsuki's playing.

It was beautiful. It really was such a beautiful performance. And absolutely perfect. I totally get why she's won so many competitions.

But... what's behind all of this beauty?

Just skill and beauty weren't enough to create a performance like this. It sounded somewhat unsettling, sad and dangerous. This appealed to and attracted the audience's unconscious.

I could see Mitsuki's face as she played. Her eyebrows were raised in distress and her lips slightly open as if she were about to call for help.

I met her gaze for a moment.

It was as if I was looking into the depths of a deep sea where no light could reach. And yet, it also felt like a scorching fire was burning.

I saw deep, deep despair. A grudge that cursed everything in this world. A rage that burned everything in the world.

It wasn't on the same level as the feelings that the Teion Denonbu kids had for me. Beyond her performance, which was painted with incredible technique and an astonishing sense of music, there was a grudge that could destroy the world.

The audience was oblivious to this, listening only to her outstanding performance technique.

'...And yet you didn't wanna be here.' I laughed spontaneously. 'I found you, huh. And you're one hell of a monster!'

My heart was so excited that it felt like it was going to burst out of my chest.

♪ ♪ ♪

The following day, I went to Teion's main school building, instead of the clubroom. There were piano practice rooms there, where I hoped I'd find her. After checking all the doors, I hit bingo when I opened the fifth one.

'...Outsiders aren't allowed in here.' Seto Mitsuki said in a condescending voice at my sudden intrusion, her expression remaining unchanged.

'Hey, we're at the same school. I ain't an outsider.'

It was a pretty large room. The other practice room I looked into only had one grand piano, but here there were two. Even so, there was still plenty of room to relax, with sofas and tables. Apparently, Mitsuki got special treatment among all the classical music course kids.

I walked up to Mitsuki's side, and got straight to the point.

'You. You're joining Denonbu.'

'...Huh?'

A surprised expression appeared on her doll-like face. She was caught off guard, and I watched her expressions change. This girl really had a surprisingly cute face.

That surprise I found endearing remained for only a split second, and was quickly replaced by a bitter expression.

‘Are you insane?’

‘I’ll take that as a compliment.’

‘...You seem to speak pretty weirdly, too.’

After sighing disgustedly, Mitsuki stared at me like I was an idiot.

‘Do I really have to do something as useless as DJing? It’s so vulgar and low class. There’s no musical value in it.’

‘DJing and electronic music are now mainstream worldwide though, y’know? How many people nowadays are into classical music?’

‘It isn’t about numbers, it’s about quality. Classical music is a pastime of the ruling class.’

She smiled pitifully.

‘Dance music is popular because it’s the base of the pyramid. Classical music reigns supreme, so its popularity is less. Only the truly chosen are allowed to play and listen.’ Mitsuki said smoothly, as if she’d pre-prepared her answer.

‘Hmmm. I gotcha...’ I sat at the grand piano next to her. I smiled at Mitsuki, who raised her eyebrows, wondering what I was gonna do next.

I started to play the piano.

‘Wha-’ Mitsuki froze in surprise. ‘Chopin’s Piano Sonata... No.2, ‘Funeral’ 1st movement...?’

‘Ding ding ding!’

I started getting into it. It had been so long since I touched an acoustic piano. As I’d expect from a Teion piano, it was perfectly tuned, and the sound was great.

If the sound can be picked up by a microphone, then the same sound can be reproduced by a sampler. Only one sound is played live. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime encounter made up of this moment, this place, the environment of the room, the things in it, the air, the humidity, me and Mitsuki, and so on.

The sound of this one time performance will never be heard again, and that's the fragility of it.

Even if it isn't quite like when you play acoustics, the same could be said for DJs. Not many people realise that, though.

As I finished playing and took my fingers off of the keys, I gave Mitsuki a smug look.

'Whaddaya think?'

'...That was so disappointing.'

Huh? Is her grading gonna be surprisingly strict?

Mitsuki let out a sigh that seemed to blow all of the air out of her lungs. 'If you have that much talent, why did you end up DJing...'

I guess I passed, apparently. I snickered at her response.

'...Piano's good, it's a nice little instrument. But for me, it feels too restrictive.'

'Restrictive?'

'For example, it's kinda like how MMA feels more interesting than boxing.'

'...I'm really not sure about that metaphor, but... anyway, there's no way I'm joining Denonbu.'

'Why?'

Me and Mitsuki looked at each other, in front of the two pianos.

'...I really hate dance music, clubs, and above all, DJs. So much so that I would like to wipe them all off the face of the earth.'

Right, so that was why she was staring at me like that before. Actually, she still was.

At first I thought this girl looked like a doll, but ain't no way. She's scarily emotional. No, intense even. She may have a poker face, but there's so many hidden emotions buried inside her.

'Knew it. Hey, you.'

'Eh?'

‘Your performance at the ceremony was great.’

‘Yes.’

‘Makes sense why you could play like that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You got insane technique and the musical sense of a prodigy, and that lets you give a terrifyingly perfect performance. Hearing you play is like being transported to a world as pure and beautiful as Heaven- but Hell is right underneath it. Probably a fuckton of practice over a mind-numbingly long period of time.’

‘That’s what a pianist does.’

‘But- your motivation ain’t normal. Your driving force is like a thick wave of lava, a grudge that seems to curse the world and everything in it. It’s horrifying, dirty, ugly, and it seems like those extreme feelings you have are about to explode at any moment. People are attracted to that devastating vibe, and that’s why everyone is so fascinated by your playing.’

‘.....!?’

Mitsuki’s face contorted in anger.

‘Don’t you imagine things like that. What would you even know?’

‘Why the hell d’you hate DJs so much then? Did they bully you as a kid?’

‘It’s none of your damn business!!’

‘It is. I want you, y’know. I don’t want someone who’s normally talented- I need a fuckin’ monster just like you.’

‘What group are you with!?’

‘No one else is asking you to join!! It’s just me!!’

‘Then what!?’

‘Be my fucking enemy!!!’

Mitsuki looked as confused as she could possibly manage.

‘...What on earth are you even saying, seriously... I have no idea what you even mean anymore.’

‘Even if you dunno what I’m talking about, you should know this much.’

‘...What?’ Mitsuki had a tired look on her face.

‘If all you do is play piano, there ain’t no way to prove you’re better than a DJ.’

‘...Gh!?’

‘No matter how much practice you put in and how good you play, there’s no way you can even touch DJing and dance music. So, there’s only one way to prove what your piano music’s really worth, y’know.’

‘...What the hell?’

‘Seto Mitsuki!! Become a DJ! If you get on the same playing field as us, you can beat DJs in STACK battles! Therefore, you can beat me!!!’

‘Beat... you?’

‘The current No.1 DJ is me, Houou Karin. Defeat me, and you’ll be at the top of the DJ world, both in name and in reality. And then you can say whatever you want about it.’

‘Anything...?’

‘That DJing is worthless, or whatever.’

I sat up from the stool and left the piano practice room, leaving Mitsuki staring at the piano keys, frozen where she sat.

Now all I had to do was wait.

♪ ♪ ♪

A week had passed.

‘Shit... I thought I’d definitely got her there... daaaaammnnn iiiittttt!!’ I yelled, complaining to the ceiling of the clubroom from where I lay down.

Mitsuki, you motherfucker! You're really gonna give me no reaction!? I hope I find a weirdo like her again soon...

Suddenly, the door opened with a bang.

'What the...'

What just happened? When I lifted my head up, I saw a figure wearing a dress standing in the doorway.

'...Mitsuki?'

The unlit clubroom was dim, and Mitsuki's silhouette was cloaked in darkness. I couldn't make out her face, but I could see that she was holding something silver and shiny.

...Scissors?

When Mitsuki closed the door, I could see her cold expression. There was something dreadful seeping out from it.

She entered the room, the scissors in her hand glowing dully.

A shiver ran down my spine, and I immediately jumped up.

'Y-you-'

Mitsuki opened the scissors, and positioned them at her own neck.

'This is half the price that I will pay upfront.'

'Huh!? Stop-'

There was a sharp sound as Mitsuki's long black hair was cut. In her left hand, she held a bundle of severed hair.

'You...'

'Take it from me.'

'What're you talking about, paying in advance?'

'Tuition fees.'

‘Huh?’

‘Teach me how to DJ, Houou Karin.’

‘.....’

Seto Mitsuki, who now had short hair, stared right at me. I could tell from her eyes that she was truly set on destroying me, and DJing as a whole.

I accepted the bundle of black hair she gave me. It was heavy.

‘You... you’re even more insane than I thought, huh.’

Mitsuki gave me a wry smile as I said this.

‘Well, someone did say I was a monster, didn’t they?’

I could only laugh bitterly.

‘Then... guess I’ll start with the outfit.’

I glanced around at all the cardboard boxes in the room, not knowing where they were from or what kind of clothes were even in them. Giving up quickly, I took Mitsuki to the streets of Shibuya.

♪ ♪ ♪

We entered a large clothes store up Park Avenue, where I planned to find clothes for Mitsuki.

‘Whatcha think of this, huh?’

My jacket of choice for her was a black leather jacket. Mitsuki’s original blue dress was shortened in length, and she turned it into a dress with a leather belt around her waist.

If we sealed Mitsuki’s classical looking dress under the punk-looking leather jacket, a new Mitsuki could be born! I had a good feeling about this.

But Mitsuki looked down at my feet sceptically.

‘Why am I taking fashion advice from someone who wears different shoes and socks on each foot...’

‘Hey, hey! They still call me the fashion leader, y’know!? Well, I dunno what that really means...’

Mitsuki let out her thousandth sigh of the day.

‘Maybe I should reconsider joining Denonbu after all...’

‘Wait!! It’s fine, it really suits you! You’re cute, y’know. And you’re totally gonna look cool like that!!’

‘....’

Mitsuki looked away, embarrassed, but I honestly thought that was kinda cute. We also found shoes and socks and bought those too, and found a changing room so Mitsuki could change clothes again.

I walked along the streets of Shibuya with this new Mitsuki, who’d seemingly transformed into a different person.

‘I feel a little uneasy about this...’

‘Really? Nah, you look great.’

‘Hmm.’

Mitsuki turned slightly red, pouting. On the surface she was always cool, but just then, she’d been surprisingly emotional.

‘When we get back to the clubroom, I’d like a quick DJ lesson.’

‘That’s fine, but... what’re you gonna do about the second half of the payment? I’m telling you, I don’t need any more hair. For real.’

Mitsuki glared at me with a challenging smile.

‘If I defeat you- Houou Karin, that’ll be enough, won’t it?’

This bitch. I swear to god.

‘Come at me then.’

I’m sure I must’ve had a battle-mode smile on my face.

♪ ♪ ♪

Kazune made a trip to Teion by herself. It may have seemed like a raid, but it was really just a courtesy call. After all, they were to have a STACK battle with Teion, who were superior in terms of music.

As a matter of courtesy, the challenger side, Akiba, should greet them on their own turf. Kazune had taken that into consideration and had decided to visit them as Sotokanda Literary High School's student council president.

Given what had happened during the interview the other day, she assumed she'd be turned away and wouldn't even be able to have a conversation. But apparently, only some students were troublesome, while others had common sense. The student council members were so overly polite and rational that they were out of sync.

However, they also seemed busy and the date and time of the meeting were quite pinpointed. Unluckily, it clashed with a Harajuku party which Mimito had invited them to. Kazune had promised she'd go to Harajuku when she'd finished her business in Shibuya, and had asked Reina and Futaba to go there first.

After the meeting with the Teion student council president was safely over, a general affairs officer (A first year girl who Kazune thought was quite cute) showed her around the school.

'And this is roughly what it looks like inside the school.'

'I see, thank you for the tour. You're very well informed.'

A concert hall where entire orchestras could play. Live music venues of various sizes in halls suitable for rock and other kinds of bands. Recording studios for practice rooms. All departments had state-of-the-art equipment and resources.

'No problem. Teion is... well, rather the whole of Shibuya feels like a newcomer's experimental city. Equipment and instruments are a priority here. We do things like testing prototypes, and it's the Denonbu members especially who do that.'

'Prototypes?'

'Yeah. We use them as we like, just to try them out for the time being, and then give feedback to the developers.'

Kazune had heard that Neucom had a big part in the technological development of Shibuya, but she was surprised to learn that it had such strong links with Shibuya.

‘Some things are good, but there seems to be a lot of interference... but it’s give and take, isn’t it really?...Oh, pardon me! I haven’t shown you our Denonbu yet!’

The two of them chatted more during the guided tour. Actually, it was more like they bounced off each other. By the time they’d made it to the Denonbu clubroom in front of the station, they’d become a lot friendlier with each other.

‘Shinonome-san, I’m so honoured I got to guide you today as the student council president! Um... if you don’t mind, would you like to stay in touch? Here’s my SNS ID.’

‘Oh, of course. I’m very happy to be shown around Teion, such a musically elite school by such a pretty girl.’

‘Thank you so muuuuuch!’

...This gave Kazune a source for information on the Teion student council. This was the moment when half of the reason she’d come to Teion in the first place had been achieved.

As for the other half- well, it would be aiming a little too high, so it was a no-go.

It had been said that Kazune wouldn’t be able to enter the Denonbu clubroom without permission, so after parting with the general affairs girl who showed her around, she quietly entered.

It was far larger than the Akiba clubroom. Moreover, there wasn’t a single person there at the moment, which further emphasised its spaciousness.

The three regular members, Houou Karin, Seto Mitsuki and Taiga Lucia were often there, according to the general affairs girl. However, it was unexpected that there were no other members of the club there.

The first and second floors had a cafe and a DJ booth, whilst the third floor and above were privately owned by Houou Karin... was it possible that the clubroom itself was dedicated to the three members of Shibuya’s top team?

‘No way...’

Kazune tried to regain her composure, and looked for the stairs to the basement. Surely there would be a dance floor in the basement for practice. Before looking around the floor above, Kazune decided to look around the basement first.

As she descended into the basement, she saw that it was big enough to easily fit two to three hundred people, and was perfectly equipped with a state-of-the-art DJ unit and AI speakers.

‘Now that’s what you call practice luxury...’

‘I agree.’

Huh!?

Suddenly, Kazune heard a voice from behind, startling her to the point where she felt like her heart almost stopped.

A girl with short hair wearing a black leather jacket stood behind her.

‘Seto... Mitsuki-san...’

‘You’re Akiba’s student council president, are you not? I was informed by the student council that you were coming here to visit us. I must apologise, however, because both Karin and Lucia are missing.’

‘Ah, right- wait, missing!?’

‘Basically, they run free like wild animals. They’ll return when they’re hungry.’

‘.....’

The image of those two girls seemed to be moving away from humanity more and more.

Mitsuki walked across the floor and onto the stage, and activated the DJ unit. With a low startup sound, the various indicators lit up.

‘Go ahead. Look around all you want.’

‘No, I...’

‘You aren’t here to size us up then?’

When Mitsuki put it so bluntly, Kazune could only laugh. That was indeed the other half of the reason why she was visiting Teion. It could be called sizing them up, but it was slightly different.

‘That might be true, but- even if we check you out now, it won’t change the outcome of our battle in 3 days’ time.’

‘Yes, I agree. So why did you come here?’

‘Well...’

How unusual, Kazune thought to herself. Normally she’d have the wits to be able to talk her way out of a situation like this, even if she had to resort to lying or bluffing. But that became too much to worry about.

‘Actually, I wanted to ask your opinion on something.’

‘My... opinion?’

Kazune cut her off before she could disagree. ‘You see, I’ve only been DJing for a short while.’

‘...Is that right? I also started recently. I’ve been DJing for less than a year.’

‘You’re lying!?’

‘Could you not call people liars straight out of the blue?’

‘Ah... I apologise.’

...She became Teion’s No.2 in less than a year!?

Even if she originally had musical experience... she really is Reina’s twin sister. What a terrifying blood relative.

‘Err, I’m embarrassed to admit this, Seto-san, but... my ability to do most things is quite above average.’

Mitsuki looked down from the stage at Kazune with an iron-faced, emotionless expression.

‘...So, recently I started Denonbu and I’m a little... what I mean to say is that I’m a bit confused-’

‘Ah, so it’s that.’

She spoke as if she suddenly understood everything.

‘Um... aren’t we still in the middle of a conversation?’

‘It’s Reina’s fault, right? Probably.’

Kazune’s heart hurt hearing that from Mitsuki.

‘No, it isn’t about Reina directly...’

‘You heard Reina DJ and thought about how you could do the same. How did she excite the audience as if she was manipulating their minds? Besides, you might have watched and analysed the videos of our opponents battling against us. Am I wrong?’

‘.....’

Bullseye.

‘You tried to analyse and imitate us, but found that you couldn’t do it. That’s what’s causing confusion for you, isn’t it.’

‘...What makes you say that?’

‘I’ve seen so many kids who are just like that.’ Mitsuki stated matter of factly. She wasn’t boasting in any way. ‘I’ve heard you DJ.’

‘Eh...?’

Kazune was surprised to hear this, thinking that Akiba were definitely not eye openers right at that moment.

‘I thought you were excellent. Your setlists are very inventive and well put together.’

‘Th... thank you so much...’

‘If you’re performing at any parties or trying to lift Akiba up in the rankings, there’s nothing you need to worry about. You can just do fun club activities. But-’

Mitsuki’s eyes sharpened slightly.

‘It would be impossible for you to come to this side.’

!!

‘This...side?’

Kazune didn't really have to ask. She already knew what Mitsuki meant by that.

There was an insurmountable barrier between people who were just generally talented and the real prodigies. Mitsuki let out a sigh.

'But, that isn't my point. It's a matter of happiness, you see.'

'...But what do you mean, that we can't come to this side?'

Kazune felt blood rushing to her head; she very rarely felt like this. My CPU is always cool, but right now I feel like it's seriously overheating... she thought.

Mitsuki continued talking indifferently.

'Here on this side, everyone is broken. There's something wrong with us. Without music, we'd all just be a bunch of sociopaths.'

'That's...'

'So, all we can do is live here. But you're different. You can choose any option you want. You can experience the happiness that everyone else is searching for. I'm really jealous of that.'

What Mitsuki said made sense to Kazune, but she was unconvinced that she could really do anything.

Until now, there was nothing that she had been really interested in. And she'd finally found that, or so she thought. However, having met Reina and meeting other schools' Denonbus like Harajuku, Azabu and Shibuya- when she looked back on herself, she thought-

I can't just be anything I want- who am I to be anything that I choose?

As if reading her mind, Mitsuki asked;

'You wanted to talk to me, which was not a bad choice. But really, you've had your setlist in your head since the start, haven't you?'

'...Yes.'

'You've repeatedly practised and built up that setlist. Am I right?'

Kazune nodded silently.

‘As you can imagine, I’m the same. I choose my setlist in advance, rehearse it thoroughly and perform it on the day of the event.’

After all, it was just as Kazune had predicted. They were the same kind of person, but she was also Kazune’s superior. That’s why she’d wanted to talk to Seto Mitsuki.

‘That approach is low level for a DJ- and idiots who do that can also be found in the Teion Denonbu. Yet, I rank higher than they do, meaning that I must be doing the right thing.’

‘...That’s reassuring to hear.’

‘But there are exceptions.’

‘Eh?’

‘Only one is ranked above me. The girl who DJs with everyone’s feelings.’

...Houou Karin.

‘But sooner or later, I’ll take her down too.’

It’s amazing how much truth is in the words that are spat up to the heavens. If I said anything like that, people would think I was joking, thought Kazune.

‘Houou-san mentioned a strong enemy... is that you, Seto-san?’

‘...Ultimately, our methods are simply different. In any case, I don’t feel like Karin is a better DJ with her method of watching how the audience reacts and deciding what songs to play on the spot.’

Mitsuki showed no signs of embarrassment at this declaration. In fact, she seemed to puff out her chest slightly.

‘For me, DJing is just the same as a piano recital. I present the perfection that I’ve made. The audience just needs to shut up and listen to me DJ.’

That was it. Kazune didn’t have that arrogance. She didn’t have that intense egoism backed by immense confidence, as only a prodigy like Mitsuki could.

‘You could say the same, student council president from Akiba.’

‘...It isn’t easy to say that.’

‘Yes. With speech comes responsibility. You need talent and competence to prove your words. But that’s easy enough.’

‘Easy?’

‘You just have to sacrifice everything else and put everything into it. Your entire life.’

That wasn’t easy whatsoever. Doing something like that could never be.

‘However, even with such sacrifices, results are never guaranteed. It could just alter your life permanently... what do you think? Could you do it?’

That would be impossible. Not for Kazune.

When she couldn’t answer, Mitsuki murmured;

‘Knowing your talent from the beginning is... unfair.’

What?

‘Your misfortune began when you met Reina.’ Mitsuki said coldly, as if nothing had happened.

‘That’s-! That’s just... wrong!’

However, Mitsuki went further, flames of hatred burning in her eyes.

‘She makes everyone unhappy. You should leave while you still can.’

Kazune couldn’t listen to that any longer. She left the Teion Denonbu clubroom, escaping Mitsuki.

♪ ♪ ♪

Jingumae Sandou High School’s Denonbu clubroom’s entrance was located at the entrance to Takeshita Street in Harajuku. At the same time that Kazune was visiting Teion, a regular DJ party was being held in Harajuku.

Reina and Futaba walked across the pedestrian crossing as they exited the Takeshita exit ticket gate.

‘Akiba! Welcome!!’

Mimito was standing at the entrance to the clubroom in a tremendous manner.

‘Aaahh- Mimito-chaaan! Did you come specially to meet us? Thank you!!’

‘A-are you a dumbass!? Not at all!’ Mimito’s face turned red.

Seeing Mimito like that, Hina, who was sitting at the reception desk, interjected in a dull voice.

‘Haven’t you been fidgeting for a while now? You asked me who was arriving about 5 times.’

‘I told you to keep that a secret!! You guys, leave this bitch Hina alone and get inside!!’

‘It seems fun in there, so I’ll come with. Ah, is it ok if you take a shift here?’ Hina approached a girl wearing a staff T-shirt.

Futaba remembered how the three Harajuku girls used to do everything for their Denonbu on their own.

‘It seems that more and more people are willing to help.’

‘...Thanks to you. Since our dedication DJ event, we’ve had lots more attention. Other kids from other clubs started helping out, and we’ve had interviews with the local media.’ Hina replied, a slightly embarrassed look on her face.

‘That’s not all! There’s even talk of us collabing with some backstreet shops! We’ll get to release our own merch!’

Reina’s eyes widened hearing this.

‘That’s incredible!! Wow, Mimito-chan!’

‘Right!! Right!?’

Mimito’s eyes were twinkling, and she was honestly delighted- but she started to look more and more smug.

‘Well, this isn’t part of my ability at all, is it? It’s like the world is slooowly catching up with me, just a little bit. So-’

Mimito turned away, mumbling.

‘I’m so grateful to you all... Reina...’

The lounge used to be deserted, but now it was crowded with people. The noise from the crowd stopped Mimito's murmurs from reaching Reina's ears.

‘Sorry, did you say something just now?’

‘I didn't say anything!’

Mimito angrily opened the door to the dance floor, from which a flood of sound poured out.

Shian was DJing onstage at the back. As usual, there was a group of shrine-goers, but there was also a large number of Jingumae students and students from other schools.

Mimito and Hina gazed at the view in front of them, both full of emotion.

‘Until recently, it was deserted... but!’ Mimito clenched her small fists. ‘We aren't even close yet! We have a lot of people, like at the dedication DJ event... no, we'll make it an even bigger party than that! And therefore, we'll piss off Shibuya and make them scream with rage!’

Hina glanced at Mimito with eyes that said ‘Wow...’

‘...I've never heard anyone put it that way before.’

‘That's not what's important here!’

‘Ahaha... but, you're still trying to battle Shibuya, right?’

Mimito pouted at Reina's question.

‘Well, that's right. They're running away from battling us whilst thinking they're the best, and that's not right at all. I haven't forgotten about them rejecting me because of the entrance exam! Well, after all, my talent, cuteness and everything I do are all on a different level from everyone else, so it's not surprising that the Shibuya people didn't understand.’

Again, Hina chided Mimito.

‘...How can you even interpret it like that? You make up too many facts for your own convenience.’

‘My interpretation is the truth of the world, so I don't think so!’

‘Right. She’s giving off some weird radio signals, isn’t she? Maybe it’s coming from those bunny ear ribbons on her headband.’

Reina’s eyes lit up.

‘Those are antennae!? Cool!!’

‘No, they can’t be, right!? Hina!! That airhead will take everything you say seriously, so be more careful!’

Reina looked at Futaba, puzzled.

‘What does she mean by ‘airhead’?’

‘I...I dunno? I wonder?’ Futaba looked away in a cold sweat.

‘More importantly... Mimito, you shouldn’t be revealing that baseless arrogance to anyone else, keep it to just me... actually no, I get second-hand embarrassment listening to you.’

‘Hina!! You definitely hate me, don’t you!?’

Hina squinted at the teary eyed, worrying Mimito.

‘That’s not it at all. Well, I don’t hate you... but I don’t feel like I don’t... that’s what I feel like.’

‘Which one is it!?’

‘Ah, it’s time for me to DJ for a bit. I’ll see you later.’

‘Wait, what!? Hinaaaaaa!!!’

Shian came up to the three girls as Hina entered the DJ booth, switching places with her.

‘Shian-chan, you were amazing!!’

‘You really were! It was a very stylish and cute set... I really liked it.’

‘...Thanks.’

Shian's expression did not change, but they all could sense that she was a little embarrassed.

‘Shian!’

Mimito suddenly asked Shian as if in dire need of an answer.

‘Shian, do you really like me!?’

‘....’

Shian was taken aback.

She quickly pulled out her phone and started typing at breakneck speed.

[Without any warninf this fuckimg rabbit gir; starts spotuing the absoltue grossedt shit at me i wanna ddie this is spffucking anoyeing]

Mimito checked Shian's private account on her phone and raised her eyebrows.

‘...That's a lot of typos you've made. What's the rush?’

‘.....!!?!?!?’

Shian stared at Mimito with eyes that looked like they were about to curse her to death, and gritted her teeth.

Futaba didn't know what to do and smiled affectionately- and then laughed bitterly.

‘Y-you know, it's amazing that you guys can both DJ in front of such a large crowd...’

‘Eh?’

The two of them looked at Futaba suspiciously.

‘Didn't you do that too at the dedication DJ event? The turnout wasn't like this then, was it?’

‘That's...’

As if recalling the scene, Mimito smiled enchantingly.

‘The view of the audience was so amazing, right~’

Shian nodded in agreement. Futaba however, couldn't come up with an answer.

‘What’s wrong? You didn’t feel anything?’

‘Ummm... well...’ Futaba started to squirm as if she was in trouble.

‘What? Is that really what you’re trying to say?’ Mimito asked angrily.

‘N-no, not at all!’ Futaba hurriedly waved her hands from side to side. ‘I get nervous when there are a lot of people around... I don’t remember anything from when I DJ... so when you ask about the view at the time... I don’t remember it at all.’

‘Huuh? You don’t remember... what do you mean, you don’t remember?’

‘.....’

Since Futaba was silent, Mimito turned her questioning gaze onto Reina.

‘It’s true. Futaba-chan gets really nervous and loses her memory when there’s a big audience.’

Even when told this, Mimito and Shian found it pretty hard to believe.

‘Umm... what? Is it like amnesia?’

‘Yes... but if anything, I’d say it’s more like a dual personality...’

This was increasingly hard to believe. Mimito folded her arms.

‘So the girl who ‘triggered the turnaround’ doesn’t even remember herself DJing... that’s complicated.’

‘...I’m sorry.’

‘But-’ Shian blurted out. However, the noise on the dance floor was so loud that no one could hear her at all.

Shian then typed something into her phone and showed her screen to Futaba.

[I feel sorry for you]

...She felt... sorry?

‘Right. I agree...’ Mimito also looked at Futaba with a sorry expression on her face.

‘Eh? Uhh...’

When Futaba turned to look at Reina, she too looked like she felt bad for her.

Futaba was horrified.

...Huh? What? So... Am I the only one that doesn't understand?

Because there's so much pressure on me, I get really scared and then the other me takes over from there... that really is a big help, isn't it? Rather than feel sorry for myself, I feel lucky, you know?

‘U-umm. Is it really something you should pity me for?’

‘Of course it is!?’ Mimito exclaimed without a moment's pause. ‘It's nothing but a shame to forget such an amazing experience!’

‘A sh-shame...’

Futaba was intensely shocked.

‘B-but... don't you get nervous and feel like your heart's about to stop beating? Especially when there's a lot of people watching you...’

‘Nev-er! I'm way happier when I see a big crowd!!’ Mimito put her hands on her hips.

Meanwhile, Shian wrote something on her phone again.

[I get nervous. I'm frantic whilst I'm onstage. But... I enjoy it when it's over.]

Was that the case? Futaba couldn't really understand.

‘Right. Well, I can get a little nervous too. My hands shake a bit, and so do my knees sometimes.’

She did get nervous after all, didn't she?

The moment Futaba saw people on the floor near the DJ booth, she wanted to run away. However it was her mind that ran away, rather than her body.

She liked DJing alone and it was fun for her. She couldn't do it in front of a lot of people though. It was scary.

‘I guess I’m just not cut out for this after all...’

‘That’s not true at all.’ Reina responded to Futaba’s spoken thoughts.

‘But...’

‘The Futaba-chan who DJs, and the Futaba-chan who’s here talking to me right now are both the same Futaba-chan.’

Futaba took out her phone and rewatched the video that Kazune had recorded. Once again, she witnessed herself DJing. No matter how many times she saw it, she could never believe it was really her.

This was who she was in her imagination. She would fantasise about herself as an idol, wishing she could be like that. If only she could be one. It was a secret pleasure that only existed in her head. There was no way she’d do that in real life, especially not in public. She’d be way out of her depth.

So, she didn’t want to think that the girl in the video was really her. It was far too embarrassing.

‘That’s wrong. This... this isn’t really me.’

‘You took us to an idol show the other night, right? There, you were just like the Futaba-chan in that video.’

‘Fuee!?’

N-no way. I always get too excited and a little hazy, which I’ve been reflecting on... so, the other two saw me in such an embarrassing state!?

‘At the time you mentioned that you remember every show you’ve ever been to, right Futaba-chan?’

‘Y-yes... oh no, I’m so sorry about that...’ Futaba lowered her head, hugging her shoulders. Reina smiled at her.

‘So you’ve probably just forgotten that feeling, don’t worry!’

Futaba scrunched up her face and looked away. ‘No... I’d rather not remember too much, or...’

It was a gratifying feeling, but Futaba was worried that if she remembered too much, she’d just traumatise herself.

‘It would be a shame to just forget such a beautiful and amazing sight.’

‘.....’

She wanted to look away and deny it. But looking at Reina’s sunny, unclouded smile, she felt that maybe it was true.

‘Right... maybe I’d like to experience it at least once.’ Futaba smiled.

That’s strange, thought Futaba. Reina’s positivity doesn’t have much of a basis, but she always has my back.

Is it just that I’m easily swayed?

Futaba looked over at Hina, who was simultaneously drawing and DJing on the stage. As always, she was impressed by her skills.

‘By the way, Reina-’

‘What’s up, Mimito-chan?’

Mimito held out a small card.

‘What’s this?’

Mimito looked away, embarrassed.

‘A memory card. Our new song’s on it.’

‘Eh?! For real?!’ Reina’s face lit up. ‘But, surely I don’t need to use this and could just download the song from Iris?’

‘Well, we haven’t actually released it yet.’

‘Riiight. So this is a secret track, I see. Looking forward to listening to it loads!’

Reina tried to reach for the memory card.

‘Also, I want this song to be used when you battle against Shibuya.’

Reina’s hands stopped. Mimito looked shyly but firmly into Reina’s eyes.

‘To be honest, I think it’ll be a long time before we can fight Shibuya. So... at the very least, we’d like you to use our song.’

‘Mimito-chan...’

‘I know it’s pretty shameless to ask this of you, but you don’t have to use it, of course. But if I made it onto your setlist, Reina... I-’

Reina accepted the memory card from Mimito’s hands.

‘Thank you, Mimito-chan.’

‘Reina...’

‘It’s so encouraging to know that Harajuku is fighting with us!’

Reina took hold of Mimito’s hands.

‘Hya-?!’

‘All of us will always be friends! Let’s do our absolute best!’

‘A-always be friends!? Haaaawaaaaauuuuuaaaaa!’

Mimito was incredibly flustered at this. Her face turned an odd shade of red and perspiration poured down her face as if she was being boiled.

At that moment, Shian waved her hand between Reina and Mimito.

‘W-what the hell is it, Shian- huh?’

Shian’s hand was pointing onstage. The words Hina had punched out on her tablet were shown in a huge font on the screen behind the stage.

[This useless rabbit girl, I swear to god!! LISTEN TO ME FUCKING DJ!!!!!!!!!!!!!!]

It was accompanied by a cute self portrait that Hina had drawn of herself looking angry.

♪ ♪ ♪

There was a footbridge over the boundary between the Harajuku and Shibuya areas. At some point my feet must have brought me there, and now here I was. I leant

against the railing and looked out over the National Yoyogi Coliseum, the venue for New Legend.

In three days time, we'll fight Akiba there. It's a bit of a joke though really, and is only held to advertise Neucom products. This time however, I'm interested in our opponent for once.

Hidaka, huh...

It was long after I invited Mitsuki to our Denonbu that I found out she had Hidaka blood in her veins.

Hidaka Reia- The legendary DJ and winner of the first STACK Battle World Championships. It made a lot of sense when I discovered that Mitsuki was his daughter, and now I know that she has a twin sister.

Mitsuki's a very different type of person compared to her sister. The talents they have are very different, too.

Come to think of it, I was dazed here at the time. Our first encounter happened because I was lured in by the sounds coming from the shrine. I thought they sounded super interesting.

I thought they had a song selection that would appeal to Harajuku's audience, but it was a little different. Underneath all the cutesy sounds, they planted so many strange ones. It was an interesting mix of old fashioned sounds and new sensations.

If they used the songs and connecting methods recommended by Iris, their DJing wouldn't sound like that at all. I was sick and tired of everyone else playing so similarly, just like the Teion kids do. But that dude was different.

Who the hell was that?

I can't imagine what kind of DJ they are.

I dunno if they're an old fart or young, a guy or a girl, what genre they mainly play or anything else, yet they've got very good basic skills.

There was something even more intriguing about them, though.

They told a story.

The sounds I heard created a story inside my head. It was-

‘Ah... K-karin-san?’

‘Hm?’

Two girls coming from the Harajuku side approached me.

‘You...’

The person that I was thinking of appeared in reality.

‘I’m Hidaka. Hidaka Reina- ah, and this is Kayano Futaba-chan.’

‘H-h-h-helloooooo!!!’

She was standing a small distance behind Hidaka Reina. This airy and cutesy seeming girl bowed her head to me vigorously.

‘Damn, you got great timing.’

I chuckled. Reina looked like she didn’t quite understand.

‘What’re you guys doing? Going to Shibuya?’

‘Y-yes. Kazune-chan... erm, our friend who’s with our Denonbu is also the student council president... she was on her way to Shibuya to visit Teion’s school council. She was supposed to come to Harajuku after, but even after we waited a while she still didn’t arrive...’

‘Hmmm.’

Reina and Futaba looked at each other before starting to cross the footbridge. They bailed on talking with me and walked past.

Suddenly, Reina stopped in her tracks. ‘Uhh, Karin-san?’

‘What?’

‘Is my sister your enemy, Karin-san?’

‘...Yeah. A pretty superior enemy. She’ll get stronger and stronger. Can’t wait for it.’

‘Is that right...’

As she was about to walk away again, Reina stopped once more.

‘Umm...’

‘What’s up now?’

‘Why do you DJ, Karin-san?’

‘Man, I don’t even know where to start with that story.’

‘...Sorry.’

‘What ‘bout you?’

‘Eh? You mean, me?’

‘Yeah.’

Reina looked down slightly, deep in thought.

‘I like to see people’s happy smiles, and through DJing, even I can make people happy. And that makes me happy. And-’

‘...And?’

‘I... don’t have any musical talent.’

...Huh?

‘Oi. Do you take me for a fucking dumbass?’

Reina looked genuinely surprised when I said this.

‘E-eh!? W-what!? There’s no way anyone could make fun of you, Karin-san!!’

She looked as if she was about to cry and continued to make excuses.

...She’s serious. I thought she was humble bragging, but that ain’t it. She’s an airhead for real.

And yet-

‘...You are the hardest kinda fucker to deal with.’

‘Eh? Uhh, uhh...’

‘Ah- never mind. And? What’s your point, being talentless?’

‘Umm... I got separated from my sister when I was little. But I thought that if I kept on playing music, I would meet my sister again one day... but, unlike my sister, the only music I can do is DJing. So I trusted that DJing would connect me to my sister, and so...’

‘So that’s why you’ve been DJing.’

Reina nodded reservedly.

Just looking at her like this, it’s hard to believe she’s the girl who DJed like that. I heard Reina DJ here that day, and a story popped into my head.

The protagonist fought the enemy and then reconciled with them and they became a new comrade- hard work, supported by friendship, won the day. Such a conventional story.

Right.

This girl’s DJing had the power to speak to people’s hearts. The images were so vivid, it was like remembering the past. But they weren’t real memories.

I’ve never tried to make an effort, I just do music cause I like it. It’s painful not to do stuff that you love, so who wouldn’t. At least, that’s how I see it. Whether it’s practising until your fingers break, producing songs without sleep for three days, or checking a thousand songs in a row in search of a single song, you’re only doing it because you want to.

As a result, I continued winning STACK battles. No strong enemies appeared and there were no exciting battles.

...In reality, there ain’t any dramatic developments.

‘I wanna meet some fucker stronger than me.’

If you’re excited by the previous reviews, you’re always disappointed.

‘I want more excitement. I wanna experience more aggro. I just wanna be able to fight harder and give it all I’ve got.’

The losers usually never show up again.

‘I give it my all when I’m making songs or just DJing, but there’s a limit to how much I can do when I’m alone. I come back to my senses eventually.’

No stronger enemies appear.

‘What am I trying to do so hard by myself, huh?’

The same scene repeats all the time.

‘This battle has been going on for years with no hype at all. I need a new development to happen. I need someone I can really go at it with.’

But when I heard this girl in front of me DJ at the shrine, I felt like I had a new memory that was never there in reality. Nah, not a memory. A dream, or a wish.

Reina looked up at me with a mysterious, or more like sad expression on her face.

‘Right... Karin-san, you’re lonely, aren’t you?’

‘...Huh?’

Eh? What?

‘You...’

What did she just say?

‘Surely no one else can match your abilities, Karin-san... I think I know how lonely that is and how hard it must be for you to stay motivated. Ah! I wouldn’t know myself, though! I mean, I can understand how hard it is.’

‘Ah, nah...’

‘And yet you still carry on reigning at the top, which is amazing. You must be under so much pressure and responsibility, I can’t even begin to imagine it.’

‘Ah- that ain’t what I’m talking about...’

‘Karin-san!!’

‘Yeah?!’

Suddenly she threw an angry look at me and replied in a serious tone.

‘Well, I still think you need friends, Karin-san!!’

‘...Wha-’

‘I understand that you want a strong enemy, Karin-san... but to be honest, I don’t think someone like that will ever appear!’

‘Huh-’ A wry smile crossed my cheeks. ‘Nah... surprisingly, I got a feeling they’re gonna show up soon...’

‘No!! Someone as great as you can’t just suddenly appear like that!!’

This bitch! Is she tryna break my heart!?

‘I think it must be lonely for you, not having a partner who is worthy of your abilities. And because you’re so lonely, that’s why you’re complaining so much about not having enemies, Karin-san! Because you’re lonely!’

‘Quit repeating that I’m lonely over and over again or I’m really gonna look like a lonely fucker!’

‘You are a lonely person after all, Karin-san!’

‘.....’

Fuck. Now I feel like crying.

‘Uh-uuhh... R-reina-san? I dunno if I can take any more of this...’

Reina started to look pale, and stopped. Thank god.

‘No! If I don’t say all this, I’ll feel sorry for you, Karin-san!!’

Wha- huh. Did she really just say she feels sorry for me?

‘Finding opponents on your level is hard, but you can make friends! My friends are always there to help and support me when I’m in trouble! And because of that, I can keep growing stronger and stronger. Above all, we have fun together! Do you really not feel lonely?’

‘.....Ahh. Right.’

That was barely an answer.

Thinking I'd accepted what she said, Reina smiled brightly and bowed her head.

‘Ok, let's go look for Kazune-chan! Please excuse us. Ah-’

There was still something else!?

‘And... please tell my sister I said hi.’

After bowing deeply once more, Reina started running towards Shibuya.

‘Ah, please wait! Reina-saaan!’

The other girl followed her, and they finally left. I was tired now.

‘...Fuck. What the hell.’

I started walking back to the clubroom, carefree as anything. So carefree. I couldn't wait to catch up with that lot.

I did feel a little out of the loop, though. What's to feel lonely about?

All along, I just wanted an enemy. Someone who could battle me on equal footing. I guess I've not had a playmate like that ever since I was a kid.

...Come to think of it.

If Azabu had any strong enough kids, it wouldn't be such a long story...

As for my dad, that bastard never seemed very motivated. I followed my old man around the world, despite not even getting many chances to talk to him much. But I've never felt lonely, not even once. DJing was a game you could play alone, anyway. I didn't mind not having any friends.

‘...Friends?’

Huh? Come to think of it, how many friends have I had so far?

.....

I can't think of anyone.

Well, good. For me, the enemy is my playmate.

.....

Huh?

So, am I looking for an opponent or a playmate?

I stopped. I stood there, stunned.

‘After all, am I really... a lonely bastard?’

♪ ♪ ♪

The day of New Legend had arrived.

Ever since early morning, crowds of people were queuing up at the Yoyogi National Coliseum. The day started at 10am when the doors opened, with various events featuring DJs and musicians, and presentations of new products.

The main event, the Shibuya vs Akiba STACK battle, started at 6pm. There would be guest DJs on stage and other STACK battles in the meantime.

The expected total number of attendees was around 30,000 people. The festive atmosphere around the Coliseum was also enhanced by a number of stages, pavilions and food stalls.

A smug-looking girl came to the relevant entrance next to the entrance gate.

‘I’m Sakurano Mimito! I’m a guest!’ She told the staff, sniffing proudly. The receptionist smiled as she checked the ID-J attached to Mimito's misanga.

‘Yes, please go ahead.’

‘Will do. Thanks for your help.’ Mimito walked through the gate, her face upturned proudly.

‘Why are you so proud? You literally just had Hidaka-san register us all as guests.’

Hina and Shian followed Mimito, having their ID-Js checked and then being given ticket information.

‘Whatever, I’m still being treated as a guest at such a huge event, right!? That means I’m definitely getting closer to being the best!’

‘In terms of being treated like a guest, all you got was free entry.’

Shian nodded her head in agreement.

‘It’s fine! Anyway, my status has been raised here so the details make no difference to me. I’m kinda like a celebrity, right!’

Hina sighed. ‘Actually, real celebrities are more like those people over there.’

She pointed at a vehicle gate, in front of which a long black limousine pulled up. As soon as it stopped, the passenger door opened and a small figure hopped out. With agility reminiscent of a black cat, she moved around to the rear of the car. She took a rolled up red carpet from the boot and rolled it out on the ground, grabbing the edges. The red carpet smoothly extended to the entrance, as if it had been drawn like a straight line. The petite girl then nudged open the back seat door.

‘Aki-sama, please go ahead!’

‘Thank you.’

Black and gold heels. Long legs wrapped in mesh tights. A tight, expensive-looking skirt hugged her voluptuous hips. She wore a corset belt around her waist and gold jewellery adorned her chest. Her small face on top of a long, thin neck was as beautiful as a sculpture. The final touch to her appearance was her wavy, shiny blonde hair.

A very gorgeous girl who looked like she had all the beauty she could handle walked down the red carpet.

Mimito was awestruck by the goddess who had suddenly descended on her.

‘Wha... what the hell- she-’

‘Isn’t that Shirokane Aki, from Minato Shirokane Girls’ High School in Azabu?’

[Ugh... too annoying too inconvenient showing off your wealth like that and feeling good about it stop pretending to be a fucking princess or some shit. Gross]

Shian was tapping away at her phone, talking shit about the newcomer and posting her thoughts on her private account.

‘You’re also considered a princess by the shrine people, y’know... but you’re a pretty evil one, I guess.’

[.....WTF?!!!!!!]

Shian bared her sharp teeth, complaining silently. Since she didn't use her voice, the other two couldn't quite figure out what she was trying to tell them.

‘But y’know, she’s a lot taller and has bigger boobs. Compared to us cuties, she looks too flashy, probably smells like old people and is no match for us~’

‘...Ugh, I guess even I have a roundabout respect for your colossal arrogance, despite you never having any evidence to back it up with.’

Azabu were all out of earshot of Harajuku's various insults towards them.

‘Tama, thank you for your hard work.’

Ginka, who got out of the car after Aki, also praised Tama occasionally. But-

‘I’m not doing that for Ginka. Not even a tiny bit.’

Aki's mood sharply changed, and she gave Tama a curt reply.

‘Tama, I’m going to go and greet the organisers. Where are the headquarters?’

‘Yes! I’ll show you the way right now!’

Her mood changed once again as Tama opened the venue guide on her smartphone and went over to Aki to guide her. Ginka was about to follow them, but something curious caught the corner of her eye.

‘Oh?’

An alluring sign caught her eye on one of the food stalls that filled the stomachs of the event participants.

Gyuudon.

Moreover, it was a specialised stall that was not part of a chain. Ginka took a silver pocket watch from her pocket.

Ten minutes to go until mealtime.

A lunch meeting was planned with the organisers, but the temptation in front of her won out.

‘Besides, if I go and greet them right now, the likelihood that we’ll all be around the table in ten minutes isn’t possible by any stretch of the imagination. Then, the meeting... I’ll leave it to you, Aki.’

She grinned, and headed over to the stall alone.

♪ ♪ ♪

Shinonome Kazune slipped out of the waiting room and walked around the venue by herself. Inside the Coliseum, an event with celebrities taking part should have been going on by that time. Various musical instruments and DJ equipment were displayed at the booths outside, where the public could enjoy playing around with them.

‘Hey there, pretty young lady with the dark hair.’ A woman in a fancy costume stopped her. ‘Are you interested in DJing? Feel free to give it a try!’

The new DJ unit on display there was the new DJ unit she’d seen at the rehearsal yesterday but with lower grade parts compared to the current one, reducing its price and making it cheaper to buy. This year’s New Legend was supposed to be promoting it. Even though it was a low-priced version, it was a little difficult to buy one individually. Maybe Neucom wanted them to be introduced as equipment for nightclubs and Denonbu clubrooms.

Today we’re going to have a STACK battle with this DJ unit. The thought of it makes me sick with nerves, thought Kazune.

‘This one has a good suggestion function and is good for beginners, and it’s more user friendly!’

‘Is that right?’ Kazune responded with a barely friendly smile.

‘Yeah, this DJ unit always has access to Iris, so it can recommend popular songs and cue points, and also songs that are easy to connect to what you’re currently playing. With this, you can start DJing right away- not only that, but you’ll get to DJ with the top-ranked DJs!’

...How is that even possible.

She smiled back at her, with venom in her heart.

‘Heh... that’s amazing. I’ll consider it.’

‘Yes, by all means- ah, also it accommodates music production software! This helps you with songwriting, so even beginners can write songs easily!’

With a forced smile, Kazune left the booth. She found a bench in the shade of a tree and sat down on it, collapsing.

The support functions of modern equipment were certainly excellent. Even the low-cost version currently used by the Akiba Denonbu was fully usable. And even an inexperienced person like myself was able to make my own songs and DJ somehow.

But-

‘Oh? And you are?’

A pretty girl dressed in masculine clothing holding a plastic bag from a food stall called out to her.

‘You’re Kazune-chan from Akiba, right? To meet you in such a place.’

‘H...Haijima Ginka!?’

‘Thanks for calling me by my full name.’

‘Ah, no... sorry. You startled me a little.’

‘Here ok?’

Kazune thought she was probably asking if she could sit next to her.

‘Y-yeah. Go ahead...’

Ginka smiled lightly and sat down. It was such a simple action, but she made sitting down look so elegant.

Her behaviour was actually really eloquent. She was indeed the daughter of Azabu’s famous Haijima family. And with how she looked, it was no wonder that she was so popular at Minato Shirokane. In a way, she was Kazune’s rival- or rather the object of her envy.

She gazed intently at Ginka.

Ginka was masculine, but when you looked at her up close, you could see that she was an incredible beauty. Her skin was tender and her hair was soft and fine. She had long eyelashes and beautiful eyes.

And she was rich, had a lot of musical talent... Kazune was unnerved by how much of a cheat at life she was.

Normally she'd feel excited to be sitting next to such a beautiful girl dressed masculinely, but right now she didn't feel that way at all.

Haha... maybe this was the end.

Interrupting her thoughts, Ginka offered Kazune a square box she'd pulled out of the bag she was holding.

'Here.'

Kazune took it, not wanting to appear rude.

'Eh? Umm... this...'

'I thought that you might be hungry since you were staring at me.' Ginka put hers on her lap and took the lid off.

...Gyuudon!?

'There was normal gyuudon and cheese gyuudon. I remembered the saying 'when in doubt, get both' and ended up buying two.'

She bought two when she's by herself!?

'Oh no- I mean, that's kinda bad...'

'Don't say that. I bought them both in the spur of the moment, two is a lot. I'd like it if you would eat with me.'

It was hard to resist her when Ginka said this with a smile that could kill a woman.

'...Thank you for the food.'

'By the way, it seems like I have the cheese gyuudon... could it be that God is calling the shots here?'

'Y-yes. It must be.'

When was the last time I ate gyuudon? I mean, what on earth is going on here!? It's like I'm in an isekai fantasy, eating gyuudon on a bench alongside Azabu's Haijima Ginka, thought Kazune.

'Mmm. I love the junk food-y taste of this. Exactly what I expected from a B grade gourmet place.'

'Huh.'

'I don't know if the chef at home could make it taste like this. I've had it at Aki's, but it was their usual food with the finest sourced ingredients and delicate, elegant flavours.'

The fact that it was B grade food made with the best ingredients and by the best chefs seemed just as appealing. But the needs of celebrities were different from those of the commoner, Kazune supposed.

...What a margin there was between them.

I feel as if I'm becoming too sensitive about that in a place like this. I should be more realistic, thought Kazune.

'What's the matter? Are you not hungry?'

Before long, the chopsticks in Kazune's hand weren't moving.

'Ah, no! It's delicious.'

Her thoughts were all over the place. There was a beautiful masculine girl next to her shoveling down her gyuudon, her problems were straying off course, she was under immense pressure to perform well in the STACK battle against Shibuya later on and many other worries kept manifesting inside her head.

Anyway, once she finished eating, she could escape this situation. With that thought alone, she kept on eating.

'...That was delicious, thank you.'

'Of course. You're a good eater.'

It was embarrassing to be told that. Had they just been having an unspoken eating contest or something?

'Umm, I have... oh, how much did it cost?'

Kazune didn't have any cash on her, but she could use her ID-J to make payments.

'I pretty much just pushed it onto you. You don't need to pay for it.'

'But...'

'In return, can I ask you a question?'

'What is it?'

Surely there were no questions that Azabu would have for Akiba. Their victory had been a fluke, Azabu were far superior to them in terms of ability. Kazune didn't reckon that Ginka had anything to gain if she was going to give her any information.

'Your worries.'

.....

'Your face looked like you were on the way to a restaurant and looking forward to it, but then you found out it was closed.'

What kind of face was that?

'Haha... we're battling Shibuya later on, so I'm pretty nervous.'

'But isn't it nothing to do with Shibuya?'

Ginka took Kazune's empty gyudon container, and put it along with her own one back in the plastic bag.

'Ah! Please let me!'

Ginka rushed to stand up and signalled with her hand for Kazune to stay put, walking to the nearest bin to throw away their used containers.

'Well, I thought you seemed to be worrying about yourself.'

'Eh?'

'I know I'm being nosy, but I want you to go into the game without any worries. I want Akiba to give it everything you've got.'

'.....'

‘You guys beat us and now you’re about to fight Shibuya. We carry our defeat, so to speak. Is it selfish of me to want you to fight without shame?’

Kazune didn’t think it was fair for her to say that, but she couldn’t argue.

‘...I guess I was just being presumptuous.’

Maybe it would be ok for her to let out a little bit of the cluttered thoughts going around in her mind.

‘I feel like I can do basically anything because I’m able to do stuff a little better than most other people.’

‘You do seem very competent to me. You wouldn’t be student council president otherwise, would you?’

‘It’s kind of a chore, coordinating all the budgeting between schools, people and clubs. All those negotiations and paperwork.’

‘I don’t think many people could handle all that... so?’

‘I joined Denonbu unexpectedly in the beginning, but whilst I was doing it I began to really try my hardest... but the more serious I got, the more I felt like there were barriers I couldn’t overcome.’

‘.....’

‘I’m the generally talented type, even if I say so myself... I set goals, analyse successes and failures, then set more short-term goals and reflect on them. That way, I can achieve my ultimate goals.’

‘Very logical, indeed.’

‘But- that isn’t the case for Reina and the Shibuya kids.’

Kazune looked down.

‘It just doesn’t make sense when you think about it theoretically. The way they DJ doesn’t come from them checking data or Iris’s suggestions. I think they’ve all got something like a kind of intuition that can’t be explained logically, but I have no idea what it is.’

She kept talking whilst looking downwards.

‘Even everyone in Azabu seems to be the same way as well. Every time I meet a top DJ, it feels more and more impossible for me. Maybe we listen to the same songs, but the amount of information we perceive from them is different. Besides, it isn’t possible to analyse how we use that information. I thought Seto Mitsuki-san from Shibuya was similar to me in terms of this, so I talked to her about it, but...’

‘How did it go?’

‘Our levels of musical talent were too different, to begin with. Besides, I... couldn’t go as far as she does.’

It felt pretty refreshing for Kazune to get all this out. She hadn’t resolved any of it though...

‘Our conversation made me realise that someone like me, someone generally talented, is still no match for a prodigy.’

Kazune smiled as best she could. Ginka stared at her smile.

‘Thanks for letting me hear your feelings.’

‘Oh, no. Thank you for listening to me complaining. My head feels a little bit clearer now.’

‘...I know someone who’s a little similar to you. I get it.’

‘Huh?’

Who was she talking about?

‘People don’t always realise the value of the things they’re familiar with.’

‘Are you trying to comfort me?’

‘It’s the truth. A prodigy is superhuman in one area, but they aren’t all-powerful. Apart from the one thing that they’re prodigious in, they’re completely useless at anything else. They’re like useless human beings aside from their one talent.’

‘Useless human beings...?’

She couldn’t help but laugh at that.

‘In other words, I believe that generally talented people and prodigies are just different types of people, not a hierarchical concept.’

‘That’s-’

‘So, let’s talk to someone who is the epitome of a prodigy right here.’

...What?

‘You heard me. I’d be happy if you’d give me your input on this.’

Ginka called out in the direction of the second bench away from theirs. The figure that had been lying there sat up, and a frown appeared from under the venue map that was draped over her face.

...H-Houou Karin!?

Why was she sleeping here!! I mean, how didn’t I notice!? Me, of all people! Kazune mentally exclaimed.

Karin scratched her head raggedly. ‘Dunno. Ain’t even thought about it.’

Haha... of course.

‘If you wanna quit, go for it. There’re plenty people who do that each year. I ain’t interested in no loser.’ Karin got up from the bench and turned her challenging gaze onto Ginka. ‘Instead of being nosy with other people, it’s time you Azabu got serious.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Hmm... whatever, see ya next time.’ Karin turned her back and tried to leave.

‘Ah, I remember now.’ She stopped and looked back over her shoulder. ‘Hey you, aren’t you from Akiba?’

‘Wha? Y-yes!’ Kazune was surprised that Karin remembered her.

‘So like, wouldn’t it be better talking to your ‘friends’ instead of me or her, huh?’

‘.....What?’

Friends?

Reina and Futaba's faces came to Kazune's mind.

'That's how it is in Akiba, right? I dunno.'

After saying that, Karin walked away with big strides. Ginka stared at the back of her head.

'I'm surprised... I didn't expect her to give you any actual good advice.'

♪ ♪ ♪

The Yoyogi National Coliseum had special seats that weren't available to the general public. These VIP rooms were mainly sold to sponsors. They were located in an area only available to interested parties, and offered the privilege of interacting with the DJs and musicians before their performances, as well as attending afterparties.

The famous producer, Haijima Fuuga, had also rented out one of these VIP rooms. Normally he'd use it for conducting business meetings, but today was different. He was alone in complete privacy.

'...Is it too soon to say?'

Interesting work always came from chatting to people he knew. However, that was just the result of it. He was simply taking a breather today, not wanting to get his hopes up from the start.

He wore a suit from an expensive Italian brand, but he was pretty roughly dressed and wasn't wearing a tie.

No negotiations, no goals to be achieved, just meeting up with old friends. Such simple pleasures are certainly something to look forward to.

Oh, the good old days.

Before long, there were fewer and fewer people to talk to whilst he was wearing a mask to hide his face. So when he murmured in his mind; 'Is this really the right place?'

A frowning face peeked through the gap as the door suddenly opened, without anyone knocking.

'I've been waiting for you, Reia.'

Hidaka Reia. One of the people he'd been waiting to see. Whilst Fuuga smiled at him, Reia entered with a bitter look on his face. He wore a T-shirt and kihei, three-quarter length pants and sandals. He was dressed as if he was on a walk through the neighbourhood.

'Really, why the hell did you have to call me up here? Why not go to a bar?'

'It's a place full of memories, right?'

'Not very good memories.'

'I thought you might want to cheer on Reina-chan from up here.'

Reia ruffled his hair grumpily. 'Well, you did me a favour the other day. I even got some souvenirs.'

'It's no big deal, but let's have a drink first.'

Reia went straight to where the glasses were, looking around the VIP room. From where they were, they could see the stage, the packed stands and the vast arena dotted with a huge amount of people clearly. The arena was an all standing dance floor.

'I didn't realise it was this big.'

'The first STACK battle world championships... that was twenty years ago now.' Fuuga made them both cocktails at the bar counter, and sat down next to Reia, handing him a glass. 'Look. You always had your first drink of rum and coke in the club.'

'You know me well... and for you it was always gin and tonic.'

'Sometimes sparkling water. You all drank like idiots, I always ended up having to look after you before you got yourselves in trouble.'

'Nothing really bad ever happened, not really. It was Homura who was always terrible.' Reia drank half his rum and coke in one gulp.

'When he started doing shots of tequila like that...'

'Well, Homura's been overseas all this time right? Does he have any plans to come back to Japan?'

At that moment, the door was forced open like it was about to break.

‘YOOOOO! I HAVE APPEARED!!’

He had silver hair with a flashy red fire pattern. The front of his flamboyant aloha shirt was fully open, and the bare skin of his pecs and abs was on full display. Removing his black sunglasses from his tanned face, he smiled.

‘Fuuga! It’s been ages, man!!’

A sweltering guy had arrived.

His name was Houou Homura. A guy who had been ranked No.1 many times in the DJ world rankings. He was a charismatic DJ who had remained at the top for nearly two decades. He came over to them with a huge stride and shook Fuuga’s hand without any warning, with a grip that made Fuuga want to grimace.

‘Ah... didn’t we only meet the other day?’

‘That was online! But, more than that-’ he stopped as his powerful eyes, reminiscent of a bird of prey’s, locked onto Reia. ‘REIAAAA! It’s been a long fucking time, dude!!’

In a split second, Homura closed the gap between them and pulled Reia into a hug as if he was about to attack him.

‘Gyoh!?’

It was a hug so tight, Reia felt as if it was crushing his bones.

‘Owowowow!! Let go, you dumb bastard! My insides are gonna pop out!!’

‘Ohh, sorry, sorry. But, Reia, aren’t you a lot chubbier?’

Once Homura released him, Reia replied bitterly. ‘Of course not. Now I’m just an old man in a plastic model shop.’

‘Plastic models...? Looks like you’re still a guy who likes to do some odd things.’

‘I happened to know someone who was going out of business, so they gave me the shop as it was.’

Fuuga took out beers from the fridge, and handed them to Reia and Homura. The three of them clinked their beer bottles together.

After taking a sip of his beer, Reia turned to Homura and asked; 'Have you really got time to show up at an event like this? You're a successful DJ, travelling the world, aren't you?'

'Hm? Nah, I ain't got time for it, but sometimes I gotta see my kid in action!'

Fuuga's eyes widened in surprise.

'Did Karin-chan want you to come?'

'Ah! I heard about this event from you, and I haven't called her in a long time. She was horrified, called me a shitty old man and said she'd kill me if I went. It's so cute when they get all embarrassed, right? It's the other side of wanting you there! For sure!' said Homura happily.

Fuuga ignored Homura's needless positivity and addressed Reia. 'So, are you gonna carry on with your model shop, Reia?'

'...There's fewer and fewer jobs for aircraft mechanics. I gotta eat too, man. Unlike you two charismatic DJs, I'm a small town kinda guy.'

Homura nodded his head, opening a bottle of tequila without permission.

'Airplanes? I use them a lot.'

'I specialise in older models, I dunno much about newer aircraft. And since the AI-triggered maintenance system, there's been a lot of cuts... if military flight systems are converted to civilian use, they'll no longer be available to civilian mechanics.'

Fuuga nodded. 'The floater system, right?'

'That. Do you know about it?'

'It's the highlight of this year's New Legend. They're using the new AI speakers.'

'What the fuck!?'

Fuuga pointed through the window and Reia rushed to it. A huge object about twice the size of an ordinary AI speaker lay in front of the stage. Following Reia, Homura also leaned forward so much that his face almost touched the glass.

'Ohh, it's goddamn huge!'

‘Seriously... that thing’s loaded? For real?’

‘It’s hard to get them that big with the particle type they’ve had so far. Ah, particles are sprayed for sound propagation and for spatial projection, you see. And from this time onwards, they’ve also included the VJ function with hologram projection.’

Reia’s face became grim. ‘Sound propagation and spatial projection using particles... I believe that’s rumoured to have been used to subdue a terrorist organisation in the Middle East?’

Fuuga just shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know if that’s relevant. But this new product is just that new AI speaker and the popular DJ unit... that’s all I’ll say.’

‘I really don’t like Neucom’s products...’

Homura twisted his head towards Reia. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘I feel like we’re being taken advantage of without our knowledge. I don’t want to be danced around by someone I can’t see.’

Fuuga shrugged his shoulders as if to say, ‘same as ever.’

‘By the way, Reia. Would you ever consider returning to DJing?’

‘Huh?’

‘I’m just asking if we can work together again.’

Homura’s eyes lit up. ‘Ohhh! That’d be great! Sounds like fun!!’

‘Would you listen to what other people have to say? I’m not going to let myself be manipulated-’

‘Depends on how you use them. We could even use their products against them.’

‘Ahh! You think too hard, Reia! As long as there’s a DJ and an audience, what does it matter, dude?’

He grinned, and smiled challengingly.

‘Well if we battle now, I’ll win hands down!’

‘...Probably.’

Fuuga stared at Reia with a bitter smile on his face. Reia’s eyes did not smile back.

...What was it?

He was pretty reluctant. After all, interesting work was born out of idle chit chat.

But at that very moment, the arena went dark and the crowd started cheering. When light began to run through the giant AI speaker, it floated as if it had been released from the chains of gravity.

‘Oh! Is it boutta start!?’ Homura exclaimed, his face still stuck to the glass.

Music started playing to signal the start of the STACK battle, lights and laser beams wove around the arena, creating a dazzling sight whilst the AI speakers projected 3D images onto the stage. The names of the Akiba and Shibuya DJs were displayed.

‘OOH! It’s my kid!’

‘Reia, your daughter’s there too.’

‘What!? Don’t tell me that my girl is battling your daughter, Reia!? Hahahahaha!! This is the goddamn best!!! I’m so fuckin’ ready, man!!’

Homura was in very high spirits, but Reia’s mood remained delicate.

Reina on the Akiba team. And on Shibuya’s- Mitsuki.

‘Of all things, mutual opponents...’

‘Ain’t it great! Let’s cheer ‘em on!!’

‘No... I’m not talking about your daughter...’ Reia stared at a huge 3D image of his two daughters that was floating in the air. ‘The price I had to pay for doing whatever I wanted was pushed onto my daughters, huh...’

Surely there could’ve been a much better way for them to reunite with each other than to meet again here.

But, Reia couldn’t take back his regrets.

♪ ♪ ♪

‘And now! It’s time for the much-anticipated New Legend Special STACK Battle! Shibuya’s Teion International High School vs Akiba’s Sotokanda Literary High School!!’

A flashy video started playing on stage whilst an announcer livened up the audience. A 3D video was shown with the camera flying through the streets of Shibuya, giving the viewer a kind of floating sensation, like everyone present really was flying through the city.

‘Currently unbeatable! The strongest in history! Will Teion of Shibuya show us their overwhelming power!?’

The camera turned around and soared far into the sky to show a bird's eye view of Tokyo, and then it plummeted down to Akihabara.

‘The unknown newcomer team! Sotokanda of Akiba is almost at the bottom of the rankings!! Will they pull off an astonishing giant killing!?’

Fireworks burst overhead, with sparkling and shimmering light particles and flower confetti falling down to the audience. Reina was very excited by the 3D images she could almost reach out and touch.

‘Woooww!! Amazing!!!’

‘Projecting a 3D image in an empty space... I wonder how they do it?’

Kazune tried to catch some of the flower confetti falling down to the ground, but the petals slipped through her hand and disappeared as if they were sucked into the floor.

‘Now for the first round!! It’s Sotokanda Literary High School’s Idol Berserker!! Kayano Futaba!!’

Futaba jumped, twitching, and she turned her tearful face towards Reina and Kazune.

‘I-I... they called me such a weird naaame...’

‘Give up resisting it already. Looks like it’s stuck now.’

‘I love that you have a nickname, it’s great!!’

As Kazune and Reina didn’t seem to understand, Futaba’s shoulders slumped.

‘...It’s... not great at all. It’s embarrassing...’

‘What are they gonna call me, I wonder? Kazune-chan, I’m looking forward to it!’

‘Ah... I’d forgotten about myself. I’ll let you keep your nickname to yourself, Futaba.’

‘It’s horrendous!’

‘And now for her opponent, Teion International High School’s Number Threeeeeee!! A cute little tiger! Ruler of the Concrete Jungle! Shibuya’s rampaging Taiga Luci-’

‘WAAAAIIIT A FUCKING MINUTEEEEEEEEEEE!!’

Lucia interrupted the announcer by yelling loudly.

‘Um... w-what’s wrong?’

‘Lucia wants this battle to be winner-takes-all!’

Her sudden offer came as a surprise to both the announcer and the organisers of the competition.

‘Karin said she would battle me if I beat Akiba! That’s why Lucia will defeat Akiba alone!!’

‘P-please wait. We’ve already decided on the rules, and we’ve made all the arrangements for the progression of-’

‘Lucia doesn’t know anything about that! When Lucia says she will defeat Akiba alone, SHE WILL DEFEAT AKIBA ALONE!! Lucia wants as many battles as possible!!’

The massive spectator-packed dance floor buzzed like a wave. Futaba shuddered as Lucia raised her gaze and bared her fangs.

‘I-I knew it, everyone in Shibuya is unhinged...’

‘Seriously, what a child...’ Kazune murmured in dismay, but somewhere in her heart she felt envious.

Maybe that’s what a prodigy is really like. Conceited, selfish with not a care in the world about other people’s convenience or inconvenience. Only thinking about your purpose and what you want, and only pushing for that.

Kazune knew she couldn't be like that.

'I heard that Karin beat a whole team by herself once! Then, Lucia can do it too!'

Karin laughed at the troubled announcer.

'Ain't that fine, though?'

'Eeeh!?'

'If Lucia's gonna battle three times right now, there ain't no need to call out Mitsuki. No need for me to appear, neither.'

'B-but...'

'If you don't accept these conditions, there ain't gonna be no battle. We'll just leave.'

The buzz from the audience, sounding almost like a scream, rose throughout the venue. The staff were in a hurry to sort this sudden turn of events out, and the announcer was immediately given an earful.

'Uh, u-uhm, suddenly it appears that this special STACK battle will be a winner-takes-all battle! The first area to take three losses will be the loser!!'

The audience booed.

'Ehhh... but then we won't be able to hear Mitsuki and Karin DJ!?'

'It's just Lucia, and that's it?...'

Discontent erupted and abuse was heard. The three Akiba DJs were very confused by all the clamour. However Lucia, who caused it, was in a good mood.

'AHHAHAHAHA! It's alright! Let Super Lucia time begiinin!!'

She suddenly ran out onto the stage, doing a forward somersault into the DJ booth.

'LETS PARTY!!' Lucia yelled in English.

The PLAY button and vertical faders were suddenly bumped up, without Lucia even authenticating her ID-J. The new AI speakers suddenly woke up. They had a much higher sound pressure than the conventional models, and vibrated the particles that filled the huge venue.

The explosion roared through the audience's bodies, hyping everyone up for a sudden red-zone level exciting start. Cheers erupted and arms were thrust up towards the ceiling.

'LET'S GOOOO EVERYONE!! FOLLOW LUCIAAAAA!!!'

An earth-shaking shout of 'WOOOOOOOOOO!!!' shook through the audience at Lucia's yells.

Futaba was thrown completely out of the loop.

'Awawawawa... um, um, now- what was the first thing I was gonna play!?'

In this battle format, both sides DJed at the same time, and the audience could choose who they wanted to listen to with the earphones that were distributed upon entering. The earphones then received the particles vibrated by the chosen AI speaker, and converted them into sound. In addition, the arm rings and chest stickers that were also distributed to the audience at the entrance transmitted sound pressure to their bodies, the visceral vibrations shaking them to the core.

Once they started listening to Lucia's DJing and got into the feeling of it, it was hard for them to consider switching to Futaba's DJing.

'Hawawawawa-! D-does no sound come out at first!? Ah, I haven't turned the trim yet! Huh!? Still no sound, nooooo...! Wha!? The faders aren't raised. Ok, calm down, calm down, be patient, remember what you did in practice... gh!? Wrong song!? F-for now, I'll cut in that song that's easy to connect! Hyawawawawa- w-which one is the cu-cu-cue point?!'

As she panicked and panicked, Futaba's head started to overflow, and she desperately told herself to calm down.

I-I have to calm down! Everyone's listening to Shibuya- huh!?

Right then, Futaba noticed the fact that the audience completely filled the vast arena.

...But if she didn't look at them, it would be ok. That was Futaba's strategy. However, she reflexively looked up and saw the huge audience in front of her.

I-it's o-o-ok! J-just imagine that they're all vegetables, or potatoes! They're a potato, they're a potato, they're a-

Countless lights stirred in the dark. The light came from the earphones and rings that the audience were wearing, and the colour showed which side they were listening to.

The countless red lights in the audience appeared to Futaba like a swarm of insects ready to attack her. She perceived all the audience as hostile.

Her vision tilted dizzily.

Ah- no, don't-

Futaba's consciousness sunk deeper into itself. A shelter that was always safe, built deep underground. When she went there, she was safe and secure. She could find peace of mind.

Whilst I'm down here, the other me can manage. That's still the best way. It may be embarrassing, it may be disgraceful, but I can't drag the others down.

The door to her mind opened.

...What?

There was someone in the room of my mind. An appearance I knew well, but had never seen before.

She turned around.

'Heya, me ♥ have a good rest!'

...Eh-

It's me. But... a little different.

I couldn't have such a bright smile or a confident attitude like that. This was the other me. The other Kayano Futaba.

'W...why...'

As long as I'm here, the other me should be able to do everything. But in that case, what was she doing here?

'Eeh~? Because I wanna be here.'

'Eh?'

'I'm here because you're ashamed of me being out front, riiight?'

'W-well...'

'I can't go against what you want, can I~?'

'W-wait. But, if you don't show up, I'm in trouble...'

'Eeh-? Isn't that kinda weird?' The other Futaba raised her eyebrows. *'You say I'm not who you are or that you're embarrassed of me, but you only want to use me when it's convenient for you? Isn't that just awful of you?'*

'Uh...um...'

'You want to see that, don't you?'

'See...w-what?'

'That amazing view.'

Futaba gasped. The other Futaba was talking about the view that the Harajuku girls and Reina said was beautiful. A sight that all DJs should see. Seeing so many people dancing and having fun because of what she herself was playing for them. That must be a lovely view.

But she'd never seen it. She couldn't see it. That view belonged to the other Futaba, who faced Futaba's problems for her.

'Yes, I know... it's too convenient for me. I... I'm sorry.'

She bowed her head to her other self.

'You know what? It's really sad when other people don't like you, you know?'

'...Yeah. I know.'

The other Futaba frowned. Her emotions were really straight to the point.

'Huuh? You sure you're not just talking outta your ass? You're the one who doesn't like me.'

'Because, I don't like myself.'

The other Futaba raised an eyebrow. *'What do you mean?'*

'I'm weak-minded, timid, withdrawn, always worried about how people see me, anxious about what people think of me, and I give up on everything before I've even tried it... I hate myself.'

Making a confession like that certainly took some courage, but she had to do it. Facing herself was scary, and if she could, she'd like to pretend it wasn't happening.

But-

Reina-san and Kazune-chan are waiting. If I was on my own, I probably would have run away from this for the rest of my life. But for the sake of my friends, I-

'The truth is, I want to be like you!'

'.....'

'I want to be confident, fun, dazzling, and make everyone smile! That's who I want to be!'

'But... you don't like me, right?'

'...I li-'

'Li?'

Futaba prepared herself, and inhaled.

'I do like you!!'

She told the other Futaba.

'Huh!?'

'Because, you're exactly the kind of idol I want to be! But... maybe that's a little too sudden... but! I want to be like that too. I want to be like you!'

The other Futaba looked a little bit confused. Then, her expression changed to one that was slightly embarrassed and sad looking.

'...In that case, why don't you just do that then, you don't need me-'

'I do need you!'

Futaba grasped the other Futaba's hand.

‘Right now I need you to help me because I can’t do this by myself, but I promise you.’

‘You promise?’

‘I promise that one day, me and you will become one.’

‘That’s...’

‘I finally understand... no, maybe I didn’t want to admit it. I was embarrassed. But I can tell you now that you’re not a different person, you’re part of me. There’s many sides to me, but I can’t show them all at the moment, really...’

Futaba looked at the other Futaba with a serious gaze.

‘That’s why I need you right now! Please! Everyone’s waiting-’

Suddenly, the other Futaba was hugging her.

‘E-eh?’

‘I’m really glad that you don’t hate me.’

‘...Yeah.’

‘So I don’t want you to hate yourself, either.’

‘...Yeah. I won’t.’

‘Really?’

‘I promise you. I’ve learned that you’re a part of me, and I can change as much as I want. If I don’t let myself be defined, I can be whoever I choose. That’s how I feel.’

‘...Yeah.’

The other Futaba pulled away from Futaba.

‘All riiiiight!! I’m burning up~ guess I’ll have a goooo!!’

Getting into the mood, the other Futaba headed out.

♪ ♪ ♪

When Futaba had completely frozen on stage, Reina, Kazune and everyone around them were concerned, and even the audience started to worry.

‘Hey, Kazune-chan... what’s going on with Futaba-chan?’

‘I don’t know. But, her first song is nearly over... this is messy.’

The outro played, and then the song finished- but a moment later, Futaba’s hand moved.

‘ALL RIGHT, HERE I GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!’

She grabbed the microphone and suddenly gave a shout that had the audience shaking.

[It’s me! I’m awkward! It’s an emergency! Help me IDOL!]
(Idol Break All - Kayano Futaba (Horikoshi Sena) Prod. IOSYS)

The AI speakers reacted to Futaba’s singing. A rippling effect spread out into the arena, as if transforming the shape of the sound into a tangible form.

An audience member, curious about the effect, switched the channel on their earphones to Futaba.

At that moment, she spoke again into their earphones.

‘Everyone! Are you all having fun~!?’

The audience responded to her easy to understand MC in contrast to Lucia, who was DJing quietly without speaking to the audience. Another audience member switched their earphones to Futaba, raising their fist in the air and shouting her song lyrics along with her.

[It’s me! I’m awkward! Brilliant, help me IDOL! There’s more still to come!!]

The reaction of the audience members who’d switched their earphone channels to Futaba led to even more of them switching to her.

She felt that the dance floor was now responsive to her.

Alright! I’m gonna smash it!

‘Here I go for the next song~!! 3, 2, 1, BREAK ALL!!’

Futaba tore in with a high tension denpa song.

Reina and Kazune looked at each other.

‘Thank god!’

‘Right! GO, GOOO! FUTABA-CHAAAAAANN!!’

Lucia’s eyes widened at Futaba’s sudden transformation.

‘What the hell is she doing?’

She smiled as she listened to Futaba’s set.

‘Ahahahaha, you sure are interesting!’

A light of madness appeared in her eyes, and she unzipped her long sleeves, running the zippers round her arms and removing them, throwing them down.

The excess big sleeves were gone, and her arms were exposed. Now that they were gone, Lucia was able to move around more easily. She was reminiscent of a raging beast freed from its chains.

‘But Lucia is way more amazing!!’

She collected the sounds from her recently eaten prey. Lucia was about taking the skills of the people she’d battled, digesting them and making them hers. She was a greedy binge eater, but was also intensely picky about what she did and didn’t like.

The AI speakers reacted to her DJing, which had grown distorted.

Lucia’s DJing had become aggressive, violent and wild, like a hungry beast. Thunder rumbled behind her and an electric current ran through the stage. The lightning bolt shot out into the arena and over the heads of the audience. Its discharge transformed itself into a living creature.

A tiger.

One member of the audience screamed, thinking it was a real tiger. But it was much bigger and more beautiful than the real thing. The electric tiger ran up the wall, ran across the ceiling and ran back onto the stage.

‘Wooooow!! Amazing!! So coooool!!’

The tiger was like an alternate persona of Lucia, standing off to one side. The tiger, with the thunderous purr coming from its throat, looked cute to Lucia.

‘Cool and cute, perfect for Lucia! You’re the best!!’

The AI speaker’s VJ direction and VJ character were created to reflect the DJ’s personality, the content of their DJing and the audience’s reaction. This tiger was selected from a database by Iris, which analysed Lucia and her wild DJing and created it based on the tiger from the video game Genpei Touma Den.

This VJ tiger further hyped Lucia up, and the synergy between the DJ and the VJ became more intense. Lucia ran her hands over the DJ unit with blinding speed, and at a glance it looked as if she’d become a part of it. She loaded up two songs to be played after her current one at the same time.

‘LESSAGOOOOO!!’

As if inspired by the tiger’s movements, Lucia also ran and jumped up onto the stage. Using an AI speaker as a foothold in the air, she flew even higher and did a backward twist somersault. She often performed parkour-like moves like these whilst DJing.

It was a completely unnecessary thing to do for a DJ, but Lucia needed it to raise her own excitement level, and get into the rhythm.

As she landed back in the DJ booth, she pressed two CUE buttons simultaneously to start the two songs at the same time. She played back more sampled sound material, and switched channels on the DJ unit and overlaid another track on top.

Her mix used the full 6 channels of the DJ unit.

‘Ahahahaha! Howzat! How is it!? Lucia can do this kind of stuff, y’know!!’

The VJ tiger roared in response to her DJing. Electric currents shot out from its golden body and travelled across the venue.

Staring indifferently at the dazzling sight, Mitsuki murmured.

‘Lucia’s amazing...’

Karin stood next to her, her arms crossed.

‘Yeah. Layering songs of different genres and playing complicated rhythms like that, huh.’

‘The rhythms aren’t synchronised, but the groove is still there... the melody is also innovative. It’s like experimental contemporary music.’

‘Ahh... it’s definitely interesting. But, how many people in the audience do you think understand it?’

‘I’d say hardly any.’

Mitsuki replied in a bored manner, and Karin shrugged her shoulders.

‘Right.’

Karin looked up at the holographic scoreboard that floated above the stage. The scores of both areas were shown on it. The gap between them had been wide earlier, but now had narrowed.

‘Only us, other DJs, and people who know loads about music are vibing with Lucia’s DJing. But on the flip side, the majority of the people here just don’t get it. People assume that if they don’t understand something, it isn’t good.’

‘...I’m surprised you have such a calm analysis.’

‘You think I’m a dumbass, don’t you?’

‘I thought you were just doing what you wanted to do.’

‘That’s right. I do what I wanna do.’

‘Really?’

‘So what?’

‘By the logic of what you just said, you are DJing to the masses in a way that they can understand. Aren’t you just trying to flatter them?’

Karin huffed. She wanted to tell Mitsuki that she just didn’t get it.

‘Nah, that ain’t it. I do what I want, and for some reason people like what I do.’

‘What a blessing. Wouldn’t you call them followers, rather than the masses?’

Karin paid Mitsuki's sarcasm no attention.

'And the doting crowd pray. Karin-sama, more light please. And sometimes, I go make them happy. I mean-'

As Mitsuki sent her a side glance, Karin smiled.

'They all flirt with me!'

'.....'

Mitsuki let out a sigh and looked up at the scoreboard.

'It is indeed the ignorant and incompetent masses who rate DJs, and it's Iris that panders to those masses. If not, you'd lose, wouldn't you?'

'Probs.'

'But you seem happy.'

'To think that Lucia has finally come this far...'

Mitsuki looked at Karin with a dumbfounded face. 'You act so superior.'

'It's the path I went down three years ago.'

'Huh... was there ever a time when you were like her?'

'Yeah. The trend was at the time that stuff people didn't do was awesome, and the more they didn't understand something, the cooler it seemed to them.'

'I'm more interested in that, personally... why did you stop going down that path?'

'I felt like a kid with a new toy and was really getting a kick out of it, but then I just felt like it was cool to be more lowkey about it, you know, and...'

Karin's face twisted bitterly.

'But that fucking old man pissed me off by calling me a chuunibyou.'

'Pfff.'

'...Are you laughing at me right now?'

‘What are you talking about?’

When Karin glanced back at her, Mitsuki pulled a straight face again. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

‘There isn’t much time left of this battle. It’s about to be settled.’

♪ ♪ ♫

I'm at my best. I'm so hyped up. This is so fucking insane.

Lucia-chan's tiger ran around the arena and came towards me. Despite knowing that it was a hologram, I still tried to dodge it. It roared at me menacingly. The time counter at the bottom of the stage showed that there were two minutes left. I grabbed the mic, and shouted into it.

'Now! My next song is the last!! Dance until your heart stooooopsss!!!'

As my last song began, a green light shone in front of me.

‘Huh?’

Its brilliance became a razor-sharp wall.

Wha- what was thiiiiis!?

That was... I didn't know what it was, as it was very distorted... it appeared to be a green monster. The design was a little bit crunchy and robotic. It was cute, and had two heads. But it was big.

I didn't know if it looked strong or weak, but it stood there, protecting me from the tiger. When the tiger roared, the monster also opened its big mouth. I didn't know what it was, but its timing was perfect for the song I was playing right then.

I grabbed the mic, and I too shouted.

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'UUUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!'
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Synchronised with my voice, rays of light were fired from the monster's mouth. Rippling rays of light, as if my shouts were converted into offensive power, blasted Lucia-chan's tiger.

The audience immediately cheered, the large crowds of people packed into the huge arena swaying vertically. They headbanged with all their might. People in the stands were also standing up.

Blue and red lights danced. At this point, the ratio of blue to red lights was about 1:1.

I'm making half the audience dance.

One chorus ended. Then, as we entered the chorus one more time, the lights came on in the arena.

How dazzling... oh?

Uuuuuooooooooooooo!?

People, people, people everywhere filling the large arena. The stands were also full of people.

Ahh, what an incredible view. I can't believe I have this view all to myself-

.....

I was sitting in a dark room, hugging my knees. What was going on out there? I couldn't do anything right now, all I could do was wait and trust the other me. Still a little uneasy, I looked around the room. I shouldn't have been able to see anything outside. But just as I was thinking that, the door opened.

The other me looked like she was in dire need of help.

'Come with me!!'

'E....eh!?'

Had something gone wrong?

Just as I was reacting to her surprise entrance, the other me grabbed hold of my wrist.

'Wait- wha- what are you-' When I tried to ask her what she was doing, she dragged me out of the room.

'...Huh-'

A wild dance of light flashed into my eyes. People, people, people everywhere as far as I could see. All of them were smiling.

It was so dazzling.

I was holding a microphone.

‘I’m in love.’

The other me was in the middle of singing.

What did this mean? Inside my head, I was panicking. But this view was heavenly.

What a... what a lovely view.

‘WOAH, SERIOUSLY! THAT WAS THE BEEEEEESSSTTTTTT!!!!’ I exclaimed.

At that moment, our time had finished, and so the battle ended.

♪ ♪ ♪

The audience, Futaba, Reina and Kazune all held their breath as they waited for the final results to appear on the scoreboard.

‘Ehehe~ how many points difference did I get? Maybe I’ve scored double!’ Lucia looked on with an excited face. However, her eyes turned into dots the moment the final results were reflected.

‘...Huh-’

121.0-121.0.

The spacious arena became as quiet as if it had been doused with water. Immediately afterwards, there was an earth-shattering stamping of feet and deafening cheering.

‘A tie! It’s a total tie! A draw! Both Akiba and Shibuya will change players!’ The announcer shouted excitedly.

‘FUTABA-CHAAAN!!’

‘FUTABA!’

Reina and Kazune ran onto the stage to hug Futaba, looking as if they were jumping on her.

‘Amazing! That was just amazing!!’

‘I can’t believe you tied with Shibuya’s No.3... and your VJ character is Wagan, that’s the best! Futaba!!!’

‘Tied... Wagan?’ Futaba, on the other hand, mumbled in dismay.

‘That’s right! He’s totally amazing!!’

It was a miracle that their STACK battle scores, which were calculated by adding up various factors, had lined up right to the decimal point, something that very rarely happened. That was why everyone in the audience was so excited.

‘From Sotokanda Literary High School in Akiba, Kayano Futaba! She did it! No way, a draw!! A member of a newly established Denonbu right at the bottom of the rankings defeats a member of Teion! Well no, they drew, but this is still worth the same as a win!!’

Futaba looked up at the scoreboard with a dazed look, then shifted her gaze to the arena.

‘It really... was a lovely view... I see now, this is the view that I must have always forgotten.’

‘Futaba?’

‘No. I’m happy with the draw, but... I’m much happier to have seen this view than that!’

‘Let’s have a big round of applause for both of them!’

A storm of applause descended upon the stage. Futaba turned bright red, and hid behind Reina and Kazune as they left the stage.

Lucia however, who was still on the stage, was lying down and flailing about.

‘UGYAAAA!! WHY WHY WHY!? BUT LUCIA WAS DOING SUCH A GREAT JOB! I DON’T UNDERSTAND!? I DON’T GET IT I DON’T GET IT!! THIS IS FUCKING BULLSHIT! A TIE IS SO WEIRD!! THE SCORING IS WRONG!’

‘Lucia.’

Karin stood above Lucia, looking down at her.

‘It’s a draw. In a winner-takes-all game, you both lose in that case. Get out of the booth now.’

‘Wrong! There’s no way Lucia would lose to a girl like that!’

‘That’s what happened. Give it up.’

‘But, but, if Lucia loses, Lucia’s ranking drops... I’ll be on a different team to Karin and Mitsuki.’

‘That’s right.’

‘No no no! Lucia, Karin and Mitsuki together!’

‘Do you see me as an enemy, or will you miss me? Which is it...’

Scratching the back of her head, Karin turned her back on Lucia.

‘But, you’ve grown a lot.’

Teion officials then disappeared into the back, dragging a limp Lucia with them. As if replacing her, Seto Mitsuki then took to the stage. Kazune anxiously looked up at her.

‘Kazune-chan! Give it your all!’

‘P-please try your best, Kazune-chan!’

Their support stuck in Kazune’s mind.

‘Yeah, I’m sorry, but I’m definitely going to lose... I’ll apologise for that while I’m at it.’

‘Kazune-....chan?’

...Oops.

Guess I’m a little weak, thought Kazune.

‘W-well, you see, if you judge it carefully you’ll realise there’s no way I can win against Seto-san. But it might give you a bit of an idea of how she DJs, if it’s of any help to you, Reina-’

‘Kazune-chan.’

Reina stared straight at her.

‘I don’t care if you win or lose, so don’t look so miserable.’

‘Wha...’

‘Something has been bothering you all along, hasn’t it?’

Reina may be an airhead... but, she’s so emotionally intelligent with people.

‘I know I may not be able to help you, but... I want to try. Ever since I transferred to Sotokanda, you’ve been there for me and helped me so many times, Kazune-chan... but I still haven’t been able to do anything for you.’

‘Reina...’

Kazune knew now wasn’t the time. In theory, she knew it would be better to just get it over with, but- she really felt like she had to tell her right then.

‘...I thought I could do anything, be anything I wanted to be. I’ve never struggled with much in my life. I thought life would always be easy mode for me.’

Futaba nodded honestly.

‘I think that’s really true. I admire you for that, Kazune-chan, but...’

‘I still think that that’s true for me now. But when I thought about choosing one thing and going down that path, or mastering one thing in particular, I realised that it was a different story.’

If you have an average score for the specs you need in life, you can definitely get a high score, but-

‘I’m still no match for a prodigy.’

Kazune thought she’d just made a pretty weak statement that sounded quite embarrassing. And yet, Reina looked puzzled.

‘Well... I think you’re more amazing than you think, Kazune-chan...’

‘But how?’

Reina pondered.

‘What you don’t have looks dazzling, doesn’t it? That person has such great things, but you don’t have them. You think to yourself that you’re a failure.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I think that me and you, Kazune-chan, are envious of what each other has, right?’

‘Anyone can do what I do if they try hard enough, though.’

Reina shook her head.

‘Even being able to work hard is a talent. I can’t make the kind of effort that you make, Kazune-chan. Ah... maybe- no matter how hard I tried, I would never be able to become student council president like you.’

Kazune was about to tell her that wasn’t true, but then she stopped, and thought better of it. She couldn’t imagine Reina at all as the student council president. Reina doing detailed paperwork, negotiating and laying the groundwork was impossible to picture.

‘But that’s not the kind of talent you want right now.’

‘...Everyone takes for granted what they have at the moment, and thinks it’s all they deserve to have. So, they don’t realise how great they are on their own.’

‘It’s still true that I just don’t have your level of talent, Reina.’

Reina thought for a moment before replying.

‘When I joined Denonbu, I met a lot of different people. Everyone likes different music and thinks differently, even what they’re good at in particular and their talents are different. But, that’s why it’s so good. That’s why every single one of them shines.’

After saying this, she looked up at the scoreboard.

‘STACK battles are won or lost depending on total points, but that’s not all. If it’s just numbers, then the high scorer is great and the loser is worthless, but that’s not the case with music.’

‘...Huh?’

‘Even if it might not be popular, it still might be someone’s favourite song... I have so many of those. Even if everyone in the world hates it and only you like it, that’s still ok. Even if it’s lower in terms of ranking, I think it has a different quality to the music above it.’

Right.

Maybe I was too focused on trying to DJ like a god and getting a high score. I guess that’s because I’m a hardcore gamer to begin with. It’s imprinted in our heads that there’s no point in playing to score low, and high scorers are the winners. I was initially attracted to the game-like aspects of Denonbu, but that’s not all there is to it. There’s more value, other than just scoring.

Come to think of it, I once played a game that everyone said was shit, but the pretty girl in it was so cute that I finished it just to look at her the whole time.

...Out of any kind of example I could come up with, I remember that... why am I like this.

Reina gazed at me with her innocent eyes.

‘I feel like from meeting everyone and learning what they like, I’ve grown up a little bit. There were things I liked, and there were things I didn’t like, but I don’t think it’s my job at all to judge the value of what other people like.’

Hearing that hurt a little, as I would often end up thinking like that.

‘I think STACK battles are also like an opportunity to get to know the other person and at the same time, yourself too. I liked that sort of thing, realising what the things that set me apart from other people are... and because I can discover things about myself that I didn’t know.’

I’d never thought of it that way. But hearing her say that, it made sense.

‘Right... maybe it is like a journey of self discovery...’

Reina smiled brightly.

‘I only felt inferior because I wasn’t as good as Onee-chan. I thought I was no good because I didn’t have any redeeming qualities.’

She then looked up at her sister on the stage.

‘But thanks to meeting everyone, I’ve come to realise that it’s just as important to appreciate your own good qualities as it is to appreciate the good qualities of others... hey, Kazune-chan!?’

I pulled Reina into a hug. She was just too precious...

‘Reina, you’ve helped me so much too.’

‘I... but, I’m always such a nuisance.’

‘You said earlier that you couldn’t do anything for me, but you were so wrong.’

Really. Since Reina had transferred to Sotokanda, there hadn’t been a single boring moment. Ever since that day. Ever since that time. From the moment Reina appeared in the clubroom, my life changed.

‘Thank you, Reina.’

‘Kazune-chan...’

Reina hugged me back, squeezing my back as she embraced me. Normally I’d be really nervous before a battle like this, but right now I felt strangely at ease.

There was the sound of a camera shutter clicking. Futaba smiled subtly, holding up her phone.

‘Futaba...’

‘P-p-p-please forgive me! I just thought that was kind of nice! I did!!’

Welcome to my world.

‘I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’ll delete it straight away!!’

I grabbed her hand at the speed of light.

‘If you delete that, I’ll spread your embarrassing secrets to the world, Futaba.’

‘Fueeeeee!? W-what embarrassing secrets are thooooose!?’

‘Should I say?’

‘Please don’t say theeeemm!!!’

‘Then send the photos to me.’

I smiled, and started to make my way onstage.

‘Ok, I’m gonna go have fun.’

‘Yeah! See you after!!’

Reina’s voice pushed me towards the DJ booth.

♪ ♪ ♪

The second match was between the second members of both the Akiba and Shibuya teams; Seto Mitsuki vs Shinonome Kazune.

Kazune may have been relaxed, but the difference in ability between them was obvious. Both had the same method of deciding on and building up a setlist in advance, but Mitsuki had a higher level of skill than Kazune.

She based her setlist on EDM, as it was typical of Shibuya, but with elements of classical music and opera that drew on her own backbone, therefore building a worldview on a grand scale.

On the other hand, Kazune had an Akiba-style setlist based on video game music.

The longer the battle went on, the wider the score gap became. At the halfway point, Mitsuki had 62 points compared to Kazune’s 41 points.

It was a good pace for Kazune, but Mitsuki was still at a completely different level.

...After all, I knew it was gonna be tough...

Thanks to Reina, I didn’t feel too much pressure. Normally in front of such a large audience, I would be really shaken up and make a load of mistakes.

However, showing my usual ability here meant I was certainly going to lose.

...But even if I know I’m going to lose anyway, why not at least try?

The scores of each team weren’t added up. It was only one-on-one matches, as it was a winner-takes-all STACK battle. In that case, a defeat was a defeat, no matter the point difference.

Something that would be more expressive of my feelings at the moment-

The next track prepared was at a much lower BPM than the one I was currently playing. But, connecting was harsh as it is. I'd only used two channels so far, but I decided to take the plunge and use another one. I set up an ambient track, setting up a breakdown-chill connection to break the previous trend of what I'd been doing. I raised the vertical fader.

The atmosphere changed dramatically.

My score went up. I now had 43 points.

Oh? Was that good?

Right. For the next song, should I sing something live?

I grabbed the microphone and overlaid my voice on the drop's vocals.

I scored another 2 points.

Was it easier to score points if you played a live song? In the middle of the current song, I put in another live song.

Huh?

I had had a good feeling about it, but this time my score didn't change.

Well, maybe putting in major developments is what scores points. And come to think of it, the first thing that got me interested in DJing was that it felt like a game to score points. But once I understood some DJ techniques and could use them to get points, I lost interest.

I understood most of it, but I could only see the result score after using those DJ techniques without properly understanding the basis of the score. I began to feel dissatisfied and it became uninteresting.

I looked again at the DJ unit in front of me. It was a much better model and more up to date than the ones we used in the clubroom. In truth, I was more interested in this hardware than in DJing itself.

Whilst the next song was playing, I checked the various menus from Function Key 1.

Found it. A holographic screen floated above the DJ unit, and the log of songs played and the number of points earned were displayed graphically on it. As the

current song was about to end, I hurriedly prepared the next song, returning to the setlist I prepared beforehand.

I seemed to decide well on song connections I practised, but they didn't score many points.

Why was that? There must be a reason.

The way I moved the faders? Timing? Was the CUE point wrong because I didn't adjust the EQ beforehand? Song selection before then?

Various possibilities ran through my brain.

I thought STACK battles were a place to pit unidentified musical talents against each other.

In the meantime, the rationale for the winners and losers was explained.

SELECT: Song choice

TECH: Technique

AUDIENCE: The audience's reaction

CREATIVE: Creativity

KNOWLEDGE: Knowledge

And the initials of those words were... STACK. These factors were determined, but it wasn't clear how to quantify them.

The ideas of a genius can't be theorised. What is inherently unquantifiable is forced into numbers. That's what I thought, and maybe I'm not wrong about it. But-

Iris may have been beyond human knowledge, but didn't pass divine judgement. The scores were calculated using aggregated data and algorithms. Rationally.

In other words-

It can be attacked.

All the hairs on my neck stood on end.

'Oh my god...'

How incredibly interesting.

There were also things to consider like the support of the audience and people watching online, so it wasn't possible to fully analyse DJing skill alone, but...

No, perhaps...

Iris may be based on or in some way related to that, as after all it could analyse human emotions and sensitivities.

Emotions, desires, enthusiasm- it may be possible to deliberately create and manipulate them.

So what it came down to was... control over people's hearts and minds.

Holy fuck.

My excitement was unbearable. Probably a very different excitement compared to that of other DJs, though.

But- this is surely the most Shinonome Kazune kind of excitement. So, this is fine. I'm literally having so much fun right now.

I selected my favourite track from the list. I still only had the instrumental, but whatever. I grabbed the microphone as I launched into a song with a lot of excitement and tension.

[Darling, darling...

Tokyo through Kanda, crying the whole way

I open my umbrella, it's still raining

Suddenly there was a huge hole in my being

That I've simply been bearing ever since

I was just waiting for you

Eternity passes in a second

A thousand years in one minute

Mayday, mayday

This isn't enough for us

I cried on this terrible day

Let's kiss on the Mansei bridge]

(Toarutowa - Shinonome Kazune (Amane Miho) Prod. TAKU INOUE)

Ahhh... this feels so goood!

I don't think I've ever been so immersed in singing a song before. How embarrassingly romantic.

I let myself be swept away in my own fantasy world. There was no greater pleasure.

Staring at the screen displaying the detailed logs, I was entranced by the number of points that were being added up.

I'm getting some good data here. This is the best. When I get home, I'll check every piece of technical information on Iris.

...Hm?

The audience looked weird.

I saw a lot of surprised faces, and they were pointing above my head.

'Huh-'

As I looked up, I saw a gigantic square object about to emerge from the stage wall. It was black in colour, somewhat unsettling and looked disastrous, like an enormous alien mothership.

The ceiling of the Coliseum was at most a few dozen metres high, but even the ceiling had a hologram, which was of the sky at dusk. But now, it seemed as if the roof had gone. A huge fortress several kilometres long was now floating in that evening sky. The distance looked strange. It seemed like a visual bug.

The dark hull of the ship, bathed in the setting sun, was lit by countless lights. By all appearances, this looked like an alien mothership that had come to invade Earth.

That design was incredibly familiar.

'Ohh... Andor Genesis!?'

Andor Genesis was the poster character from the legendary game, 'Xevious'. When it appeared in reality, its presence was insane. It truly was a mysterious, ruthless boss.

'Seriously, that's... that's my VJ character?'

No way?

Futaba's was Wagan, Taiga-san's was a tiger, and this is mine!?

'You produce some interesting stuff.'

Seto Mitsuki was also looking up overhead.

‘No, I didn’t mean to put it out there...’

‘So what the hell is mine?’

With a wry smile, Seto-san stopped the sound for a moment.

Then came a dark, gothic sounding EDM drop.

Wow, intense...

As I mused this, a ripple started to spread behind Seto-san, distorting as if a stone had been thrown in water.

A creature of a horrific shape emerged from it.

‘A DRAGON!?!?!?’

A carnivorous dinosaur-like head and long neck appeared. Then large wings, a muscular body and a long tail. A blue dragon, like those in the fantasy genre.

It was a realistic looking dragon, not a cartoon one like Futaba’s.

Super realistic, but... wait, was this design the Blue Dragon!? The Blue Dragon from Dragon Spirits!?

The Blue Dragon turned its head and opened its mouth to my Andor Genesis floating above.

‘No way...’

Immediately after that thought, flames shot out of the Blue Dragon’s mouth.

I was dazzled by the tremendous flash of light. Flames overflowing from the Blue Dragon’s body ran across the stage and cascaded down to the audience like flowing water.

Then, the flames shot from its mouth became a white-hot ray of light, which headed in a straight line towards the fortress and pierced my Andor Genesis.

♪ ♪ ♪

The final score between Mitsuki and Kazune ended up being 146-108. Although defeated by a large margin, Kazune left the stage with a refreshed look on her face.

‘Kazune-chan.’

Kazune smiled at Reina and Futaba as they welcomed her back off stage.

‘You know, I think I’ve finally found my own version of Denonbu.’

‘I think you have...’

Reina was just as happy as she was.

‘You’re next up, Reina. And it doesn’t matter if you win or lose, either. Talk to your sister as much as you want.’

‘Right! You’ve worked so hard to get to this point, Reina-san!’

‘Futaba-chan, Kazune-chan... thanks.’

Reina touched the misanga around her wrist.

‘Well then, I’m off!’

Once on stage, Reina headed straight for the DJ booth. She accessed her Iris data by holding her ID-J over the DJ unit. Once authenticated, her profile and data stored in Iris were displayed.

On either side of the DJ unit, Reina also had analogue turntables which she brought from home, and on top was a sampler and effects extension borrowed from Azabu’s Kurogane Tama.

She now had all her weapons ready. If she turned to the side, she would see the DJ booth of the opponent she had to fight against: Shibuya.

‘Onee-chan...’

There stood Seto Mitsuki, glaring at her coldly.

‘I never thought I’d see the day that I’d be on the same stage as you.’

‘Yeah... I’m so glad.’

Despite saying this, the look on her face was more nervous and under pressure than she ever could have imagined.

‘Yes, I know. I’ve been waiting for this opportunity too.’

‘Eh!? You-’

Reina’s face relaxed slightly. But-

‘I’ll use it to deny you and your father’s existence.’

‘Gh-’

Mitsuki’s expression was endlessly cold, and her eyes sharp as blades.

Reina felt as if she was holding a knife to her throat.

‘Why...? Did me and my dad do such bad things to you, Onee-chan?’

Mitsuki bit her lip at the sad look in Reina’s eyes.

‘Any further conversation is pointless. I will crush you, and I will prove that I’m far superior to you, even as a DJ, which is your speciality.’

‘Right...’

Reina clenched her fists tightly.

‘I understand. But I’ll do what I want to do, too.’

‘What do you want to do...?’

‘I’ll tell you how I feel, Onee-chan- with sound.’

Mitsuki responded with absolute zero coldness.

‘Too bad. I don’t have a heart that can be touched anymore.’

Before Reina could reply, Mitsuki pressed the PLAY button. A divine song intro echoed from the AI speaker floating in the air.

This was the strongest setlist she could think of at the moment, with which she would crush Reina once and for all. As the audience begins to be intoxicated by the solemn sound, the EDM slowly surfaced with a disturbing sound.

The audience's anticipation was heightened.

After some impatience, a high-impact drop suddenly struck. In an instant, the arena went wild.

Reina pursed her lips and started her first song.

Now, I'll give it everything I've got!

She went for a sudden start with her original song, 'Favourite Days'.

[I'm collecting all the things you love
So I can bring them all to you
You won't hear it if the sound stops
A miracle, just for today

...Please, let it reach her.

Appearances aren't important
I wanna give you strength
As long as you smile at me,
That's all that matters]

(Favourite Days - Hidaka Reina (Shidomi Yuuka) Prod. kz)

However, Mitsuki showed no response.

In this year's New Legend, the two opposing DJs played at the same time. There was no guarantee that Mitsuki would listen to what Reina was playing.

...So, how...

Reina ran her eyes alternately between Mitsuki and the vast audience filling the Coliseum.

...I need to get myself a decent amount of the audience listening to me first. If the reaction on the dance floor changes, she might notice me!

Reina took a quick look around the dance floor, trying to decide which song to play next. Rather than flow or context, surprise was needed here.

There were many Shibuya fans in the audience. She needed a song that would steal their ears, a song that reeked of security and progressiveness, just like Shibuya-

She made a quick decision, turning the dial on the DJ unit to search for the track.

...Mimito-chan, I'm counting on you!

Reina connected the new, unreleased song that Mimito had entrusted her with. The rabbit-ear ribbons on Mimito's headband stood up straight as she heard her song being played.

‘AAAAAAHHHH!!! IT'S MY SONG!!!! IT'S MY SONG ‘DO YOU EVEN DJ!’

She grabbed Hina's shoulders roughly, who was standing next to her.

‘WOOOAHHHH, CALM DOOOOWWWNNNNN!!!’

‘BUT, BUT! ITS BEING PLAYED IN FRONT OF SUCH A HUGE AUDIENCE!? MY SONG IS FIGHTING SHIBUYA!’

Shian murmured in the very excited Mimito's ear.

‘...It's also recorded in her playlist.’

‘MY NAME WILL GO DOWN IN HISTORY!’

‘Seriously, you're totally exaggerating. Well anyway, good for you.’

‘Yeah...’

Mimito's excitement subsided a little as she looked up at Reina on stage and then the scoreboard overhead.

23.0-16.5.

They were just getting started, but the score was widening already. The score gap was still quite small, but if they continued on like this, the gap would become wider and wider.

Mimito clenched her little fists.

‘Come on, Reina...’

Reina was looking for what she should do next. Meanwhile, Mitsuki was DJing exactly how she planned in an unassuming manner.

Everything went according to plan, from her song selection to the connections. The audience was hyped up at the climax of her setlist, just as she intended.

But Mitsuki was unaffected by the audience's reaction. It was just like how she'd expected it to be. She had built up that effect deliberately.

...This is just how things are. Even if Reina and Dad make a name for themselves as DJs, I can easily surpass them.

Today, I will prove that.

However, it took longer than I expected.

At the end of last summer, I had learned, practised, tested and perfected everything that Karin had taught me. Theory and practice. Everything was repeated and refined.

During that time, I had learnt significant lessons from Karin. Not only about the technology, but also about the culture and sensory aspects of dance music, clubs and DJs.

But, it was only the methods that I could not imitate.

Karin's DJing can be theorised to a certain point, however from which it then became impossible to explain with logic.

When Karin DJed riskily, I once asked her why she did so.

'Dunno. No reason. Guess I just thought it was kinda cool.'

Perhaps she really meant it.

Normally, that kind of DJing wasn't considered to be good, but it had been accepted. It triggered a rise in excitement on the dance floor.

Later on, she could explain why she took the risk, but- how did she know the effect she was going to have by doing that beforehand?

If Karin didn't change her explanation, it must have just been a coincidence. However- that was too convenient.

'Nah. I do whatever I want and then for some reason the audience just seems to vibe with it.'

This sounded like the arrogance of a self important anime character, but for Karin it was just a fact. It was probably her honest opinion.

Maybe it was her intuition. Or natural talent.

There are people in this world who possess those sorts of things. The kind of person who wins people's hearts and minds, not through knowledge or skill, but through instinct.

Mitsuki looked sideways at the DJ booth next to her.

‘...Ugh.’

She clenched her teeth angrily. The current score was 68.8-54.6. The gap was slowly widening, and the time on the clock was already half gone.

Sweat beaded on Reina’s forehead. She knew if she carried on like that, she wouldn’t be able to catch up.

...My sound isn’t reaching her.

What do I do. What do I do. What do I do. What do I do. What do I do. What do I do.

Her impatience stopped her from being able to think quickly, and her hands were trembling on the faders.

The ID-J on Reina’s wrist made a noise. Her misanga, that tied the ID-J to her wrist, was reflected in her eyes.

Kazune-chan. Futaba-chan.

Reina looked down and saw Kazune and Futaba shouting encouragement up to her.

‘GO FOR IT, REINAaaaa!!’

‘PLEASE TRY YOUR BEST, REINA-SAAAAAANN!!’

Although they were in the middle of the crowd, Reina thought she could hear what they were saying.

‘That’s right... I could never have come this far without you guys.’

Reina searched for a song that wasn’t on her playlist.

'I can't just let it end like this!'

Reina reached for the effects & loop machine set up on top of the DJ unit and chose some destruction-like sound effects.

She remembered the question that Tama had asked her.

'What about you then? Do you have a favourite song?'

'I do.'

She rotated the DJ unit's jog wheel as far back as she could.

The song was rewinded, and it played backwards. Time seemed to rewind.

...When she was in BABEL.

'The theme song from Supersonic Warcraft Crossfader!'

The audience listening to Reina were taken aback by the retro robot anime theme tune she'd started playing suddenly. Once past the nostalgic intro, a strong four way heat spread. She loaded up the drum and bass samples with the equipment she'd borrowed from Tama. The noise effects kicked in.

Reina was improvising a club remix of the theme tune, which the audience couldn't help but smile and cheer at. It wasn't good nor bad, simply interesting. Her remix was perceived as a playful element unique to this festive event. Above all, everyone knew the song.

It was from an anime that once dominated the world, and was always on video streaming websites and programmes of nostalgic anime theme songs. Everyone had to have heard it at least once.

The atmosphere of the vast dance floor changed.

Mitsuki, who had been concentrating on building her own world, noticed the change.

...What was happening?

She switched the channel on her earphones to listen to Reina.

'!?'

Her eyes widened, and pupils narrowed.

‘That song...’

The song is a nightmare for me. I’m hearing it as if I’m reliving the humiliation of that day, right in front of my own eyes.

The AI speakers were reacting to Reina’s DJing and the excitement of the audience, and the particles scattered in the air were used as a screen to project holographic images.

‘.....!?’

A massive orange humanoid robot appeared behind Reina.

‘Cross... fader-’

Memories that were imprinted in Mitsuki’s childhood came vividly to life.

That day, her sister who she’d considered to be far below her in terms of talent, gave her a taste. A taste of defeat.

That wasn’t music. It wasn’t. She was just trying to be popular.

I told myself over and over again that I didn’t need to feel hurt about it. But then- I realised.

Reina had a talent for inspiring people. Far more than I did.

I had put blood, sweat and tears into practising and improving my piano technique.

But technique is not about technique. Technique is a means to an end, and its purpose is to inspire people.

However, Reina... she did it instinctively.

Mitsuki’s back teeth made a grinding sound.

‘Through it all... I’ll-!’

She didn’t want to look at that robot any longer, not even for a second. Skipping over the rest of the songs in her setlist, she immediately selected the one she knew would most excite the audience.

I’ll get rid of that robot!

Screaming that mentally, she pushed the PLAY button. A ripple spread through the arena once again and the Blue Dragon reappeared. It opened its mouth to spit flames, but Crossfader fired its thrusters at the Blue Dragon.

The audience went wild at the extraordinary spectacle of the robot and dragon fighting each other. The music Reina played further enlivened and fuelled the heat of the unfolding battle scene.

The Blue Dragon opened its mouth towards the head of the assembled Crossfader, as the Crossfader pointed the cannonball lasers positioned all over its body at the dragon. The maximum firepower of both sides was fired at very close range in the melee, and magma-like flames and a dozen or so brilliant lasers flew around the Coliseum as they fought.

A hologram of blasts and flames filled everyone's field of vision, followed by the sound of explosions and screams. The smoke that had obscured the arena gradually faded away, and it was noticed that the robot and the dragon had disappeared.

...A tie.

Whistles and loud cheers rang out, turning the venue into a melting pot of excitement. Reina and Mitsuki looked at each other as their counterpart VJ characters emerged from the smoke.

'Onee-chan...'

'Reina... I won't forgive you.'

'Onee-chan! I've missed you, Onee-chan!' Reina blurted out, enduring Mitsuki's hateful stare.

'Don't mess around with me! You left me with our mother!'

'I always wanted to see you! I wanted to talk to you!'

'Liar! You smiled like you never worried about anything! You forgot all about me and went and had fun without me!'

It wasn't a conversation, more so an exchange of words. It was as if they were trying to hit each other with their feelings.

'I never forgot about you!'

‘Out of all of you- I was the only one who cared about us all being together as a family! The rest of you didn’t give a shit about that!’

‘That’s not true!!’

Reina quickly turned the dial on the DJ unit and selected the song she had prepared for this occasion.

‘I want you to listen to me, Onee-chan! I want you to listen to how I feel!!’

‘I’m not listening to that.’

Mitsuki reached out her hand to cut off the sound from Reina’s channel. Reina no longer had time to think about how to connect the song to the current one, so she broke her flow and quickly switched to it.

...Reach her.

Reina hit the CUE button, praying.

Mitsuki’s finger, which was positioned on the channel switch button, stopped.

[As the evening sun sets
Sound beyond the dawn of time
Rings out as it pleases

Tomorrow the skies will clear
I just know it
Rain is forecast,
But no matter what, it will clear without fail

I’m reaching, I want to reach you
Passion walking alongside you, and
Honour for the way you appeared
I still long for this dancing dream

Sunrise, sunrise right here and now
I could look away and still be dazzled
I just loved it
Trust your feelings
Resonate

I’ll never forget you
Should we carry on?

Because eventually, in the morning,
You'll come around]

(Anthem of Dawn - Hidaka Reina (Shidomi Yuuka) Prod. Yunosuke)

Mitsuki's heart started to beat faster.

...What the hell was this?

Reina's feelings towards me resonated in my heart; this song seemed to see right through me.

Emotions swirled in my mind.

Was this just as humiliating as having an embarrassing secret revealed?

But, how could Reina know me like this?

Whilst I was still stunned from hearing her song, Reina pulled out an analogue record from a duralumin case, placed it on the silver turntables and dropped the needle.

I heard a sound that I had missed.

This- wasn't this a record that Mom liked and listened to a lot? As I listened carefully, I could hear what sounded like environmental sounds behind the music.

It was strange. My chest tightened, as I was struck by nostalgia listening to the old record.

Footsteps that sounded somewhat familiar. The ticking of a clock. The distant barking of a dog. The soft sound of a piano. The sounds of the house that I used to love.

A nostalgic scene unfolded before my eyes. It was as if we had stepped back in time.

A warm ring full of light. Dad, Mom and Reina were there.

I could hear them laughing. Yesterday and today had been fun, and I was sure that tomorrow would be another fun day too.

I used to never doubt that.

I miss everything so much.

That wasn't the cold, empty house I now lived in. It was a warm house full of light, and I was there-

'!?'

I was suddenly pulled out of my thoughts. Again I found a cold DJ unit in front of me, beyond which was the huge arena.

'Just now...'

I looked up at the AI speaker without a second thought.

No, it hadn't been a VJ hologram. I saw it in my head- no, it was shown to me.

...By Reina, with her DJing.

Struck by surprise, I looked over to the Akiba DJ booth again. With a serious expression on her face, Reina was controlling the channels on the DJ unit and tapping the pads of the load sampler with the sound samples she'd prepared.

She was recreating the sounds of the home we'd once shared. Of course she hadn't been recording them at the time, though. These were newly created sounds, just like the real thing.

Reina remembered the sounds from that time, too. She performed her original song again, this time with the nostalgic sounds overlaid.

Reina's singing voice reached my heart through my ears. Her voice called out to me. Her song reverberated in my mind as I was shut up alone in that cold, dark house. Reina's voice. Reina's heart.

A scene unfolded in my mind that I had never seen before. The window was open, and warm light was flowing in. Reina was looking at me, against the glow, and reached her hand out towards me.

What was this? Is this what my heart wants?

It can't be.

Chill out. It's just some sounds she sampled. I need to find out how she got them, and then this feeling will probably go once I find out the source.

...She'd changed songs again.

But when I listened carefully, I realised it wasn't just a single song. It was a mix of many songs and many different sounds. It was like a puzzle with many different pieces put together. Unravelling each piece, one by one.

This mix was... a song me and Reina had practised together. One of the songs from the TV when we used to watch it together. A song from a commercial. A song I'd wanted to play at my first competition but my mother wouldn't let me and I gave up. A song that I was so happy to be able to play for the first time that I made Reina listen to it.

It was a concert that I had held for just one person. I remember Reina looking deeply moved, and she applauded so much that her hands hurt.

...Why did she even remember all of this? Even I had forgotten about it.

It must be because these were Reina's treasured memories. She remembered things I had forgotten, too.

'Ah...'

For some reason, my vision became blurred. Thinking that was strange, I rubbed my eyes and felt something warm dripping down from them.

Tears...?

My teardrops fell onto the monitor of the DJ unit.

...I see now.

Reina had a talent for reaching people's hearts. She had the talent to emotionally move people like this.

I acquired my talent through theory, learning and mind-bending practice. But somehow, Reina has had hers from the very beginning.

That was frustrating. I didn't think that was fair.

I am not a genius. I am not a child prodigy. It was Reina who was the genius. And I've always been jealous of her, even since we were children.

I envied Reina's talent.

...Ah.

I'd been jealous of her my entire life. So envious, so jealous of Reina. That's why I wanted to win.

I...

I wanted to prove that hard work beats genius.

I was about to wipe my tear-stained monitor when I realised that the setlist I'd planned was already over. Ah, right. I'd skipped over a song earlier.

Time is passing silently right now, resulting in me losing a lot of points. I need to play something.

But what? Nothing came to mind.

I can still hear Reina's mix, consisting of many sounds we remembered from our childhood.

I still felt like something was missing, however.

...Ah. That's right.

I have no sound. I am the missing piece.

Reina is waiting for me to complete this puzzle. She's waiting for my response.

I... selected a song that I had been working on. It was still in its rough stage, and I hadn't completed it yet.

But, thinking this was the only way, I pressed the PLAY button.

The instrumental started to flow out, but that wasn't enough.

I'd never sang in front of people before, but my hand grabbed the microphone. I wanted to fill in that blank piece of the puzzle by myself.

[At midnight, inside a dark box
The shadow takes a rest
Knowing that it'll never return
I followed faint memories from my childhood

There are some things I just can't give up
I used to believe that was a strength
I wish to return once more

To that bustling city, filled with sunshine pouring down on us

Turn back the clock by one
You wake up as the moonlight shines on you
One thing I dreamt of that came true
On the mask I threw away
I'll just keep dancing

At 5am, into a dark box
A light shone through]

(Tsukuyomi no Dance - Seto Mitsuki (Sister Claire) Prod. takashima)

Just as the song ended, so had our time limit. I didn't have to look at the scoreboard to know the result.

Still however, I had no regrets. Or rather, I felt like I had let go. There was so much going on inside my head, and I was too emotional for my brain to calm down and stop thinking.

And yet, it was oddly refreshing. I felt strange.

I awkwardly turned my head towards the Akiba booth and-

'Eh!?'

'O...o...onee-chaaaaaaan...' Reina was worn out from crying and I couldn't help but pull a face. I felt embarrassed because there were tears streaming down my face earlier, but... I was a little relieved that I had a sister who was embarrassing herself much more.

Naturally, I felt compelled to say something.

'...I'll see you later, Reina.'

After saying that, I left the stage. There stood Karin with her arms crossed.

'You done?'

'...Well, that didn't go as planned.'

'I bet. Rare for you to score so low, huh.'

I looked up at the scoreboard. The STACK battle had ended at 85.3-91.0 to Reina.

‘That’s horrendous.’

Karin chuckled.

‘So, what’re you gonna do? If you’ve reconnected with your sister now, are you gonna quit DJing and go back to piano?’

‘.....’

I felt refreshed, but inside my head was still in turmoil. But, at least that much was clear to me.

‘No. DJs pay back what they are owed by other DJs.’

‘Your sister is... surprising, huh...’

I think so too. But-

‘I think DJing has become a little more interesting.’

Karin rolled her eyes.

‘Huh...’

‘This time I’ll probably fall off of the radar, so I guess I’ll have to start all over again.’

And yet, strangely, I feel cheerful.

‘...But around the time of the new year, I should be able to line up between you two again.’

‘What, so you’re motivated for real?’

I smiled provocatively at the chilling Karin.

‘I still owe you half of that payment.’

Karin smiled sharply, but somewhat happily.

‘Ain’t you forgetting about something?’

‘Eh?’

‘In a winner-takes-all game, it's all ‘bout which team stays in the end, it ain't ‘bout what happens in the middle of the game. So basically, the next game decides everything. Therefore-’

Karin grinned and walked away, ready to battle.

‘I’m gonna go make up for your and Lucia’s losses.’

‘...Karin?’

I was a little surprised at how unlike Karin this was. And then I realised-

The Karin heading towards the stage looked as if she was covered in flames.

♪ ♪ ♪

Reina looked at the strongest DJ as she walked on stage. A shiver ran down her spine at the sight of her, and something deep inside her trembled.

What was this feeling?

‘Yo.’

Karin greeted her light-heartedly, and headed into the Shibuya DJ booth. That alone drew thunderous applause and cheers from the audience.

Reina understood that feeling.

The presence of Karin standing at that DJ booth alone was extraordinary. She looked as picturesque as a piece of art. So cool.

Besides, Karin today seemed different from any impression that anyone had ever had of her. She looked incredibly powerful, as if flames were emanating from her entire body, and the look in her eyes told that she couldn't wait to start rampaging.

‘I’m so honoured to be standing on the same stage as you, Karin-san. I-’

‘Come and take me down.’

‘Eh?’

‘Don’t be boring with the ‘I’m honoured’ speech and all that shit.’

‘.....’

Reina hastily retracted the words she was about to say.

‘Don’t assume there’s gonna be a next time. You might only get just the one chance.’

...That’s right.

Karin-san was the undefeated leader of the Denonbu rankings, and it was a miracle for Reina just to be able to play against her. This was a precious opportunity, and she had to cherish every moment of it.

‘Right. Thank you so much for this battle!’

Reina bowed deeply to her.

‘I’ll give it everything I’ve got to defeat you, Karin-san!’

Reina’s shining eyes, which were no longer lost, looked straight at Karin. With a satisfied smile, Karin activated her DJ unit.

Ambient, quiet synths echoed throughout the arena. The audience was confused by the emotional and beautiful melody. When she appeared, Karin would always start off with a strong, impactful sound.

With a single punching blow, she overwhelmed her audience, and soon everyone in the arena listening to Karin was dominated by a sense of unexplainable anticipation.

The excitement of the audience rose sharply the moment they realised that a wild rhythm was rising from beneath the soothing sounds.

‘Let’s fuckin’ go!’

The bass and drums suddenly roared with a galloping BPM, instantly captivating whilst also taking the audience by surprise. The arena’s excitement was heightened by the unexpected introduction.

...Just as I’d expect from Karin-san.

For Reina’s initial impact, she played a remix of a popular anime theme song. Of course, it wasn’t bad, but Karin had already stolen the audience away.

‘I’m only just getting started!’

Reina took a quick look around the arena. The earphones of the audience filling the hall were glowing red and blue. Mostly red however, indicating that more people were listening to Shibuya's side. People watching online might've been more likely to switch over, though.

Right now, I just have to please the people listening to me here!

For her next song, Reina folded in a future-pop anthem. She held an analogue record high in the air, to which the audience reacted with a large commotion.

It may have been curiosity- but she couldn't afford to be picky. If people weren't interested, she couldn't start it.

Reina placed the record on one turntable and set the needle.

I have to give it everything I have to reach Karin-san. No... I still don't know if I can even reach her at all. But the turntables are my own weapon, one which Karin-san doesn't have. I have to make the most of the weapons that only I have, or...

After starting to play the record, Reina took a deep breath and monitored what Karin was playing.

Her eyes widened in astonishment at what she heard.

...My own song!?

She heard Karin playing Favourite Days.

Another rhythm took over, and she realised Karin was improvising a Shibuya-style EDM remix of her song. She'd just easily robbed Reina of one of her own weapons.

The fact that Karin could play it meant the track was a recognisable one, and it would undoubtedly become popular. Many producers wanted their songs played by a top DJ like Houou Karin for this very reason.

Every song she played was like an endorsement by her that the song was a great song. DJs from all over the world would then play it in their own performances and many listeners would search for and listen to it.

She was happy that Karin had chosen her song to play, but for this moment in time for Reina, it was a tough situation. She'd made the same move that Reina had made against Harajuku by playing her own song against her.

But, even so...

It was great.

Reina felt as if her song had been reborn. It was a song she was very familiar with, but eventually when listened to enough times, she gradually lost, for lack of a better word, the initial 'crush' she had on the song. The song's vitality had gradually weakened.

Despite that, Karin had just brought it back to life. It really was as if Karin had breathed new life into it.

Just like a phoenix.

It wasn't just the result of Karin making a good remix, but the flow of the song selection, timing, sound production and the atmosphere of the venue all came to fruition.

She could of course use it in her own future-pop flow, but it had really lived within Karin's current EDM stream.

So should she do the same?

However, she felt differently.

It was a good thing that Karin had flushed it down the drain at that moment. As Reina turned to look at the Shibuya DJ booth, she locked eyes with Karin, who grinned at her.

Howzit? The look in your eyes told me it was good.

Karin then looked back down at her hands.

...Hidaka... Reina.

That girl has a people pleaser mentality and she's always DJing with other people in mind. She loves seeing people have fun and entertaining them.

She's airheaded and nosy, but also good-natured and straightforward. Ain't nothing wrong with that, as those're necessary elements for a DJ.

But that wasn't enough to please the audience.

Karin looked around the audience filling the vast arena. It was as if she could hear their hearts, which were screaming for the most exciting anthem of all.

If that was the case, of course it's gotta be Shining Lights! Gimme that light!

She heard those silent voices.

But, I ain't gonna do that. It ain't always a good idea to develop things the way you want them to. If the DJ was at the mercy of the audience, then the DJ was the audience's slave.

Imma remind you lot who really rules this place!

The next song Karin played was bright and refreshing, the bass sounded great and the strong rhythm got the dance floor moving. The audience threw their arms up in the air and cheered in a frenzy of excitement at this further unexpected turn of events. Red lights were moving everywhere.

I'd subverted and succeeded their expectations. That was just my style. The pleasantly surprised audience were surrendering themselves to my sound.

...As long as I'm DJing, I ain't gonna let any of you wake up from this dream.

I pulled out layers of sounds from different tracks. The sound bounced. The shimmering sounds mingled and melted together. If anyone touched my sound, it was all over. This party was unstoppable. You guys'll be freshly surprised by what I put out there.

I will show you a new world. I'll make you think you're taking a breather, but then I'll get you hyped right back up again.

The audience's expectations were raised, and they became even hungrier for sound.

Fuelling that hunger is also a skill. I deliberately flashed a nasty smile at the arena.

...You greedy bastards.

Guess I have no choice, I'll give it to ya-

'Come on, jump!!'

Strong kicks and brazen bass hit the arena.

The noisy sound of a fast paced rap. Rhythms developed one after the other. Then a beautiful sounding part.

It was a dizzying mix.

Insane dubstep. The audience were drowned and tossed by its sound.

Not only the audience, but Reina in the booth next to her, too. She was listening to Karin's DJing so much that she almost neglected her own.

...Incredible.

Karin seemed to be completely unaware of her audience, but she was.

She provided new value that wasn't known about, new sounds that had never existed before. She reincarnated old sounds that had never been heard before, so that everyone would want to listen to her.

But I'm not like that.

I always offer what I think that person would like. I've always lived my life in the face of others.

But, if-

What if I could recommend something I like, even if they didn't want to hear it? When I think about that, a feeling of excitement spreads from deep within my chest.

But... I'm scared of it being rejected.

...Huh?

During the training camp, I had wanted to show Kazune-chan and Futaba-chan my hobby of making plastic models.

Why was that?

Maybe it was because... they're my friends.

I trusted that they wouldn't start hating me if they turned out to not have an interest in plastic modelling.

But with others, my anxiety prevails. How did I become so timid?

I turned to face the Shibuya DJ booth. I could see my sister beyond Karin-san.

...Ah. I understand.

When I was a child, my mother gave up on me, my sister shunned me, and I changed as a result of that.

I didn't want to be hated. I didn't want to be abandoned.

That feeling was so strong that I started to think about what would make them happy.

I looked at my sister, and remembered that day when I did what I wanted and was told by her that it wasn't music. The cold look in her eyes as she told me that has always been burned into my mind.

But... right now, my sister had a different look in her eyes. She looked straight at me, and was interested in what I was doing. She wasn't rejecting me, she was stepping towards me, wanting to listen to me. The sounds I like. What I feel good about.

Those eyes were now guiding me, like a light illuminating the darkness. It was as if they were saying, let me hear you.

'Ok then... I will.'

It was a little scary, but- I loaded up a song I wouldn't usually choose, lining up its CUE point.

I have a good premonition.

Something was different from usual. My heart trembled, and I felt like backing away.

No, no. I have to do this.

I'm not alone.

When I let my gaze wander off-stage, I saw Kazune-chan and Futaba-chan. I always have those two by my side.

I trust them, so I'll jump...

I raised the fader and turned the EQ.

...into my New Frontier!

I could hear their cheers. I could feel the audience's excitement in my own body. Overlapping heartbeats resonated, as the voltage on the dance floor went straight up.

The colours of emotions and instincts were blending together.

Once I'd switched completely to that song, I thought of what to do next. I had a flash of inspiration that rushed straight through to my fingertips as I began working on a short mix. Until now, I had unconsciously chosen a smooth and natural setlist development.

But now, I'm no longer trapped. This felt so interesting.

I wanted to ask the audience if what I was about to do was alright with them.

My thinking started to accelerate. Thinking faster gave me more time to consider things.

Would they like this? Which was better?

A myriad of my favourite songs crossed my mind.

I assembled the parts using the mixer. Sparkling sounds and pounding bass. Complex compositions and fast-changing rhythms. I combined all these parts to create a brand new drop.

That was my typical future sound.

When I glanced at the DJ booth next to me, Karin-san was looking at me with a happy but evil smile.

...Knew it. This girl, man, thought Karin.

She had sensed a change in Reina's DJing. Not only did it resonate with the audience, it resonated with Reina herself, too.

...Just as I'd hoped.

She's influencing the people around her, and also changing her own perspective. She herself is changing as a person, and that's because of me.

'I'm on FIRE!'

Alarms sounded. A barrage of broken bass thudded. The drums attacked. The audience were hit by a ton of rap music at extreme speed.

My battle mode was ignited.

As if sensing this in my sound and my own mind, the AI speakers projected my inner flames visually. Flames swirled around me and rose up as a pillar of fire.

At this, a scream-like cheer erupted from the audience. A flaming bird emerged, scattering sparks of fire with its dramatic entrance.

...Fenghuang, the Chinese phoenix. The sign of the emperor.

Karin extended her hands out towards the audience as if to say, I am the emperor of Denonbu.

I loved the word 'strongest'. I thought it was cool to reign on the throne. But-

That was way more boring than it might've seemed. That's why I was always a challenger at heart, even though I claimed to be the strongest.

I had few enemies, though. The top of the pyramid was too narrow.

If it was bigger, would more strong enemies show up?

Dance music is the base of the pyramid of music, Mitsuki had once said. In that case, I'll flip it right over.

Into an Inverted Pyramid.

A hellish heaven where the most talented and badass people flock together to fight to the death. A rare wonderland.

My soul cried out. Something hidden in the depths of my mind, unknown to anyone or even me myself, rang out in the form of sound.

Creating such a world was difficult alone, however. You can't get stronger if you fight alone.

I looked at the Akiba DJ booth and laughed.

...Hidaka Reina.

'You can keep up, right?'

Karin's mumblings didn't reach Reina's ears, but she could feel her fiery battle spirit, and also the sheer brilliance of her outstanding DJing.

In addition to the DJ unit, Reina was using a full range of effect plugins and samplers that she could also use as turntables and rhythm machines.

Karin, on the other hand, wasn't using any special equipment. She just had the DJ unit provided by the management.

So... why was her sound so different? Even though they were using the same equipment, there was a massive difference.

Reina bit her lip nervously.

Karin-san... she sounded like she was DJing aggressively. Maybe even violently. But despite it sounding that way, she wasn't at all. Karin was DJing with meticulous care and frightening delicacy. She'd even carefully adjusted the EQ to make the vocals stand out and the rhythm parts come forward.

She'd been careful with sound layering so she could combine sounds without them clashing weirdly. They didn't sound uncomfortable when played at the same time; in fact, they sounded very audibly pleasing. It was far more engaging than listening to them separately on their own, and when Karin-san played those sounds together, it sounded as if they'd always been like that.

If it's built in beforehand, it's difficult but not impossible.

But Karin-san improvises it on the spot. She would mix songs with ones she remembered in her head, a simulation which had impossibly high accuracy.

I, too-

I've become more subtle and more daring. I've drawn out detailed progressions and developments through careful DJing, and I've sounded out the story I want to tell at will. I spread out a blank notebook and let the colours run as they pleased.

I'll just shout it straight out. I'll sound myself out.

Which colours, which parts, which tracks, which sounds should I use?

Every possible development came to mind. The options were endless.

That meant that the possibilities were endless.

I drew up my next development whilst applying effects and adjusting the tempo to match the BPM. My brain ran in parallel.

I don't have enough time to think, and I could do way more with more time. Speaking of time, how much do I have left-

When I looked up at the scoreboard, I saw that we only had 5 minutes left.

The score was 182-174.

'Huh...'

I had thought there would be more of a point gap between us. As I looked around the dance floor, I noticed that there were just as many blue lights as red ones.

A shiver ran down my spine at the sight.

...I could possibly win this.

Houou Karin could be within my grasp!

A flame lit up in Reina's eyes. The fighting spirit in her heart was ignited.

I'll maximise my remaining time to catch up to her!

Think faster. Then there's more options to choose from. More possibilities. The rising tension accelerated my neural pathways, and all kinds of combinations came to mind.

My choices felt limitless. I chose the one I felt I could best express myself with. Combining that created something new. It didn't matter if it was something I wouldn't normally do or something I'm not supposed to do.

I don't care about musical rules or promises!

We're free. As free as the feeling of running across a meadow.

No structure that history has assembled is so blue that it can't be broken! I wanna turn my emotions into a groove and convey them to everyone!

I ran my hands over the DJ unit at a speed that surprised even myself.

The robot assembled itself in the background as I assembled the sound parts. From the frame, the internal mechanism and exterior were attached and Crossfader appeared.

It was the symbolic figure of Reina's fighting spirit.

...I'm beginning to get it now, thought Karin. She was delighted to see Reina like that.

That was how she should be.

'COME OOOON, HIDAKA REINAAAAAAA!!'

Let's make the most of this one in a lifetime moment!

A moment that hurt like a bitch.

DJing is ephemeral and fleeting. People think electronic music can be listened to again at any time, but that's not the case. Listening to it at a club is different from listening to it at home, and the way it sounds depends on the venue.

Even here, the audience changed the sound of it.

This time, this moment, this place, the audience and my own feelings, all of that is what DJing is all about. My DJing is only for this moment. When the sound has finished ringing, it'll disappear. This is an experience that can never be experienced again.

That's why it's so precious.

Some things were born because of this moment in time. Fuelled by how Reina was DJing right then, my brain was also full of dopamine. Bizarre elation, euphoria and various thought processes went crazy inside my head.

More. Faster. We can run faster. We can go further. That's where we try things that no one has ever tried yet. New genres and new music are born. That's the sound of the future, which no one has heard yet.

To a world no one has seen yet, at the speed of light.

Shining Lights.

We'll unleash all our senses. We'll go beyond everything, even our imagination.

Let the future be heard, right at this very moment.

To Reina's eyes, Karin's silhouette and the sound she played seemed to glow.

...Incredible. So, so incredible. Such a fresh sound. A lively sound that had just been brought to life. The newly born music was dancing. The heartbeat of life was beating.

Dazzling, fast, distant, just like a shooting star. If I'd still been the version of myself I was until yesterday, I would have been swept away in an instant. I'm pushed to my limits before I even know it when I'm chasing after Karin-san.

I compete so I can surpass myself. I too am like a shooting star, and right now I'm shining.

Connecting sounds like I found them out of thousands of stars, creating electronic music that evokes emotions that can't be explained with words, turning overflowing feelings and thoughts into sound, all to reach out to the back of the Hidaka Reina running in front of the one I was now.

The star to aim for is far away.

It may or may not be Karin-san, I don't know. But surely, the person who I want to be, who I'll meet someday, is. There's no answer to that, however.

The signposts pointing the way to the stars are surely the strong bonds and simmering passion that I've found.

Kazune-chan.

Futaba-chan.

Mimito-chan.

Hina-chan.

Shian-chan.

Tama-chan.

Aki-san.

Ginka-san.

Karin-san.

Lucia-chan.

And... Onee-chan.

The light that all of them gave me is shining in my heart, resonating as a heartbeat.

I follow that shining heart as it continues to beat.

I reach towards the future.

Just... a little more.

I felt like I'd almost reached that light.



The annual New Legend event had finished.

It had been a day full of interesting events, and all the attendees must have gone home with a deep sense of satisfaction. Among those, the Akiba vs Shibuya STACK battle was one of the hottest in recent years. The content of the battle was so fascinating that there were immediately fierce comment wars on the internet about it.

Although various opinions were thrown around, most people highly appreciated the fact that all the DJs expressed their own personality through the way they DJed as much as possible. The last battle was the ultimate battle- Houou Karin vs Hidaka Reina. That one had been the toughest, fiercest and overall best, and therefore was deeply engraved in the memories of the audience. It would surely be passed on as a new legend.

After the end of the event, the groups involved-

‘W-wait! We’re here for the New Legend launch, isn’t that great!’

Mimito looked around the hall excitedly. The three Harajuku girls that Reina had invited had arrived at the launch. The banquet hall attached to the Yoyogi National Coliseum that it was being held in was as luxurious as a first-class hotel. There were glittering chandeliers on the high ceiling, and tables with pure white tablecloths were lined up on long carpets. A temporary kitchen had been set up next to a wall, where cooks from top restaurants had travelled in to show off their skills.

‘Please don’t make a fuss, Mimito. It’s embarrassing.’

‘But I’ve never done anything like this before! Oh, isn’t that a celebrity? I swear I’ve seen her in a drama before-’

‘Ohh, it really is her. And those two idols that are rumoured to be in love with each other... we feel really out of place here.’

‘.....’

Shian had been hiding behind the two of them for quite some time now, typing away on her private account.

[This is a really fucking annoying den full of normies. All these snobby bitches think they’re high class fr. Don’t you dare have these filthy gatherings near my shrine, or I WILL punish you.]

‘...Shian, make sure you don’t tweet anything on your public account by accident.’

‘Indeed. I don’t want all three of us to be found floating in Tokyo Bay tomorrow morning.’

Shian nodded silently and continued typing.

Ever since the party started, the three Harajuku Denonbu members had been huddled together in a corner of the hall. No one in particular spoke to them, and they didn’t speak to anyone else either. They wondered if they could go and get food, or if it was reserved.

‘Since you’re here, Mimito, why don’t you go and talk to someone?’

‘Huh!? W-why!?’

‘This is an opportunity that doesn’t come along very often. Hey, you should go and network as the club leader.’

‘D-don’t make this so hard...’

‘Do it for the Harajuku Denonbu.’

‘...Fine. Then, as the club leader, I’ll give you some orders, Hina. Go to a proper table and get to know someone.’

‘Are you a demon? That is literally impossible for mankind.’

‘Then why did you tell me to!? Shian! You go!’

‘...!!!’

Shian shook her expressionless face from side to side at a very high speed.

‘Hey. I brought you guys some food!’

Suddenly a platter piled high with food was placed on the table in front of them.

‘R-Reina!?’

Reina put down another plate of food with a big smile on her face. Shinonome Kazune and Kayano Futaba also came over to them with drinks on trays.

‘Ah, everyone in Harajuku in such a corner.’

‘I was so busy, I didn’t even get a chance to talk to you guys at all... I’m so sorry...’

Futaba smiled apologetically and handed the drinks to Hina.

‘I-It’s ok. But are you sure? You guys are the stars of the party, you don’t need to bother with us.’

Reina replied with a puzzled look on her face.

‘What? But when I see my friends, I wanna chat with them.’

‘.....Oh.’

Hina looked embarrassed.

‘Oh and Mimito-chan, thank you for letting me use your music! It helped me out a lot.’

‘Huh... i-it was nothing...’

Mimito blushed, trying not to tear up. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Shian beginning to silently stuff the food Akiba had brought them into her mouth.

‘T-that’s not fair, Shian! I’m hungry too, y’know!!’

Attempting to hide her embarrassment, Mimito also reached for the hors d’oeuvres.

Then, a small girl wearing a baseball cap with cat ears on it appeared.

‘Jesus Christ. You poor people are so nasty.’

‘Ah! Tama-chan!!’

Azabu’s Kurogane Tama made her way over to Akiba and Harajuku in a condescending way. A little further away from Tama were Shirokane Aki and Haijima Ginka.

‘Thanks for letting me borrow your equipment, Tama-chan! It was really easy to use.’

‘Well, of course it was. It was specially ordered for me, by Aki-sama!! The rental cost also isn’t cheap.’

‘Huh... are you charging me?’

‘Isn’t that a given? In this world, things don’t come so easy-’

‘Tama.’

Hearing the terrifyingly stern voice of Aki made Tama’s hair stand on end.

‘Y-yes, Aki-sama!’

‘Don’t say such poor things.’

‘P-poor!?’

Tama fell down to her knees, shocked. Ginka, who was watching the exchange with a smile on her face, turned an eye to Kazune.

‘Looked like you blew it.’

‘Yeah... maybe it was because I’m not cut out to be like everyone else... but I feel like if I told you that, you’d be appalled. I think I’ve found my own way of being in Denonbu, though.’

‘Right. Well then, I look forward to what the future brings.’

‘Ginka? You seem to be very familiar with her.’ Aki interrupted their conversation somewhat disturbingly.

‘Ahh, we had lunch together today.’ Ginka replied lightly. It was unclear if she’d picked up the signals from Aki.

A vein appeared to bulge on Aki’s forehead.

‘I thought you’d stood me up for an important lunch meeting... right. So that’s what it was.’

Aki caught Kazune with her terrifying glare.

‘A-ahaha... well, I...’

As Kazune was thinking of a way to get out of that situation as soon as possible...

‘Ah! There she is!!’

Taiga Lucia ran in, avoiding the crowd.

‘OOIIII! KARIN! MITSUKI! OVER HEEEREEEE!’

She waved her cute long sleeves in the air, calling them over loudly.

‘God, shut the fuck up. You don’t have to make so much noise, I can hear you.’

The sight of Houou Karin and Seto Mitsuki caused some tension among the Denonbu members already there. Suddenly, Reina and Mitsuki’s eyes locked.

Mitsuki looked away, but not out of rejection. She had an embarrassed look on her face.

Karin approached Reina, regardless of Mitsuki.

‘Oi. Follow me for a sec.’

‘Eh? O-ok.’

As Karin turned on her heel and sped off, Reina ran after her.

‘Um, where are we...?’

‘Somewhere away from that situation.’

Karin opened the window of the venue and stepped out onto the balcony.

‘Here it is.’

Sofas and faint lighting lined the wooden deck, allowing visitors to relax and enjoy the night view of Shibuya. It was just the two of them there, as if it had been reserved for Karin and Reina.

Karin walked past the sofa and propped her elbows on the balcony fence, Reina lining up next to her more reservedly.

‘Um... thank you so much for today.’

‘S’alright. Today was interesting.’

Reina had ended up scoring 192.0 points, breaking the tournament record set by Karin last year. When the scores had been announced, there was a stir in the hall. It had been a moment when a new record was set.

Akiba had performed a miraculous giant-killing. Many were convinced that a new star had emerged who had done just that.

...But, they were still overturned.

Houou Karin had scored 206.0 points, winning the competition with a new record. Despite her loss, Reina still felt a sense of achievement. During the battle, she had had a feeling that a whole new door had been opened. She had thought on her feet very quickly and her options for selecting and combining sounds had increased dramatically, allowing her to DJ in her own new way.

The sound resolution was also much higher, allowing for more subtle and detailed DJing. She could pack more feeling, and more information into one performance.

It wasn't as much that she was impressed- she just wondered how she had DJed like that. It was as if she suddenly became God or something had come and possessed her. Couldn't she DJ any better? She wondered.

Even so, she was no match for Karin. Reina gazed at her as she looked at the night view in a daze.

...She'd seemed within Reina's reach at the time.

Now that I think about it, no matter how hard I try, I can't compete... I can only assume that's what it is, thought Reina.

As she was thinking, Karin spoke.

'I was right about you after all, huh.'

'Eh?'

'I told you I never have any strong enemies, remember?'

'Ah... yes.'

They'd spoken on the pedestrian crossing, when Reina and Futaba were on the way from Harajuku to Shibuya. Karin must've been referring to that.

'Well today, I finally found one.' She looked at Reina with a smug expression.

'Uhh... but in the end, Karin-san, it was you that won hands down. Are you sure you were really right about me...'

‘That ain’t it at all. Only reason I was able to DJ so good was cause of you.’

‘Eh!?’

‘Yeah! This was totally the best day ever! Mitsuki’s sister turned out to be a great find, and Mitsuki took things to a whole new level today, too. We also found out how much Lucia had grown... right!?’

Reina was perplexed. However Karin continued to talk by herself excitedly.

‘This is seriously getting interesting! Now we can have electrifying battles. Deadly battle of all battles between the monsters and the crazies, like a real ass fight to the death!! Right? Exciting, ain’t it!?’

Reina thought that Karin was the crazy one as she listened to her speak with a dangerous look in her eyes.

‘U-uhh, I should get back to the others... Ah-’

As she looked behind her, the faces of the rest of Akiba, Harajuku, Azabu and Shibuya were all stuck to the balcony window. Karin frowned when she saw them all.

‘The fuck are they all doing?’

Mitsuki opened the window and joined the two of them on the balcony.

‘I was afraid you two troublemakers would cause a scandal.’

‘...Who’s a troublemaker?’

Kazune and Futaba rushed over to Reina with worried faces.

‘Is everything ok, Reina?’

‘Huh? Y-yeah?’

Tama was a little tongue-tied.

‘If you could cause a violent incident or two, we could get Shibuya out of action, you know...’

‘Tama. Don’t say those things, even if you’re thinking them.’

Ginka looked at Aki with a wry smile as she gave Tama a warning.

‘Ah- by the way, Reina. From today onwards, you’re my rival. Come on man, you’ve gotta do this, aight? Seriously, I’m begging you.’ Karin said clumsily, scratching her head.

Reina made a troubled expression.

‘U-uh, rival? I’m really not that big of a deal...’

But somehow, she was beginning to understand what Karin meant when she called Reina her rival. Maybe it was how Karin recognised her as a suitable opponent in her own way. They may not have been friends, but there was nothing to hate or dislike between the two of them.

In fact, she might even be doing Karin a favour. In other words: they were rivals.

However, Reina thought it was presumptuous to call herself a rival of Karin’s.

‘B-but more importantly... I have a lot to learn from you in the future, Karin-san. Please take care of me from now on.’

She bowed deeply, then stood back up and looked Karin straight in the eye.

‘And... I’ll do my best to stand alongside you one day, Karin-san!’

Reina thought she’d conveyed her determination as best she could, but the Emperor of Shibuya didn’t like it. She acknowledged Reina again reluctantly.

‘Don’t make it all about ‘someday’. This ain’t about time. I’ll leave you here if you keep fucking around.’

‘Wha, whaaaat!?’

‘I knew it... everyone in Shibuya is unhinged...’ The three Akiba girls were shaken.

They were then interrupted by a deliberate cough.

‘Excuse me, don’t you think you’ve forgotten about someone, Houou-san?’

‘Huh? Who the fuck’re you?’

‘I’m Shirokane! Shirokane Aki, no less!! We met in the final of a previous tournament!?’

‘Ahh, I think we’ve met. For some reason or something.’

Karin’s throwaway answer further struck a nerve with Aki.

‘Gh... I will definitely make up for this humiliation! Won’t !! Ginka! Tama!!’

‘Ahaha...’

‘Yes! Tama will take care of that!’

‘W-wait, I demand you wait!’

A petite girl unexpectedly spoke.

‘I’m the world’s cutest and best DJ, Sakurano Mimito from Harajuku, and I’m here too! Don’t ignore me!’

Hina and Shian looked on in surprise behind Mimito.

‘Ohh... so she’s challenging her. Do your best, Mimito.’

‘...I’ll pick up her bones when she dies.’

‘You two are fighting them with me! And don’t you dare kill me!!’

Mimito was determined, but Aki and Karin weren’t particularly impressed.

‘Harajuku... you’re rather far down in the rankings, aren’t you?’

‘You an elementary schooler?’

‘ARE YOU KIDDING MEEEEEE!! Mimi is a high schooler!! And anyway, doesn’t Akiba have a similar ranking position to us!? First of all, Harajuku even beat Akiba once!’

The look in Aki and Karin’s eyes changed as they heard this.

‘Oh... I see.’

‘Heh, this kid seems kinda interesting.’

Mimito trembled and hugged Hina and Shian.

‘W-w-w-w-what should I do! They’re staring at me!’

‘Hey, stop that. What if they think you’re with us?’

‘But aren’t we friends!? Aren’t we members of the same club!?’

‘No, I didn’t want to join and then you forced me to, Mimito.’

Shian nodded.

‘**TRAITOOORRRSSS!!**’

Not only Harajuku, but Lucia and Tama were also fighting.

‘**A tiger is stronger than any black cat! Play with Lucia!!**’

‘If you want to fight me, then give me fight money. Ah, look at that boy over there! He’s got so much food!!’

‘**Give it to Lucia toooo!!**’

The level of safety and overall IQ across the balcony decreased at an alarming rate. Ginka and Mitsuki seemed relatively sensible compared to everyone else, but they didn’t seem to want to interfere either. Kazune looked dumbfounded.

‘**This is a complete mess.**’ she murmured to Reina. Futaba was trembling with fright.

‘**Uuuuu... everyone is too dense...**’

‘**Yeah. But... this is kinda fun.**’

Reina smiled with genuine joy.

‘**I came back to Tokyo and joined Denonbu... I met so many different people, connected with so many people and discovered so many sounds I didn’t know existed...**’

She looked up at the night sky. The city lights were so glaring that not a single star was visible. Even so, they were all definitely there.

The bonds that connect people are invisible, but they are definitely there. They might not be visible now, but surely there are more waiting to be discovered.

I’m sure Denonbu will connect me with them, too.

Kazune-chan and Futaba-chan. The Harajuku girls, and the Azabu and Shibuya girls.

I was able to connect with my sister again, too.

‘Denonbu really is amazing.’

What happened today is one consequence, but this is not the end of the story. All of us are only just standing at the starting line.

This is where the real Stage begins.

♪♪♪

END OF PART 1

Thanks for reading!!! Please share with your friends and drag them into denonbu hell with you if you enjoyed (✧ω✧)

TL: @syrupsealpha on twitter

Part 2 First Prologue:

[Part 2 Kabuki First Prologue](#)