

Azabu (Part 1 Novel 3)

This girl had a really overwhelming presence. It was almost as if she wasn't human. It felt like her soul had a different mass, distorting the space around it to its centre and radiating a gravitational pull on the consciousness of other people.

White hair with a striking red streak. A confident smile. Eyes with a penetrating gaze.

Just her standing there completely changed the atmosphere. This girl could be anywhere, and everyone would instantly think she owned the place.

She truly had the air of an emperor. Everyone was unable to move an inch.

Her eyes, like those of a predator, caught Reina's.

'You sure have an interesting sound.'

All the hairs on Reina's body stood on end.

This was Houou Karin. The girl at the top of the rankings, the prodigy of Teion International High School, the best DJ in Japan.

Shock and tension took over Reina's entire body. She couldn't even utter a reply. It was as if Karin's presence had engulfed her entire being in fear. She was like a small animal staring at a ferocious beast.

Reina didn't have many fears. However, looking directly into Karin's fiery eyes, she felt herself shaking. She shuffled her legs, sweating nervously.

Reina herself was confused at how her own body was behaving. Karin continued talking to her, as she stood still in shock.

'Hey, you. You a Harajuku student?'

Reina managed to gurgle out a reply as her throat stiffened.

'...N-no, I'm not. I'm from Akiba...'

Karin raised her eyebrows at Reina's vague answer.

'Akiba? Didn't know there was even a Denonbu there. Your name is?'

‘R-Reina... I’m... Hidaka Reina.’

‘Hidaka...?’ Karin’s eyes narrowed, but just for a moment.

She smiled, and walked towards the DJ booth on the stage. She put her hands on the edge of the stage and lightly jumped onto it, despite the distance between the stage and the floor being about as tall as she was.

‘Don’t mind me borrowing this for a sec!’

Without waiting for a reply, Karin scanned her ID-J over the DJ unit. Iris instantly read her data.

As she did this, Kazune leaned forward as if she had been released from the chains Karin’s appearance had somehow put on everyone.

‘Karin’s going to DJ!? No way!!’

Reina didn’t understand Kazune’s surprise. Noticing this, Kazune explained;

‘Houou Karin only ever goes to official Denonbu matches or parties where she’s announced to DJ. There’s no way she’d jump into a dedication DJ event in another area like this...’

Mimito came to her senses, and continued panicking.

‘Wh-What the hell is going on!? What the fuck!? Is it r-really... Houou Karin... Eeeeehhhhhh!?’

‘Mimito, please calm down.’

When Hina tried to soothe her, Mimito stopped moving and a serious expression appeared on her face.

‘No way....!?’

‘Do you have any idea what’s going on?’

When Hina asked this, Shian, Kazune and Futaba also waited for a reply.

‘...I bet she’s here to crush me, because she’s scared of how much I’ve grown!!’

Hina and Shian turned away in disgust.

‘That can’t be why.’

‘...Nope.’

‘Why not!?’

But then, a huge sound blasted out of the speakers which made the three of them instantly shut up.

‘!!!’

Reina gasped.

A memorable sound rang out. Just hearing that one sound made Reina’s heart flutter.

Karin looked down at Reina from the stage. She smiled, and raised the fader into her next song.

[Shining Light,
Flying around the world
Like a flash of light
It begins to burn bright]

(Shining Lights - Houou Karin (Sukoya Kana), prod. PSYQUI)

It was an elaborate intro. Unlike the usual way most DJs would start their first song, it captured the audience at the beginning. The sound was different.

It was the exact same equipment and the exact same environment both Harajuku and Akiba had just performed in, yet Karin made it sound different.

She thought she’d made adjustments as well. Reina was confident that she sounded better than Mimito had, even though they were both using the same track data. But, Karin could go much further than that. The song playing right then was an original track made by Karin herself, so a simple comparison couldn’t be made. But to Reina’s ears, the difference was obvious.

‘The mixer is adjusted differently... and so is the quality of the original data...’

Looking around, they could all see members of the audience who were about to leave quickly run back to see this unexpected performer.

‘Hey! Isn’t that Houou Karin!? Holy fuck!!’

‘Was she secretly here this whole time!? That’s insane!’

As information spread on social media, people came one after another from the Shibuya area. Now, there were more guests than there were at the main dedication DJ show. The Harajuku and Akiba girls were swallowed up by the wave of people flooding in behind them.

‘Fueeeeee!? R-Reina-san, Kazune-chaaaan!’ Futaba cried, as the crowd swept her away from her fellow club members. Kazune, also being swept away, called out loudly to Mimito.

‘W-what are they doing!?’

‘I don’t know why you’re asking me, I don’t get this at all!’

The shrine was now as filled as it was every New Year’s Day.

Karin was blasting out a selection of songs that captivated the audience in no time, with drops that lifted you to the heavens and grooves that compelled you to dance. It was impossible to not get excited.

On stage, Karin gazed sharply at the audience with a wry smile. She pointed at her now huge audience.

‘This is getting exciting!! I’m really in the zone right now! You guys still have energy left to dance in you!?’

Her question raised the audience’s voltage into the red zone at once. They were begging and pleading with her for more sound.

‘Hell yeah! Let’s fucking go!’ Karin shouted, a satisfied smile on her face.

This declaration caused a massive rush of dopamine into the brains of the spectators. Their arms flailed and they jumped up and down. They expressed their joy of receiving sound from the Emperor of Denonbu with their whole bodies, with all their might.

A strong drop was building up, when-

‘!?’

The sound stopped.

Suddenly, the venue was silent. The sound of the wind rustling the trees and the chirping of birds was deafening.

The audience all looked puzzled. Their murmurs began to grow louder and louder.

‘What’s going on... what just happened?’ Reina asked Kazune, who was by her side, but even Kazune didn’t understand what was going on.

‘I don’t know, maybe there’s a problem with the equipment?’

When they looked at the DJ booth on the stage, Karin had a grim expression. She stared at the gate of the shrine.

‘Hey. Don’t do anything unnecessary.’

All eyes turned to the gate. A lone girl was standing there.

‘That’s my line, you know.’

She had short black hair with a blue streak, and wore a black leather jacket over a classy blue dress. Her style looked as if it was coordinated to protect her delicate beauty with aggressive fashion. Her thick soled boots made a loud noise as she made her way to the stage.

The crowd naturally split up left and right, creating a straight path for her to walk through.

‘Social media is out of control right now. I’ve reported this to the school and they’ve suspended your Iris ID.’

‘I told you. Don’t just do what you want.’

‘That’s quite selfish of you, isn’t it? We aren’t allowed to DJ when we aren’t scheduled to, you know that.’

Her face was both cool and beautiful as she stared challengingly at Karin. Kazune recalled the list of students at Teion International High School and narrowed it down in her mind.

‘That’s... Seto... Mitsuki.’

‘Fuee? Who... is she...?’

After struggling through the crowd, Futaba had finally found her way back again.

‘Teion Denonbu’s No.2.’

Kazune replied, still staring at Mitsuki.

‘S-she’s... amazing. I can’t believe I’m seeing No.1 and 2 together in a place like this...’

Next to Futaba, who was impressed, Mimito was looking at the newcomer with frustrated eyes.

‘I knew it... that bitch.’

Even though Karin was looking back at her with a resentful look in her eyes, Mitsuki didn’t seem to notice or care at all. She walked away, keeping her gaze straight at Karin. Kazune looked at the pretty girl as she walked off and sighed.

‘My god... She’s Teion’s No.2, and she’s so cute... I thought God never gave anyone both beauty and talent...’ She mumbled, enraptured, and tried to take a photo on her phone without hesitation.

But just before she could take one, Mitsuki stopped in front of her and the rest of Akiba and Harajuku’s Denonbu members, crossed her arms and made an annoyed sound.

‘We’re going now. Come down from there quickly.’

‘But...’

Karin jumped down from the stage. Seeing what was happening, the crowd started whispering again. Houou Karin was thought to be an unstoppable, free spirited girl. It was unheard of for anyone to control her behaviour like this.

But, there was one girl who scolded Karin, and who Karin obeyed. Karin’s presence only raised Mitsuki’s presence in value, even if she was unwelcome. Ignoring the countless relentless gazes fixed upon her, Mitsuki waited for Karin to catch up with her arms folded.

‘I shouldn’t... but, this would make a really good two-shot!’ Kazune’s questionable whispers could be heard from anyone next to her.

‘...Onee...-chan?’

‘Reina? Did you say something?’

‘That’s... my sister...’

‘....Huh?’

Kazune’s eyes widened.

Teion’s No.2?

That girl had just walked out of the gate alongside Karin. Kazune compared what she could see of the retreating Mitsuki and then Reina next to her.

In her opinion, it wasn’t hard to see the resemblance. However-

‘Compared to the picture you showed me, she looks very different now... also, why is she Teion’s No.2?’

‘.....’

Reina ran off after Karin and Mitsuki.

‘Reina!’

Ignoring Kazune calling her name, Reina dove into the crowd, but unfortunately the path that had been made for Mitsuki was already blocked again. Wading through the waves of people, she finally emerged at the gate, but could no longer see Karin or Mitsuki.

‘...!!’

Reina ran along the approaching road in the direction of the Shibuya Area. She passed through the torii gate and looked around, but before she knew it there were already dark clouds gathering.

There was a footbridge in front of her, with a large drop below, and on the other side was the Shibuya Area.

Two figures could be seen crossing the bridge. Reina took one step past the stairwell and ran along the footbridge.

‘Onee-chan!!’

The two stopped in their tracks, but only Karin looked back. Now out of breath, Reina called out again.

‘Onee-chan... is it really you, Onee-chan? It’s me! It’s Reina!’

But Mitsuki still did not turn around, the black haired back of her head still facing Reina. Karin looked a little taken aback.

‘Oi, she’s calling you.’

Her leather jacket clad shoulders drooped a little. She turned around, finally facing her sister with cold eyes.

Her hair, her clothes and her mood had changed, and there was no trace of her childhood self. Despite this, Reina still recognised her.

‘Mitsuki-onee-chan...’ tears came to Reina’s eyes as she smiled.

She approached Mitsuki at a quick pace, wanting to hold her hand quickly, hug her and feel her warmth.

But...

‘Don’t come near me.’

That one sentence was like a metal shield.

‘Wha...’ Reina stopped in her tracks with a puzzled smile. ‘Oh, we aren’t little kids anymore... sorry! I’m just too glad to have found you again, ehehe...’ she scratched her head apologetically. ‘A few days ago, I prayed at this shrine. I prayed that I would see you again. And it came true! I’m amazed!’

In contrast to Reina, who expressed her joy with her whole being, Mitsuki’s steely expression didn’t change. Anxiety spread through Reina’s mind, but even so she forced a smile and continued talking.

‘U-uh, I joined a Denonbu too... just like you, Onee-chan...’

‘Huh?’

For the first time, Mitsuki showed a reaction. But it was different from what Reina had imagined.

‘Just like me? You’re the same as me now are you, Reina?’

Reina felt herself getting more and more anxious at Mitsuki's irritated tone of voice, but she still tried desperately to smile.

'...Ah, but you play piano too, right? Of course. B-but, I'm so happy to have something in common with you. When we were younger, you... didn't seem to like DJs very much-'

'DJs are shit.'

'...Eh?'

Mitsuki's response was as sharp as a knife, and Reina couldn't get her head around what she meant exactly.

A drop of water hit her nose, as it began to rain. Raindrops started to darken the ground.

'B-but... aren't you a DJ now? You're in Denonbu...'

'DJing is worthless.'

Mitsuki turned her back on her twin sister, and walked away. Karin shrugged her shoulders with a bitter smile, as if to silently apologise to Reina, and followed Mitsuki.

'Onee...'

Reina tried to follow, but her legs wouldn't move.

Rain continued to pour, and the scent of it reached Reina's nose. As if the smell of it prevented her from following Mitsuki and Karin, she stood there in the rain.

♪ ♪ ♪

'Looks like it's just a passing shower. The forecast says it's going to stop soon.'

Checking the weather app on her phone, Kazune spoke to Reina.

'.....'

The girls were sitting in a small cafe not far from the shrine, taking shelter from the sudden downpour. It was a cute pastel-coloured place, with brightly coloured tables and chairs. On the contrary to being in such a pretty cafe, the atmosphere was heavy.

Futaba skim read the menu, sweating coldly at the gloomy atmosphere.

‘W-woooow... the pancakes here look delicious. I think I’ll order some.’

‘I highly recommend those. Akiba has nothing on Harajuku when it comes to sweets. We’re a whole world away!!’ Mimito replied, giving Futaba a fake smile.

However, that was enough to break the conversation. Mimito elbowed Hina in the side.

‘Ah... uh, uhm, well in my opinion, I’d recommend this parfait. What about you, Shian?’

‘...I like both...’

‘Heh, heh... but, will it make me gain weight...’

The somewhat bland exchange was unnoticed by the gloomy Reina.

‘Hey, Reina. Is Seto Mitsuki really your sister?’ Kazune asked her boldly.

At this, Reina’s shoulders trembled.

‘Did you get to meet her after all?’

‘Well...’ Reina slumped down deeply to hide her face.

‘If you don’t want to tell us, that’s ok. If we can help you in any way, just let us know.’

‘Y-yes. Please order something nice and cheer yourself up. I get all energised when I eat something sweet...’

‘Right! After all, you guys just beat us!! If you’re this gloomy as winners, how should we feel right now?!’

‘Yeah... right. Sorry.’ Reina looked up and forced herself to smile.

‘Uu... I’m not blaming you for feeling like this. I just don’t like seeing you so sad...’

‘Yeah. Thank you, Mimito-chan.’

‘D-don’t get me wrong!! I’m not trying to console you or cheer you up or anything like that...’

Perhaps embarrassed at what she said, Mimito fell silent, blushing, and her mouth shaped itself like an 'x'.

'Right, it isn't anything to hide... and if I'm going to continue DJing, it's something I'll have to open up about at some point...'

Having said this, Reina started thinking about the past.

♪ ♪ ♪

Mitsuki and Reina were twin sisters. As children, they lived together in Tokyo, but their parents divorced when they were nine years old. Their father, Reia, moved to Hokkaido and took Reina with him. Their mother, Tsukiha, stayed in Tokyo with Mitsuki. They hadn't seen each other since.

'My sister was always a musical prodigy, unlike me.'

'Had she been DJing since you were kids?'

'Nope. She was a piano prodigy, and excelled in playing classical music.'

'Classical music?!'

Hearing this, the other girls were very surprised.

'My mother was a pianist, so... my sister regularly entered competitions. But I was never any good at all, though.'

Futaba remembered what Reina had once told her.

'You can't play the piano.'

Were those Reina's mother's words...

Reina's twin sister was a piano prodigy, but what were Reina's feelings at that time? Just imagining it made Futaba's heart ache.

'Around that time, my parents weren't getting along either... and I wondered if I was one of the reasons that they divorced.'

Kazune raised an eyebrow.

'Surely you've been overthinking this.'

‘Ahaha... maybe. My mother and sister had never really liked DJing, but it was the only way I was able to make music...’

Now it all made sense to Kazune and Futaba. And so-

‘Music will connect me and my sister together again someday, I’ve always believed that. I was so surprised when I found out my sister was in Teion’s Denonbu... but I was so happy, I could hardly believe it. And yet...’

Mitsuki had rejected Reina.

‘DJing is worthless.’

Why had she said that? She was in Teion’s Denonbu as their No.2...

Mimito suddenly stood up vigorously.

‘Then, you should go talk to her!’

‘Mimito-chan...’

‘If you keep feeling like this, you’re sure to lose the rematch against us, right?’

Hina nodded. ‘I hate to agree with Mimito, but I think so too.’

‘Huuh!? What does that mean?!’

‘...God will protect you. It’ll be alright.’

‘You guys...’ Tears welled up in Reina’s eyes. Kazune and Futaba put their hands on her shoulders.

‘We’re here for you.’

‘I don’t know if I can help you... but I’m right at your side.’

‘Right. Thanks!’

As Reina looked out the window, she saw that the rain had stopped. The light of the sun was faintly shining through the clouds. Reina stood up along with everyone else.

‘Let’s go to Shibuya!!’

♪ ♪ ♪

The Shibuya area was just a stone's throw away from the Harajuku area. If you crossed the street in front of Kamizono Jingu, you'd already be in the Shibuya area. As you walk down the hill along the darkened railway line and turn right at the end of the hill, the density of the Shibuya area suddenly increases.

Buildings towered on both sides of the road, hologram signage floating around them. Shibuya was the picturesque city of the future. Akiba had similar holographic advertisements, but Shibuya was different in number and scale. Numerous searchlights and lasers extended into the night sky.

And even more noteworthy-

'Wha- Kazune-chan, what's that?! It looks like a fighter plane or missile pod is flying!!' Reina exclaimed, as a black aircraft passed over her head.

'That's an AI speaker.'

What looked like a war aircraft to Reina turned out to be a speaker unit. It had three speakers, a camera and two vertical tail fins. Below it was a semi-circular flying unit, but however, no engine or propeller could be seen.

'How is it flying...'

'I don't know much about it either, but they use special particles for everything. It's usually used in halls or clubs... it's very Shibuya. I've never seen one flying outside before, though.'

The AI speaker stopped at a Y-junction and shone a spotlight towards the road, where a DJ unit and a small girl emerged. She had short yellow hair, and hawkish eyes reminiscent of a wild animal. Her bare stomach and legs, peeking out from clothes that resembled a football uniform, were toned and well-trained.

'Hey hey hey!! Who wants to battle Lucia!? I'll fight you as many times as I can!!'

Mimito looked her straight in the eyes.

'Huuuh? I thought you Shibuya kids had to get permission to DJ!'

Mimito had previously applied for a match against Teion International High School and was turned away at the door by Mitsuki. As Mimito was in the middle of being taken aback at this energetic newcomer, a nearby female student approached her.

‘In Shibuya, street fights are allowed. Well, it’s kind of like training, but only for Teion students.’

‘What... right...’ Mimito felt both disappointed and relieved.

‘Ah, but not that girl. She’s like a battle junkie. If you wanna battle, just go for it.’

Mimito’s face was drawn as she was spurred on.

‘What are you going to do, Mimito?’

‘Uu...’

In the middle of their confusion, a male student walked into the spotlight. The surrounding gallery cheered.

‘Taiga Lucia... today is the day when I will beat you!!’

‘Ahahaha is that riiight!? This is gonna be so fun!! But Lucia is STRONG!!’

And just like that, they began to have a STACK battle right there on the street. If you looked closely, you could see more AI speakers floating at the end of the road, where another STACK battle was taking place.

Futaba hid behind Kazune, frightened.

‘H-hey... this is kind of scary...’

‘It is... as much as I’d love to watch this battle, right now we need to find Reina’s sister first.’

When they asked a nearby student where the Teion Denonbu’s clubroom was, they were told it was in a building facing the huge crossing in front of the station. As they arrived there, they saw that the building had a huge hologram monitor on the wall. On that monitor, a music video by the Teion Denonbu was being projected. Houou Karin and Seto Mitsuki seemed to feature quite heavily in it.

‘Onee-chan...’

Unfortunately, the clubroom was off limits to non-members. They requested to visit it, but were denied. Nothing more could be done. The Akiba and Harajuku Denonbu members had no choice but to return home meekly.

They parted with Mimito, Hina and Shian at Shibuya station, and Reina, Futaba and Kazune boarded the Yamanote line back to Akiba. Despite coinciding with the usual rush hour home for most company workers, the train was strangely empty.

Nowadays, people lived closer to their jobs, and those who took the train to work were in the minority. Even if they did, it was rare for people to take the train for long distances. Across from Reina, Kazune and Futaba were sitting side by side, but there were only a few other passengers.

The new active suspension and noise canceller worked effectively and the train ride was very comfortable. Reina mumbled as she listened to the slight vibrations and the sound the tracks and wheels made.

‘I’ll go back there another time.’

‘Reina-san...’

Reina smiled at Futaba, who looked concerned for her.

‘I’ll ask as many times as I can to try and meet her again. I think that’s all I can do.’

‘No.’ Kazune, who had been staring at her phone earlier, said abruptly. ‘There could be other ways.’

‘What do you mean?’

Kazune showed Reina her phone screen to answer her question.

[Neucom Entertainment STACKBATTLE LEGEND]

‘What’s that?’

‘An event, usually known as New Legend, is due to take place next month. It’s like a Neucom product launch, but there will be a STACK battle competition. Teion International High School has been named as one of the participating schools.’

‘Then...’

‘I’ve looked into past events, and as you’d expect, Teion has often been matched with the top-ranked schools. On the other hand, there have been times when matches have been set up with newly established schools or groups lower in the rankings.’

Futaba shuddered as if she’d imagined herself playing against Teion.

‘Isn’t that just bullying...’

‘Maybe it’s like an exhibition. In baseball, it’s like a professional player coaching a youth baseball team. Shibuya’s strength is why people admire them, but by involving unknown schools, it makes inexperienced students think they might be able to do it too. It could also be an attempt to inspire more people to start DJing?’

Reina’s eyes twinkled.

‘If we participate in that event, maybe... Onee-chan...’

‘Yes. I’m sure you’ll get a chance to meet her face to face.’

‘Kazune-chan! I want to participate in that event! How can I get in?!’

‘I’ll make a proposal and submit it, and send them a demo video of our DJing.’

Reina made a troubled face.

‘A proposal...?’

‘...I-I’ll make one. As for our demo video, I’m sure today’s event will be just fine.’

‘THANKS KAZUNE-CHAAAN!!!’ Reina warmly hugged Kazune.

‘H-hey... Reina-’ Despite her annoyed smile, Kazune was inwardly absolutely delighted.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH, SHE’S SUCH A CUTIE!!! If she hugs me tightly like this... I’ll write as many proposals as she wants!!!!

Kazune secretly screamed with joy inside her head. Reina calmed down a little and let go of Kazune.

‘Sorry, I’m just so happy...’

‘Don’t be silly, I don’t mind at all.’

‘Thank you so much, Kazune-chan. You too, Futaba-chan... for cheering me up today.’

‘Fuee!? R-r-r-really! B-but... I didn’t really do anything...’

‘Don’t say that, you really did! If there’s anything I can do to help you both, just let me know! I just want to thank you.’

‘There isn’t really...Ah!’ Kazune suddenly remembered something. ‘Reina, are you... interested in cosplay?’

‘Eh?’

The following day, a cosplay photo session was apparently held in the Sotokanda Denonbu clubroom.

♪ ♪ ♪

The Azabu area was large. It extended west to the Shirokane territory, east to Mita, south to Takanawa and extended as far as Azabu Juban in the north.

‘The Shirokane family rules over this vast area! The next head of the family, Aki-sama, is basically the queen!’

A maid in a white apron dress brought tea on a silver wagon. She looked like a small middle school student, and oddly for a maid, she wore cat ears for some reason.

‘Haha, I am only a student. I’m not quite a queen yet...’ Shirokane Aki lightly brushed away her shining golden hair and smiled a lustrous smile.

The Shirokane family residence stood on a hill on Mita. The building looked like a guest house on a plot of land so vast that it was hard to believe it was a private home. Aki’s room faced the courtyard and looked like a luxury hotel suite.

The countless other rooms were also excessively luxurious and decorated. If you introduced this place to someone who didn’t know what was going on and told them that it’s a nobleman’s palace, they’d probably be bound to believe you.

A large number of maids were employed to maintain such a mansion. The maid who brought the tea was one of them, but her situation was different from the other maids. Kurogane Tama was only 15 years old, but she lived and worked in the Shirokane household. She poured tea into tea cups costing well over a million yen each and placed them on a marble table.

‘You always say that, but you have the beauty of an actress and an outstanding style that surpasses that of a model! You’re truly a beautiful goddess, and super smart, too! It’s your sense of music and management that has propelled the Minato Shirokane Girls’ High School’s Denonbu to No.2 in the Tokyo area!! It’s a lie that God doesn’t give anyone both beauty and talent! Everyone else is in trouble!’

‘Really... stop that, Tama. That sort of thing isn’t something to be flaunted too much.’
Despite saying this, Aki reached for her tea with a smile on her face.

‘But, I’m just telling the truth!’ She gave her mistress a big smile. Behind it, Tama secretly smirked.

Hehehe, she’s in a good mood! If this is the right time, I’m sure she’ll nod her head vigorously when I ask for a pay rise! Tama thought smugly.

‘By the way, Aki-sama? I’ve got a lot on my plate right now... and a little debt to pay-’

But just as she was about to try and get a pay rise out of Aki, they heard a knock on the door.

‘Gh.....! Right as I’m getting down to business, who do you think you are!?’

A handsome figure with grey hair dashed in through the large door.

‘Hey, Tama. Don’t mind me interrupting.’

‘Ugh, seriously, you’re getting in my way! What are you going to do about my negotiations for a pay rise?!’

With a momentary scowl towards Tama, the handsome newcomer dressed in boyish fashion, Haijima Ginka, addressed Aki.

‘If you’re in the middle of talking about contract renewal, I’ll come back later?’

‘That’s not what we’re talking about. Tama, stop being delusional and pour Ginka some tea.’

‘Gh... grrrrrrr...’ Tama prepared the tea, glaring at Ginka with resentful eyes.

‘Ginka and I need to talk alone. When the tea is ready, leave us.’

‘Ghhhh... u-understood.’ Tama tried to leave the room, carrying a grudge.

‘Oh, I remember now. Tama?’

Tama whirled around, her eyes sparkling.

‘Is it a pay rise!? Or could it be a special bonus?!’

‘I hear you’ve been harassing our contractors again.’

‘Eh!? W-what do you mean by that.....?’

‘We’ve had complaints from department store sales people.’

‘N-no, that asshole, he thought I was a little kid despite me being a maid, and he was fucking with me, so I thought I’d teach him a bit of a lesson! It’s called educational guidance, you know!’

‘In that case, why don’t you talk to the head maid about such problems. Don’t use the name of the Shirokane family to get people banned from places, or put pressure on department stores to prevent them from operating, or make empty threats.’

Tama’s eyes were swimming.

‘N.... no... hahahaha...’

‘I also hear that you’ve been spending a lot of money in the shopping district in front of the station.’

‘Gh..!’

‘It’s up to you to decide what you do with your salary. But to buy everything on the menu in a restaurant, or tell them to give you all the clothes in a shop window, or buying the most expensive items in a shop- that’s too much.’

‘Ha... haha... I’ve just been stressed out recently... it’s a liberating feeling to have money in your hands...’

‘And don’t mention the Shirokane family name every single time. It’s quite frankly annoying.’

‘N-no, I just want to be taken seriously. Besides, if I say I’m with the Shirokane family they give me premium service!’

Aki uttered another ‘Ah,’ as she remembered something else.

‘The shopping district has been urging me to pay all your bills, so I will deduct it from your usual salary.’

‘UUUAAAAAAAAARRRGGGHHHHH!!! BUT- PLEASE FORGIVE ME FOR THAAAAATTTT!!!!’ Tama got down on her knees, sounding like a cat desperately begging.

Aki ignored her pleading and kicked her out of the room.

‘Seriously, she’s always so lively and never boring.’ Ginka smiled and sat down on the sofa.

‘Tama is so annoying sometimes...’

‘But, you’ve grown attached to her, haven’t you?’

Aki sniffed in a bored manner.

‘It’s just an employment relationship. If I no longer need her, I’ll simply terminate the contract. If someone offered her a job with better hours and salary, of course she’d move on.’

‘Maybe.’

‘...Let’s get down to business. New Legend is coming up soon, and this time we’re likely to be matched up against Teion International High School. What do you think? Can Azabu beat Shibuya at this moment in time?’

Ginka took a breath before she replied.

‘About that- it’ll take more work.’

‘And what do you mean by that?’ Aki tilted her head slightly.

‘I heard about it when I dropped by my father’s studio earlier. Apparently, the organisers are planning to pit our school against Sotokanda Literary High School in Akiba, with the winner taking on Shibuya.’

‘...Akiba?’ Aki raised her eyebrows curiously. ‘I’ve never even heard of Akiba having a Denonbu. Why such an obscure school?’

‘I’ve heard that whoever they are, Houou Karin vouched for them.’

‘Houou... Karin did?’

Aki looked more and more confused and surprised.

‘That’s strange... what kind of Denonbu even is in Akiba?’

‘Maybe an unexpected underdog, or an unknown powerhouse.’

Aki chuckled.

‘There’s no room for such a Denonbu to exist. The Iris data makes that clear, they aren’t even in the top 10 of the rankings, and they’re at such a level that they can simply be ignored.’

‘Maybe that’s the case.’

‘What is it? Is there something on your mind?’

‘...Nah.’

Ginka also considered the Akiba Denonbu to be just a newly formed club. What was curious, however, was why her father, Haijima Fuuga, had bothered to pass this information on to her.

What was it that drew Houou Karin to that Denonbu?

Aki spoke to the deep in thought Ginka with a confident smile.

‘Let’s say they are a school with some ability. Even if they are, there is a wall that cannot be crossed between Minato Shirokane and Akiba.’

‘And that is?’

‘Capitalism!’ Aki puffed out her chest. ‘We have plenty of funds, state-of-the-art equipment, the best facilities and coaching by top DJs from all over the world! We are able to extend our talent with money!’

‘Indeed. And thanks to that, the Azabu Denonbu as a whole has recently improved our ability. Not only our A team, but also the B and C teams have improved. It’s clear that the gap between us and Shibuya is closing.’

‘It’s not enough that the gap has shrunk! We must completely overtake them in the next match! To do so, we should think about how to attack Teion rather than such a mysterious high school! Think about it!’

‘...Haha, we’ll take care of it.’ Ginka looked at the clock on the wall and got up from the sofa. ‘Well, looks like it’s almost the end of my stay. I’ll be leaving now.’

For a little moment, Aki looked sad, but then raised her eyebrows a little angrily.

‘You’ve only just arrived, and we haven’t finished our conversation yet.’

‘Winning against Shibuya is not going to happen overnight. Let me think about it for a while, ok?’

‘How about a lunch meeting? It’s been a while since you’ve had a taste of our chef’s-’

‘Sorry, I’ve already made a reservation for lunch. If I don’t leave the gates of the Shirokane mansion in three minutes, I won’t make it in time. I have to go now.’

Just before opening the door to leave, Ginka turned around.

‘After all, your house is huge.’ She winked at Aki.

‘Really, that girl...’

Aki gently placed her hand over her heart, noticing that it was beating a little faster.

♪ ♪ ♪

After Ginka left, black cat ears could be seen poking out from the shadow of a large potted plant in the corridor.

‘Hehe... I heard all of that.’

Ever since Aki kicked her out of the room, Tama had been stuck to the door, eavesdropping on their conversation.

‘Ginka is a good DJ for sure. Well, not as good as me... if she’s wary, she has good reason to be. Then-’

Tama’s eyes sparkled.

‘It seems Aki-sama is completely off her guard. If I’m the first to find out information about Akiba and report it to her, then maybe...’

A higher salary filled future unfolded itself inside Tama’s imagination.

‘WEHEEYYYYY! A pay rise!!! She’ll surely give me an extra bonus!! Now that’s what I call a reward!’

Tama removed her cat ears, took off her maid apron and ran down the corridor, now wearing a baseball cap also with cat ears on it, which she had pulled out from god knows where.



A huge black car pulled up on Akiba's Central Avenue. The sound of an internal combustion engine exhaust roared from the intimidating vehicle.

Petrol-engined cars were rare nowadays. Only the most wealthy in society still drove them, as they required high taxes in addition to lengthy administrative procedures to maintain. Passersby gazed at the car as if it were a spectacle. What kind of people were inside? Were they entertainers, elite businessmen or government officials?

However, a small girl opened the heavy door and came out. The girl, wearing a baseball cap with cat ears and black street fashion, looked around at the crowds along the road and giggled.

'Kihihihhi, all these poor people look at me with envy that Tama can drive around in a super luxurious car like this! I live in a different world from you commoners.'

She took out the car's remote control keys from a small pink bag she had slung over her shoulder and pressed a button. The car then started moving on its own. The function of the button let the car automatically drive around the perimeter while the owner ran errands.

'Well then, I'll make my way to Sotokanda Literary High School! With Tama's investigative skills, I'm going to strip the Akiba Denonbu of all their secrets!'

As Tama was heading towards the Sotokanda Literary High School building, a voice called out to her from behind.

'The Denonbu clubroom is in a separate part of the school building.'

'Huh? Really?'

When Tama turned around, a beautiful girl with long bluish black hair was standing there.

'It's just around the corner, I'll show you.'

'Oh, would you? I'd be grateful.'

Tama followed the girl and opened the door facing the intersection just a short walk away.

'It's right here. Come on in.'

‘Wow, I scare myself with how good I am at infiltrating so quickly. Thanks so much for the tour-’

The girl closed the door behind her and locked it.

‘W-why are you locking the door?!’

‘Huh- Kazune-chan! Who’s this girl!?’

A cheerful-looking girl with brown hair and a less confident girl with light brown hair, almost blonde, emerged from the back of the clubroom. Tama had now turned pale.

‘Eek! This isn’t good! I need to escape-’

However, she was firmly held from behind by both shoulders.

‘Hi there, cute little secret agent ♥. Welcome to Sotokanda Bungei High School’s Denonbu.’

Shinonome Kazune smiled at the cute girl she had just captured.

♪ ♪ ♪

Tama was easily caught and interrogated by Kazune.

‘First of all, I’ll start by asking who you are and what you want to find out about the Sotokanda Denonbu... actually, maybe you should ask us.’

‘Hmph! Why would I want to talk to you poor bastards? I may not look it, but I’m a super maid, the pride of the Shirokane family!’

‘Oh, the Shirokane family? That’s amazing.’

Tama quickly became smug at Kazune’s words of praise.

‘Yeah, yeah. You should appreciate me more! Working for the Shirokane family is not an easy thing to do! Being Aki-sama’s exclusive maid, I’m already at the top of the maid world.’

Kazune searched the beautiful girl database in her brain at high speed.

‘Hey... does this Aki-sama happen to be the daughter of the Shirokane family, and also the head of the Azabu Denonbu?’

'Damn, for a commoner like you, you do seem to know a few things. Aki-sama is a good person! She pays me.'

'I'm sure working for the Shirokane family pays well. I envy you very much.'

'Hehehe, yeah yeah yeah. Tama lives in Azabu and it's way different from Akiba, the city for ordinary people. Our earnings are totally different! I should be working in the mansion right now, but after all, money is still coming in whilst I'm here. I make stonks by the second!'

Futaba's smile was troubled, and she mumbled;

'Then, aren't you slacking off right now...?'

Listening to Tama's bragging, Kazune again searched the database of beautiful girls in her brain. She found the girl in front of her in Minato Shirokane Girls' High School.

Kurogane Tama. A high school first year. Kazune didn't know if she was really a maid or not, but she certainly was a member of the Denonbu over in Azabu... but wait... wasn't she Minato Shirokane's ace!?

She had just been teasing Tama earlier, but suddenly Kazune switched modes.

'I see. It's an honour to meet such an incredible person. We don't get to meet people affiliated with the Shirokane family very often.'

Tama sniffed proudly.

'I pity the common people who are blind to the real world. You lot are bound to be crushed by me and my colleagues sooner or later, but are just too proud to realise it yet.'

Kazune looked slightly doubtful. What did Tama even mean by that? Azabu say they're going to crush Akiba... but from their point of view, wouldn't they see themselves as too above Akiba to even interact with them?

Just then, Kazune's phone buzzed.

'Huh....' When she saw the message she'd just been sent, Kazune's eyes widened.

'Kazune-chan, what is it?' Reina asked.

'I just got an email from the management of... New Legend.' Kazune replied, still staring at her phone screen.

'What!? Holy... what does it say!?'

'They're holding contestant auditions. Our opponent is...'

Kazune shifted her gaze to Tama.

'Minato Shirokane Girls' High School.'

♪♪♪

It wasn't advisable for them to have captured one of their next opponents. They couldn't afford to be accused of trying to win by cowardly means, and therefore Kazune released Tama.

'I really didn't think a school the size of Minato Shirokane would do something like this.'

From one of the back seats of the taxi, Kazune stared at the ultra-luxury car in front of them. Through the rear window, she could see the cat ears on Tama's hat bobbing side to side with the motion of the car she was in. Futaba, who was sitting next to her, looked at her curiously.

'But why? And why did that girl try to spy on us...'

'I was confident in the proposal I submitted, but I didn't expect us to qualify for being matched up against Azabu. Since we're newcomers, I can understand it if we were matched up against another high school at a similar level, but they've put us against the No.2 ranked school, Minato Shirokane Girls' High School? I don't understand what they're trying to do.'

'Yeah... me neither.'

'If we follow Kurogane-san, we might learn something. It could be that the car is going to Minato Shirokane, the Shirokane mansion, or... maybe someplace completely different.'

Futaba gulped.

'B-but, that's...'

'That means we may be caught up in someone else's business.'

‘N-no, that scares me!’ Futaba was shaken up with tears in her eyes. ‘I-I’m sorry, but we should turn back after all. Reina-san, please change our destination!’

Reina was sitting in the front passenger seat, staring at the rear view of Tama’s car with a stern expression.

‘Driver-san, don’t lose the car in front of you! Make sure you follow her past the traffic lights!’

‘W-why are you so determined!?’ When Futaba complained in a voice that sounded as if she was about to cry, Reina replied with a bright smile.

‘Because it feels like we’re in a detective or spy drama, right? This is so cool!’

‘Fuee...’

‘Reina... we literally don’t have a driver.’

They were in a fully automated, unmanned taxi. These ones had a steering wheel and pedals for emergency use, but they were usually retracted so that they couldn’t be operated.

‘Yeah, but it’s driving properly! The car itself is the driver!’

‘Well... whatever...’

When Kazune connected her phone to the taxi’s AV system, it played a video of Kurogane Tama, which she had searched for on Iris. A hologram immediately appeared in the car. It was as if she was there with them. The sound was quite good for a taxi audio system, with a pleasant heavy bass.

‘This is the official spring STACK battle competition.’

Reina forgot about pretending to be in a detective drama, and listened to the video of Tama’s DJing.

‘That’s Tama-chan’s DJ style, huh...’

‘In terms of genre, she seems to play a lot of house.’

Looking around at the hologram video spread out around her, Futaba nodded.

‘It’s very stylish, and what you’d expect from an Azabu DJ. It kinda has an adult atmosphere... the melodies are really beautiful too.’

‘Yes. She may look like a middle schooler, but... she really is Azabu’s ace. Looks can be deceiving, I suppose.’

Both Kazune and Futaba smiled, enjoying the pleasant music. However, Reina was staring out of the window with a mysterious look on her face.

‘Reina? What’s up?’

‘Well... I think she’s really good. But...’ Reina’s gaze was now on Tama in the DJ booth. ‘Tama-chan doesn’t really look like she’s having much fun...’

‘Eh? Oh...’

Kazune was about to ask about Reina’s observation, when the taxi suddenly stopped. They saw that the car in which Tama was riding had pulled over to the left. Tama got out, and the car drove off on its own. The Akiba girls got out of the taxi in a hurry, and followed after Tama. Reina looked around curiously.

‘Are we in Azabu?’

‘We’re in Roppongi right now...’ Kazune craned her neck, also taking in her surroundings.

After a while of following Tama, she disappeared into a bar.

‘...BABEL? I think that’s the name of this bar...’

Futaba was pushing back on this expedition with all her might. She looked as if she was about to run away.

‘W-what are we going to do now... I think... I might go home...’

‘Let’s go in!’

‘R-Reina-saaaaann!’

Regardless of Futaba’s resistance and the fact that she now looked as if she was about to start crying, Reina opened the door. Inside was a slightly old-fashioned, authentic bar, the walls lined with bottles of whisky, with an aged, one-piece shiny wooden counter.

Perhaps because it was still early evening, there weren't many people there. At the back of the bar was a DJ booth.

'Tama-chan...'

There, Tama was DJing. The music she was playing was-

'Eurobeat!?' Kazune exclaimed in a small voice.

'S-she's DJing completely differently compared to the video we just saw...' Futaba also mumbled in surprise.

Tama was playing songs that were made long before she was born, creating strong drops at will. Reina unexpectedly stormed through the bar and went straight up to the DJ booth.

'Tama-chan, you're amazing!!'

'Wah-!? W-what are you doing here!?'

'We followed you!!'

'GYAAHH! You criminals!! You poor people make Akiba unsafe!!'

The three of them tried to calm Tama down, who was now in a panic.

'...For real, isn't stalking a crime?! This is why the poor are always in trouble!'

After they finally managed to calm Tama down, the four of them sat around a table in the bar. Reina glanced around the bar, apologising for the earlier uproar.

'I'm really sorry... hey, this bar doesn't really look too glamorous at all-'

'Don't be rude!' Tama was indignant. Reina immediately apologised again.

'Well it's a bit old fashioned, I'll admit that. But I'll rebuild it, and so Tama will rise to the top! I'll open the new BABEL at the top of the hills!'

Kazune nodded. 'So this is why you work for the Shirokane family. But Kurogane-san, aren't you really supposed to be part of the Roppongi area?'

'Well yeah, but that doesn't matter. I'm indebted to Aki-sama.' Tama looked around the BABEL bar. 'This place was supposed to go under a long time ago. But thanks to

the investment made by Aki-sama, the bar survived... So, I'm working for her to repay that favour.'

Futaba was unexpectedly moved to tears.

'That's honestly kind of touching...'

'Now, I get to live in the Shirokane mansion! I'm enjoying the luxurious celebrity life I've always dreamt of! The pay is amazing compared to my previous part-time job at a convenience store. That stingy bastard manager... he should've paid me so much more!!'

'Haha...' Futaba was now less impressed.

'But, Tama-chan, are you enjoying DJing for Azabu?'

'Huuuh? What do you mean by that?'

'Because you seemed to be having more fun when you were DJing here compared to the video I saw of you DJing for Minato Shirokane. I thought maybe the kind of music you like, Tama-chan, is not the kind of style you do at Azabu, but what you just DJed here.'

Tama frowned after a brief moment. 'Huuuh? What are you talking about?'

'What I mean is... at least for me, I want people to hear the songs I like and to connect them in a way that people think is good...'

Tama looked stunned.

'But, DJs play songs for the audience. It doesn't matter what you like or think is good or whatever.'

Her response shocked Reina.

'Does it really matter?'

'Well yes, it's about what you get from it. It brings in the cash. As long as the money is good, whatever genre I play doesn't matter.'

'So... What about your Azabu style?'

'I play whatever songs Aki-sama tells me to. I think that's what Azabu people like.'

‘...I see.’

It didn’t matter to Tama if she liked what she was DJing or not. Reina was shocked at how she answered her questions so bluntly.

‘So, Tama-chan-’

But when Reina was about to say something, the door opened. Tama started to utter a business greeting out of habit, but-

‘Welcome to- EEEEEKKK!?’

An army of maids had just entered.

There must’ve been about ten of them in total, coming into the shop in a big group. They were all very beautiful and in their 20s. A maid with a slender face and narrowed eyes, whose presence stood out among the maid army, glared coldly at Tama.

‘Tama.’

‘Y-yes ma’am! Head maid-sama!!’ Tama stood up at lightning speed and saluted.

‘Tama, you took the young Mistress’s car again without permission. Moreover-’

After glancing at Reina, Kazune and Futaba, the head maid’s expression turned stern once again.

‘It seems you have caused trouble for people in the Akiba area.’

‘N-no, they just happened to be visiting the bar-’

‘We’ve already traced the car’s route on the GPS.’

‘GYAAHHH!!! W-what should I do!?’

‘You must confess what you did to the young Mistress.’

As the Akiba girls looked on in amazement, the head maid bowed beautifully.

‘You are all welcome to come. The next head of the Shirokane family, Shirokane Aki-sama, is waiting for you.’

‘Shirokane... Aki-san is waiting for us?’

Reina repeated the name in disbelief, Futaba was blue in the face and quivered, and Kazune clenched her fists.

♪ ♪ ♪

The Minato Shirokane Girls' High School building was a classical brick building, reminiscent of old European boarding schools. The Denonbu clubroom was located on campus, and it too was so luxurious that it could pass for the Paris Opera House. The inside was even more impressive. The opulent lobby, richly decorated with wood and marble, was adorned with many statues of beautiful goddess-like women. In the lobby of such a place, the students, who were all daughters of very wealthy families, were conversing elegantly with each other.

The maids were very noticeable as they led them through the school. Tama looked like she was on the way to an execution site, and the Akiba Denonbu members walking behind her attracted attention whether they wanted it or not.

'...Goodness, who are these girls?'

'If they're with Shirokane-sama's maids... then they must be VIP guests, don't you think?'

'But with all due respect, they do not look that way.'

When the students noticed the Akiba girls, they began to whisper amongst themselves. The head maid looked back at them as they were following behind.

'My sincere apologies. Today happens to be the day of a regular party on campus.'

'A party... does that mean we get to see the Denonbu members performing?'

'Yes, Aki-sama is DJing right as we speak.'

Once inside through the heavy doors, the place was transformed into a state-of-the-art dance floor. Colourful spotlights spun round and round. Mirror balls reflected the light. Lasers cut through the smoke that billowed out.

'T-this is incredible... it's very different from our clubroom...' Futaba murmured, her eyes round.

'Uwah, It's Shirokane Aki! In the flesh!!' Kazune exclaimed, leaning forward in excitement.

A blonde girl was DJing, and she had a stunning appearance like that of a foreign model. Her face was as chiselled as a Greek sculpture. It seemed as if one of the statues in the lobby had come to life and started DJing.

Reina stared blankly at the figure and surrendered herself to the music playing from the giant speakers. Legitimate house. Biased towards songs with vocals. Very stylish and clean. No forced connections. Gentle and very graceful. The tempo was slow, and her mix had a chilled-out feel.

Reina slowly looked around the floor. Not a single student moved or jumped energetically, everyone just let the sound wash over them. Most of them were swaying so gently their skirts barely moved.

‘So this is Azabu’s kind of music...’

It was very peaceful and pleasant club music, and just by listening to it you feel like a stylish young high class lady.

Reina noticed that a boy came to the DJ booth. But this was a girls’ school... surely boys were off limits here? The head maid, sensing Reina's confusion, quietly explained.

‘That is Haijima Ginka-sama, a school friend of Aki-sama’s. She likes to dress in masculine clothing.’

...Haijima?

The producer her father had introduced her to also had the surname Haijima. Come to think of it, Haijima Fuuga’s studio was also in Azabu... could it be a common surname in Azabu?

As Reina was deep in thought, Ginka began DJing.

‘Oh wow. She’s good...’ Reina’s thoughts instantly came out of her mouth.

The song selection and style was basically the same as that of Aki, but Ginka’s skill shone through in many places. Each little EQ adjustment, the way she moved the faders, the way she applied effects, the timing of mixing, etc. were just a few things, but they added up and made a big difference to the overall quality.

Despite her masculine appearance, she was polite and sensitive. And she also had a frighteningly accurate sense of rhythm and tempo- it was like she had a metronome inside her body.

‘I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Aki-sama is waiting for you, so please follow me.’

The head maid led the Akiba girls into the VIP lounge. Sitting on a white leather sofa, Shirogane Aki smiled leisurely.

‘Welcome, members of the Sotokanda Bungei High School Denonbu.’ Aki glared at Tama without waiting for a reply from the three visitors. ‘Tama. What the hell were you thinking? I can’t believe you’re causing trouble for people in other areas.’

‘I’m s-sorry!! I thought I’d inspect the enemy, just in case!’

Aki put her fingers to her temple as if she had a headache and let out a loud sigh.

‘Ugh... you don’t need to think about them. All you need to do is show off Azabu’s supreme music on the dance floor.’

‘Yes ma’am...’

‘And... you took my car without my permission, didn’t you?’

‘Gyah-! W-well, it’s... a necessary part of scouting out the enemy, isn’t it...’

‘Well, the costs will be deducted from your salary, so keep that in mind.’

With tears in her eyes, Tama knelt down in front of Aki.

‘WAAAHHHH!!! PLEASE FORGIVE MEEEE!! AKI-SAMAAAAA!’

‘...Aki. Surely you can forgive her for just that.’

A handsome girl dressed in masculine clothes walked into the VIP lounge. It was Haijima Ginka, who had just finished DJing.

‘I read in a book that you have to discipline someone when they’ve done something wrong whilst it’s still fresh in their mind.’

Tama looked up with a start.

‘Isn’t that like gambling discipline or something?!’

Reina fearfully raised her hand.

‘Uh, u-umm, Tama-chan wasn’t troubling us... I was really happy she came to Akiba to visit us...’

‘Eh...?’ Ginka stared at Reina. ‘By any chance, might you be Hidaka Reina-chan?’

‘Wha!? H-how do you know my name....’

Ginka approached Reina and gently lifted her chin with her fingertips. At the sight of this rather intimate interaction, Kazune could feel her nose start to bleed.

.....What is happening?! This is such a picturesque jaw lift-

‘My dad told me about you. He said you were a very cute girl with a lot of talent... and you certainly are cute~’ Ginka whispered in a seductive voice, and winked at Reina, making her heart flutter.

‘T-THIS IS TOO HOT!?’

‘K-kazune-chan... calm down...’ Futaba tried to stop Kazune’s gay outburst from getting any worse.

Reina was stunned. She could hardly comprehend what was going on.

‘Uhh, about your dad... is it possible that his first name might be Fuuga?’

‘Yeah. My dad-’

‘GINKA!’ Aki’s sharp voice rang out.

Ginka gazed at Aki with a twinkle in her eye.

‘Good grief.’ She shrugged her shoulders and stepped away from Reina. ‘It’s not like you to shout in front of guests. What are you angry about?’

Ginka moved next to Aki, who looked up at her, flustered.

‘Are you accusing me of being rude to our guests?! Could you please not flirt with them without a second thought?’

‘I wasn’t flirting... I’m simply a service-minded person. I’m just playing the role I’m expected to play in this academy.’

‘Ugh... if you say so...’

‘Hehe, but of course you want me more than anyone else, Aki.’

‘Would you please shut up? I don’t want to talk to you anymore right now.’ Aki said evasively, breaking off their conversation.

She has always been like this. She has always confused me and hurt me. And yet she is so kind. She seems so easygoing and unbothered from my point of view. Really infuriatingly so, Aki thought.

Kazune stepped forward.

‘Um... My name is Shinonome Kazune and I am the student council president of Sotokanda Literary High School. Thank you very much for inviting me here today.’

At Kazune’s self introduction, Aki raised her head as if she had just woken up.

‘But, I don’t understand why you wanted to see us. If you mean making Tama’s visit up to us like Hidaka mentioned earlier, there’s no need to.’

‘Is that right... Well, I invited you here quite simply because I’m interested in you.’

‘If it’s alright for me to say so... I don’t understand why such a newly established Denonbu like ourselves would be of interest to the No.2 school, Minato Shiroka-’

‘Yes. Why would such an unknown, low ranked school from Akiba be matched up against us in a STACK battle for a place in New Legend? It’s very intriguing, don’t you think?’

Aki stared at Kazune.

‘That’s... also what we would like to know.’

From behind Kazune, Reina and Futaba also nodded.

...They don’t look like they’re lying, at least to me, thought Aki. Time to observe these three Akiba girls again.

This student council president girl... she seems very talented. Surely she’s too good to be in Akiba? If she decided to come for an interview for our Denonbu she’d definitely be accepted.

The timid girl hiding behind the student council president doesn’t look very capable... she seems frail and definitely has some low self esteem going on there. Even if she is competent, it seems like it would be hard to get her on stage. She’s good looking. Maybe she could be a receptionist? She doesn’t seem very smart, however. That’s a no from me.

And then, that girl Ginka called Hidaka Reina. I'll ask her later how she knew her name...

Aki examined Reina again, from top to bottom.

This girl... she's hard to read. She seems honest, naive and a natural airhead, but there's definitely more to her than that..... What's she hiding?

Is she just a piece of trash or... could she have some huge value?

'...You said your name was Hidaka Reina?'

'Y-yes. Uhh, I swear we aren't trying to cheat or have things rigged. I'm also surprised about being matched against Azabu.'

'I see. Well, I suppose it could've been the management's decision on a whim. By the way, what is Akiba's music like?'

'I'm not sure... how to describe it...'

Reina looked at Kazune and Futaba with a troubled expression.

'Kazune-chan and Futaba-chan... play different genres of music compared to what I play...'

'Huh?' Aki's gaze became steely. 'I don't quite understand what you mean. The genres of music each area gravitates towards are an expression of the area and its values. How are you all performing together in your Denonbu if you all play random things?'

Reina was taken aback when Aki made that point.

'Eh? W-what do you mean?'

'Isn't it obvious?'

Aki stood up and unfolded a feathered fan.

'We here in Azabu believe in a refined and elegant sound. Beautiful, delicate and bold... club music with tradition and history. A royal road indeed!' She declared this as if it were a given.

‘The music of Azabu is simply the best, and reigns supreme! Music from other areas is cheap, flimsy and just worthless noise compared to that of Azabu. Shibuya’s ‘music’ is all exactly the same!’

Aki pointed to the disco ball with her handheld fan.

‘All the disco balls in the Tokyo area, all of the ones in Azabu- of course, they should all spin just for me!!’

Reina was overwhelmed by Aki’s momentum. However, she did not believe what Aki was telling her.

‘...But, everyone plays the music they personally like, each to their own. I don’t think you can just decide what kind of music is better-’

‘STACK battles and the rankings decide that.’

‘Well... yes, but-’

Indeed, STACK battles were about winning and losing. However, Reina believed that the outcome of a win or a loss was not something that determined absolute superiority or hierarchy.

‘When we battled against Harajuku, I feel like we got much more than just a win/lose result out of it. I thought their DJing was great. I was more happy to meet all kinds of wonderful sounds than to win or lose-’

Aki interrupted Reina’s counterargument in a bored tone.

‘On the contrary, I would like to ask you this. What are your own values?’

‘Eh?’

‘I’m asking you, what is your absolute favourite... your most cherished kind of music that you love most in the world and would be willing to sacrifice anything for?’

Absolute favourite?

‘I...’ Reina’s eyes were swimming. Aki had asked her a very simple question. So why then did Reina clam up, unable to respond at all?

Aki continued to interrogate her in an irritated manner.

‘Why are you even DJing if you don’t even know what kind of music you value most?’

‘Huh-’

‘What do you expect to get out of DJing?’

‘I... well, my sister-’

Ginka raised her eyebrows slightly.

...Hidaka Reina had a sister?

‘I’m not talking about other people, I’m asking about you. What do you want to gain for yourself?’

Aki gave up trying to get an answer out of Reina and let out a loud sigh.

‘I intend to take Minato Shirokane’s Denonbu right to the top and raise Azabu’s cultural value, all with my own hands. In other words, I’ll increase the value of Azabu’s assets.’

‘Do you mean... your reason for DJing is money?’

Aki blinked with a puzzled look on her face.

‘Of course. What other reason could there be?’

This Reina girl clearly has no idea of such concepts. I’m truly at a loss for words, thought Aki. She began to look down on Reina even more.

‘Reina-san, what do you think connects people?’

‘Eh? Do you mean... uh... friendship? Or love?’

‘I’m talking about money and financial interests- ultimately, economics.’

Again, she gave an answer that Reina didn’t expect.

‘Money...?’

‘For example, today’s party is on the outside, a social event for the students. All the Minato Shirokane students are connected through the economy. The girl DJing right now is the president of a subsidiary organisation. The PA is the daughter of a director of a company that runs a major restaurant chain. The largest shareholder in that company is the Shirokane family.’

As Reina was the daughter of a man running a small plastic model shop, the world Aki had just spoken of seemed like a different one entirely.

‘But... I can’t think of any relationship I have with anyone that’s only about money!! Like, for example- me and my dad!’

‘Your father supports you financially, doesn’t he? Surely he gives you an allowance?’

Reina’s thoughts were getting all tangled up and confused inside her mind.

Aki’s way of thinking was something that Reina had never imagined before. She had to admit however... the logic of it sounded correct. All the relationships Reina had taken for granted; she was now imagining them crumbling beneath her.

‘I’m not just talking about direct monetary transfers. It’s also about, for example, intangible psychological benefits.’

‘But... but!! People can connect with each other without thinking about money at all! Like Kazune-chan and Futaba-chan-’

‘You are members of Denonbu, aren’t you? Each of you must feel that you have a vested interest in the success of your Denonbu. For example, for the student council president there (Aki gestured to Kazune), the name value of the school will increase if its Denonbu is ranked highly. That’s very highly effective advertising. That can translate into advertising costs.’

Kazune couldn’t refute Aki’s point.

‘Yes... that is a major benefit.’

Aki nodded, satisfied with that response.

‘I don’t mean to doubt your friendship. But spiritual connections are just a fragile illusion.’ Aki looked slightly downcast as she said this. ‘However, economic connections are strong and reliable. Contracts are the most secure way of keeping people around. I want... to keep my most dearest and loved ones in the strongest chains... don’t you agree?’

The three Akiba girls were speechless.

Reina’s thoughts were a jumbled mess and she had no idea what to say. Still, she had to say something, so she forced herself to squeeze out a reply.

‘B-but... my sister... I don’t want to use money to connect with her-’

‘Your sister? What is your connection with her, then?’

Reina took a sharp breath.

...There wasn’t one. They had no connection.

Reina believed, without any evidence, that if they met once more, something would come out of it. And the result of that, when she met her sister in Harajuku?

Rejection.

Reina could no longer refute a single word.

♪ ♪ ♪

That night, a sports car was driving along the Metropolitan Expressway.

Ginka sat in the driver’s seat, and Aki in the passenger seat. The car was of course automatically driven by itself.

The car was a private space where the two of them could be alone together. It was a very precious time for Aki, who always had people around. They could watch the night view of Tokyo as it drifted by and talk to each other about anything without fear of anyone overhearing them.

‘We have to beat Shibuya this time. We will win, won’t we?’

Ginka thought over several possible answers. If she chose a positive answer, she could enjoy the drive without starting any arguments. But-

‘I dunno...’ mumbled Ginka, crossing her arms.

‘What do you mean? We’ve been working so hard for the past few months to get our vengeance against them, have we not?!’

‘We are indeed growing day by day. Aki, you have become much better and stronger than you were last year. And with Tama joining, our overall strength as a team has improved, I’ll admit that.’

‘If so, then why?!’

‘I’ll ask you this. Don’t you think the Azabu of today can beat the Shibuya of last time?’

‘...Well...’

Ginka thought that the fact that she did not declare the words, ‘Azabu will win,’ showed that she had the makings of a good manager. She never made decisions based on wishful thinking, and was taught business skills ever since she was a child.

‘Of course, we’re doing everything we can. If we don’t prepare well enough, we’ll be in over our heads. Don’t you feel the same way, Aki?’

‘No. There’s still room to improve, and more things to do.’

‘But we’re making less progress lately. I used to feel that I’d made several steps forward in the past, but recently it feels so hard just to take a single step forward.’

‘That’s what luxury is all about. It is those who can recognise the value in the slightest difference.’

‘But it is up to Iris and the general public to judge.’

Aki looked sour and leaned back in her seat.

‘Honestly... this is so infuriating. Why do people like us, who can recognise what is truly excellent, have to leave the decision making to those who do not listen...’

She reached for her glass in the drink holder and took a sip of the bubbling golden liquid.

‘That’s why Shibuya, with its lack of class and noisy, awful music, is so popular. It’s absolutely deplorable! Don’t you think so too, Ginka?!’

‘I understand how you feel. However, we also have to think about dealing with the real issues.’

Aki sank limply back into her seat. ‘Even if there was a way to do that, I wouldn’t bother anyway.’

‘What are you going to do? Should we go home now?’

‘One more drive round.’

‘Roger that, my princess.’

Ginka instructed the AI to take a circuitous route around the Metropolitan Expressway. Given how long one lap took, there was time for two more. Then, she'd be able to take her princess home just in time.

'My father and the academy are expecting great things from the Denonbu. This time, we must prove that Azabu's music is the best.'

Ginka hesitated for a while before opening her mouth.

'I suppose it's not like there isn't a way we can do that.'

'Is that really so!? Then-'

'But you will have to make some sacrifices. Are you willing to do that?'

'There's no such thing as risk-free business. And you have to be able to manage that risk, because you are a first-class manager. So, what were you proposing that I do?'

'Ah... for now, the battle with Akiba is the first step.'

'Akiba?' Aki looked out of sync. 'With all due respect to Akiba, I honestly can't deal with them. Why did the management play this card at all?'

Ginka responded with a bitter laugh.

'If you don't care about them, then why did you speak so harshly to the Akiba girls?'

'Well... I guess I was sort of in a bad mood.'

Aki really wanted to expand further and explain why she'd been so harsh towards Akiba, but that would basically be admitting that she was jealous of how Ginka flirted with Reina. Of course, that wasn't the only reason.

'Naturally I was annoyed by that Reina girl's overly easy-going and energetic attitude.'

'You were jealous, weren't you?'

Aki stared at Ginka, her mouth open in shock.

When the two of them were alone together, Aki had such a lovely expression on her face. She didn't seem like the next head of the Shirokane family when she was with Ginka. She acted like a girl her age, Ginka mused.

‘A-anyway, there’s no point comparing ourselves with Akiba. They don’t even know the kind of music they want to play.’

‘We, on the other hand, have to fulfil the requests of our sponsors and make them happy, since they’re so crucial to our success... and match their taste in music.’

‘So, they’re basically asking us to repay them for their investments. I don’t think that’s unreasonable in itself, since we aren’t children anymore.’

Ever since she was a child, Aki had always seen, as much as she hated it, the world-weariness of the business world.

‘By giving back more than they’ve invested in us, we gain trust, which creates further investment, and thus creates a better cycle.’

‘Therefore you will not simply inherit the family, you will increase the trust and value of yourself, and consolidate your position as the next head of the Shirokane family; both in name and in reality... but, it must be really hard to live up to the expectations of those around you and always play the role of the future head of the family.’

Ginka was also from a prominent family within Azabu, because her father was a very well-known DJ and musician. She didn’t carry a responsibility as great as that of Aki.

On the other hand, the Shirokane family was a huge business entity. If they ever collapsed, the amount of people who would be affected was unimaginable. It could destroy the lives of many happy families.

Eventually, such enormous pressure would fall upon Aki’s shoulders. She was already preparing herself for this. Along with being involved in Minato Shirokane’s Denonbu, Aki was also being trained as a gifted member of the business elite.

Ginka was worried about Aki because of this. Because of how amazing she was, Aki was keeping up with her Denonbu activities whilst training to become the next family head. However, she was still pushing herself too hard. She didn’t really have enough spare time to be committed to the Denonbu. Ginka wondered how she wasn’t worried about suddenly collapsing from exhaustion one day.

‘...Come to think of it, aren’t you still living up to your parents’ expectations, Ginka?’

‘What?’

‘That outfit.’

‘Ah...this.’

Aki looked at Ginka's outfit and giggled. Originally, this had been Ginka's parents' hobby. They thought it would be fun to dress their daughter more boyishly, and Ginka didn't particularly dislike it. Besides, she was well liked by the other children around her.

Ginka responded how she was expected to. She got more and more used to behaving more like a boy. It was also fun to see all the girls go crazy for her when she behaved in a gentlemanly manner. She also liked watching them turn red and freak out whenever she playfully flirted with them.

However, when she was in elementary school, she was surprised when a girl confessed to her that she was in love. At first, she thought the girl was possibly a lesbian or bisexual, and was attracted to her as a girl. But Ginka was doubly surprised to find out that that girl confessed to her thinking she was a boy.

In the end, the girl ended up hurt, and Ginka felt a deep regret towards that. So perhaps it was redemption for that that she still wore men's clothes.

If so, that confession may actually have been a witch's curse. Since then, she sealed herself off from girly clothes and behaviour.

Ginka gazed at the witch with the shining golden hair.

‘What's the matter?’

‘Nothing. I think you're becoming even more beautiful every day, Aki.’

‘.....Gh!?’ Aki's face turned bright red and steam rose from her face, like an instant water heater. ‘W-what are you saying, all of a sudden!?’

‘Sorry. I didn't mean to say my thoughts out loud.’

‘.....’

Aki slumped down in embarrassment, her shoulders becoming stiff.

She could make a smart turnaround against any other opponent, but with Ginka, the odds were stacked against her.

Aki suddenly remembered the lecture she'd inflicted upon Reina earlier that day.

This here was a connection other than an economic connection, a connection only between feelings and the heart. She had thought she wasn't childish enough to believe in such an unreliable and fragile connection.

However... she thought what she and Ginka had was very romantic.

'Maybe I was a little jealous after all...' Aki murmured, gazing at the flowing nightscape.

♪ ♪ ♪

Reina was building plastic models whilst helping out at her dad's shop. She planned to display the models she made in the shop, so making them was both a hobby and a practical benefit for her.

The parts were already coloured. The paintwork was of such a high quality that at a glance it could be mistaken for metal. Small details such as maintenance hatches and identification marks had already been completed. The difference from the 40 year old deadstock items in the shop's warehouse was obvious. However, there were many enthusiasts who loved the old models and they were priced very highly.

'Connection through money, huh...'

Reina was still troubled about what Aki had told her the other day. If even the joy of the heart is considered a benefit that can be converted into cash, it is certainly hard to imagine a relationship that is entirely free of conflict of interest.

The only one she could think of was that of her sister, Mitsuki.

Is that why we can't even have a connection... thought Reina.

'Ughhhhhhhhhh...' Reina sighed loudly.

She had tried to distract herself by practising her DJing, but this time she just couldn't concentrate due to being told she couldn't do it once again.

'If I was asked what kind of music I love the most, and what I treasure the most...'

But... if she chose a number 1 genre of music for herself, wouldn't that mean she could no longer play any other kind of music? Would all other kinds of music then become the enemy?

'I don't like... something like that...'

♪♪♪

Reia took over the shop from Reina, as he had finished stocking up, so Reina headed for the local arcade, Fardraut. Kazune's parents owned Fardraut.

'What was said the other day... I don't think I could respond to it clearly either.'

Kazune voiced her thoughts to Reina as she effortlessly aced a rhythm game. But Kazune was also troubled, and wasn't certain of her feelings about it either.

'But, you know, you shouldn't think about it too much, right?'

'I guess...'

'Really. You shouldn't.'

As soon as she beat the high score, Kazune finally took her eyes off the game screen.

'She's the daughter of the Shirokane family, isn't she? We're living in an entirely different world from her. We have different ideas, common sense and values.'

Kazune laughed. Well, that was the funny part about it.

'You're an honest person, Reina, which is why I think you're so bothered about it. But, I don't think it's a good idea for you to worry too much about what she said. We're battling Minato Shirokane soon, anyway. Shouldn't we be concentrating on that?'

'Yeah... I get you. I think you're right, Kazune-chan. All these Azabu people are so rich and it's like they're on a higher plane of existence from us. How can ordinary people like us-'

She stopped. A lone figure appeared in Reina's mind.

'So, should we go practice- huh?! Where are you going, Reina!?'

Reina suddenly ran out of the arcade in a flash.

♪♪♪

'Oh, it's you again...'

When Tama saw Reina enter the bar, she looked blatantly disgusted. It had just opened and there were no other customers. As Tama was in the middle of thinking about how to get rid of her, Reina cut her off first.

‘Tama-chan, I really want to ask you about something.’

‘If you aren’t a customer, you aren’t wanted here. Please leave if you’re just hanging around.’

‘Ah, I guess I’ll buy something then-’

After saying this, Reina remembered that this was a bar in Roppongi. She nervously checked the menu, expecting it to be expensive.

‘Huh? This is hardly any different from Akiba.’

She let out a sigh of relief and ordered an orange juice.

‘We’re very conscious of prices here, as there are commoners even here in Roppongi. I’m just saying, we need to be able to cater to them too... and because of that policy, we get so many stupid poor people in here. That’s why I don’t want anything to do with poor people.’

‘I’m glad~ I knew you were just like us all along, Tama-chan!’

‘Why are you being so rude to me!! Tama is already out of her poor life! I’m a celebrity now, you know!!’

Tama furrowed her hair, getting angrier. Reina tried her best to calm her down.

‘The other day, Aki-san asked me a lot of questions... and I couldn’t answer any of them at all. So, Tama-chan, I really want you to tell me what you think. Please!!’

‘Ah, you mean the old saying that when money runs out, relationships run out? Well, that’s true, isn’t it?’

Reina sat down when Tama put her orange juice on the counter.

‘Do you say that because... you work as a DJ in Azabu?’

‘That’s right. The truth is that I’m really from the Roppongi area, but I’ll go anywhere if I have a place there. As long as the money is good.’

‘Right... so, if another area offered you better pay, you’d go there...?’

Tama took a sip of the iced cola she'd poured herself.

'...I owe Aki-sama for her investment in this bar.'

'Oh, I remember you mentioning that before.'

'This place almost closed down once. But thanks to her, it's still open for business.'

Tama looked around the bar.

'I was sick and tired of these shabby little bars that catered to the poor, and thought it would be refreshing to see them go out of business...'

Tama's eyes seemed very kind, and she had a faint smile on her face. Then she noticed that Reina was staring at her and coughed to bring her guard back up.

'But, this is the thing. It's often said that cats will forget a favour in three days, but if you think about it another way, they remember them for three days... well, that's about as far as I'm concerned.'

She smiled sarcastically and lied, but it seemed to Reina that she didn't mean it.

There may have been no doubt that Tama's loyalty to Aki was for her financial gain. However, it didn't seem like that was all there was to it. The bar should've been in business to earn money, but it would be contradictory to keep it running if it didn't have enough profit.

Tama clearly loved BABEL. No matter how many times she denied it. It kept going even if it was struggling business-wise, because Tama loved it. It sounded contradictory, but since people live with such a mixture of thoughts, it made sense. Reina thought.

...So, did Tama feel the same way about DJing?

Tama could no longer stand the silence, so she went to the DJ booth and played a random song, replacing the background music. It was a Eurobeat song.

'...Hey, Tama-chan. You said before that DJs play for the audience, so they don't care about what genre they play or anything else, right?'

'Well, I guess I did say that.'

'But isn't that... different from what Aki-san said?'

‘Ah-...’ Tama took off her hat and scratched her head. ‘I’m like a mercenary to them, you know. I don’t even know what the policy is. But... I feel like Aki-sama and the others overthink things.’

Tama skilfully moved the horizontal fader, connecting her next song with an exquisite cut in.

‘Celebrities can be a little too upper class, which can be kinda unappealing.’

‘I agree. But doesn’t that mean...’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I feel sorry for them. I think that Aki-san and Ginka-san are really talented, and DJ amazingly without any mistakes. But, neither of them seem to be having much fun...’

‘You mean they both seem bored?’

‘I mean, it seems like they’re both- fighting. Both have such a beautiful and graceful sound, but they seem to be struggling... don’t you think so too, Tama-chan?’

‘Why do you think that...’ Tama sighed, stirring her glass of coke. ‘...I think that the part about people being connected by money is true. After all, without money, there’s no conversation. But... I don’t think that applies to my style or my favourite kind of music.’

Tama pressed the STOP button to stop the music.

‘.....’

The silence was somehow heavy.

‘...Hey, why did you start DJing, Tama-chan?’

‘Huh? Well, I’ve been in this kind of environment since I was a child.’

‘Who were your favourite DJs at the time? And what mixes did you like?’

Tama frowned as if she was a little annoyed at this question. ‘Bold of you to assume I had any.’

She plucked an object from the end of the shelves lined with bottles of liquor, and placed a small, flimsy looking case on the counter.

‘Oh! Is that a cassette tape!?’

‘Heh, how could you tell?’

Tama grinned, set the cassette deck under the counter and pressed the play button.

‘You still have this cassette deck...’

‘One time when I was really broke, I thought I’d sell it off for a load of cash.’

A song began to play over the bar's speakers.

‘This tape has been in the bar for a long time... I don’t know whose mix it is, and it’s really just a piece of junk. But it was what got me started.’

The Eurobeat disco tape must have been listened to hundreds of times. The tape was damaged and the sound had deteriorated considerably. But-

‘This is a good mix.’

‘Right? And the next song goes hard as fuck!’ Tama said excitedly.

The tape switched to the next song.

‘Ah...’

Tama smiled with satisfaction after seeing Reina’s expression.

‘It’s great, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah. It is.’

She must surely have heard it a thousand times already. And yet, Tama’s eyes were shining.

‘It’s too bad that I don’t even know what song it is... it isn’t even on Iris, so I’m at a loss.’

‘I see...’ Reina looked overjoyed listening to the song, and smiled at Tama several times throughout it.

The smile on her face sometimes seemed strangely embarrassing to Tama.

‘W-well, what about you then? Do you have a favourite song?’

‘I do.’

Reina thought back to her own starting point.

‘The theme song from Supersonic War-machine Crossfader!!’

Tama spat out the coke she had just drank.

‘What the hell is that choice...’ she wiped her mouth with her sleeve. ‘Well, I guess I liked that one too.’

Tama laughed.

Reina understood.

There was no ‘number one’ song or type of music. Everyone liked a lot of different songs.

♪ ♪ ♪

The day of the New Legend qualifying round arrived. The location was the National Yoyogi Coliseum in the Shibuya area. The final New Legend STACK battle was also scheduled to be held there and preparations were currently underway for it.

The DJ booth and sound system had already been set up, and now both the Azabu and Akiba DJs were in the process of checking their equipment. The gigantic stage was flanked by two DJ booths, Akiba’s on the left, and Azabu’s on the right. This STACK battle would take place in a real-time format with both teams playing at the same time.

Normally, the floor would either be divided or the sound would come through the audience’s earphones, rather than through the speakers. This time, however, the technology developed by Neucom Entertainment was being experimented with.

Instead of sound being transmitted by air vibrations, the technology would transmit sound by means of special particles being sprayed into the venue. When the earphone receiver was used to select which sound to listen to, the system reproduced not only the sound that could be heard from the ear, but also the sound pressure that shook the body.

However, guests weren't allowed into the venue during the qualifiers, so only those involved could get a taste of the event there. Instead, a large number of viewers online were waiting impatiently for the battle to begin.

Nevertheless, to the 6 DJs battling that day, the floor was still completely empty. Although they knew it would be like that, there was still a big lack of excitement.

'This is another new product from Neucom, apparently.' Kazune handed a package of disposable contact lenses to Reina and Futaba.

'Contact lenses?'

'AR contact lenses. The lenses project images onto your retinas. They make it look like the people watching us from online are actually here in the venue.'

'Wow! People from all over the internet are really coming here to watch us!'

'It looks that way, yes.' Kazune replied as she looked through the publicity data. 'Like the new sound system, apparently it was originally military technology that was converted into a civilian product.'

'Wow!! That's so cool!'

Compared to the beaming Reina, Futaba looked anxious.

'I'm not very good at putting in contacts...'

'Huh? Really?'

'Yes. I'm scared of... putting things in my eyes...'

As they tried to convince Futaba that she'd be fine, the staff member in charge of the PA came over.

'Um- you're from Akiba, right? So this....?' He pointed to the equipment that Reina had brought in.

'Ah, I brought it from home! I thought I might wanna use it!'

The staff member scratched his head in annoyance.

'Is it even possible to connect... this...'

'Ehhh!?'

Aki watched this exchange from Azabu's DJ booth. What on earth were they arguing about? Aki was a little concerned, but quickly lost interest as it wasn't a big deal anyway. There was a big gap in how much more competent they were compared to Akiba. If that gap widened further due to whatever the trouble was, it wouldn't mean much.

Aki operated the DJ unit and looked over to Ginka, who was checking the sound on the floor. Ginka signalled to Aki that the sound was fine, and Aki raised her hand to show she understood.

Ginka nodded in satisfaction as she returned to the DJ booth.

'It's great. That's exactly what I'd expect from a new system like this.'

'Well, I'm very much not amused that it was set up in the Shibuya area before Azabu.' Aki replied sarcastically.

'Aki, we probably will win this qualifying round.' Ginka said with a serious expression on her face.

'Of course we will.'

'But in the real thing, Shibuya will beat us.'

'Wha...' Aki was confused at Ginka's sudden admission of defeat. 'Why are you saying this to me now!? Have I done something to you?'

'I'm trying to be kind to you.'

'You aren't being kind at all!' Aki's eyes were filled with agitation. 'You're always like this, Ginka. I never know what you're really thinking, you always confuse and tease me! I'm so much more...' Aki bit her lip in frustration.

'The real me, or...'

Ginka took a breath before continuing.

'I can't help you if all I do is be nice to you. I'll do whatever I can for you.'

'Then think of a way to beat Shibuya!'

'Ok. Then I'll do that.'

‘Huh?’

Ginka’s straightforward reply left Aki out of the loop.

‘You’re teasing me, aren’t you? You don’t always mean what you say, Ginka.’

‘That’s harsh.’ Ginka laughed bitterly and scratched her cheek. Then her face suddenly became serious. ‘But, I mean it.’

Aki’s heart jumped out of her chest.

‘What do we give up, and what do we gain? I wanted you to have that choice. For you, Aki, winning against Shibuya is your top priority.’

‘Yes... that would mean Azabu could reach the very top. If we manage to beat them, Azabu will become more culturally valued and property values will increase.’

‘All right. And while I’m at it, I’d like to ask you one more question.’

‘And what is that?’

‘...Why did you become involved in Denonbu in the first place?’

Aki raised an eyebrow at this. ‘Huh?...What do you mean?’

‘If you only cared about raising property values, there are plenty of other, easier ways to do that besides leading this Denonbu by yourself. Why did you choose Denonbu?’

‘That’s...’ Aki faltered.

She had joined in the first place because she wanted to get closer to Ginka. In truth, that was the only reason. Various theoretical arguments could be traced back to that point.

All of the students at Minato Shirokane Girls’ High School had some financial connection to the Shirokane family, and there was only one exception.

Her childhood friend, Haijima Ginka.

Her father was a well-known DJ, musician and producer. The Haijima family’s cultural reputation had made them a prominent Azabu family, but they maintained their economic independence, and had no economic ties to the Shirokane family.

So in Aki's mind, Ginka may one day be gone from her.

She wanted to make a connection with Ginka.
She wanted a relationship with her.
She wanted a bond with her.

Aki could try and make up all kinds of reasons for her involvement in Denonbu, but in the end this was all it came down to.

Ginka was her first love.

That was shattered the moment she discovered that Ginka was actually a girl. But since then, Ginka had been by her side.

How would I describe the relationship between myself and Ginka? And what kind of relationship do I want to have with her?

I don't know myself. But, I think I have a good eye for people.

And yet, I find myself foggy and hazy. I must seem like a foolish little girl who is too presumptuous and incapable of making calm decisions.

And I don't know what to do with Ginka. I should be able to reach out and touch her, but she still escapes my grasp like a fog.

I want her so badly.

Maybe people don't get what they want most, Aki thought.

'Sorry for the wait!! I just arrived!' Tama came running in, holding her hat.

Suddenly brought back to reality, Aki put a hand to her head. 'Really, Tama... maids aren't supposed to arrive later than their mistresses. That's a 10% pay cut.'

'GYYYAAAAHHHHHHH! PLEASE FORGIVE ME! PLEASE FORGIVE ME FOR THAAAAATTTT!!!'

Tama slid down on her knees to repeatedly bow in forgiveness to Aki.

'Ugh... ok, Tama. But if you lose today's match, I WILL fire you! So remember that!'

Indeed, there was an option for that in the terms of the contract. There was a clause that allowed their employment relationship to be unilaterally terminated if Tama ever

lost a STACK battle. Tama had never lost a STACK battle. She was immensely confident about that. So to her, that condition didn't really bother her.

'Yes! I'm so sorry for being late!!'

Reina cheerfully called out from behind Tama.

'Umm... Azabu girls. Best of luck today!' The three Akiba girls had come up to the Azabu DJ booth to greet them. Kazune and Futaba bowed their heads as Reina greeted the three Azabu girls.

'Why, best of luck to you too. So, earlier... were you in some sort of trouble? I saw you having a discussion with the staff.'

Reina hurriedly shook her head. 'Oh, no, I was just having a little trouble connecting my equipment... but it's ok now.'

'Oh? Did you guys bring your own equipment?'

'Yeah. Uhh...'

Without waiting for Reina to reply, Tama interrupted.

'Ha! It's just poor people's equipment. It's probably just an old, shabby piece of shit! Look at our setup compared to that!'

Tama proudly extended her hand towards the equipment positioned around the Azabu DJ unit.

'Wow! That's amazing. What is it!?'

There were a lot of boxes, each with many knobs and buttons.

'These are rhythm machines, effectors, samplers and loop machines built for DJing. I couldn't use these things before, though! Aki-sama bought them for me!'

'Wow... so cool! You can really use all this, Tama-chan!? Amazing!'

Seeing that Reina was genuinely impressed, Tama continued to brag.

'It looks like a market product, but in fact it's all custom-made! It's set up just the way Tama likes it! The only way to get the most out of such a set is to use it, and since I'm the Shirokane family's Super Maid and the strongest DJ-'

‘Tama, please shut up.’

‘...Yes, Mistress.’

Tama immediately stopped talking when she was told off by Aki.

‘Now, I expect a good match. A crushing defeat would be uninteresting. Besides...’
Aki smiled thoughtfully. ‘I’m sure those who are fans of you would be disappointed.’

‘My... fans?’

‘Oh, nothing. Now...’

‘U-um, Aki-san? You asked me this question the other day...’

‘A question? Ah...’ Aki had almost forgotten about it. She managed to pull it out of her vague memories.

‘We did talk about that, too. Do you have an answer?’

‘Yes. But I’ll answer your question when I perform.’

‘...I see. Well, I’m counting on you.’

She may have replied in that way, but inwardly she thought, what cheek. I guess I’ll just have to beat her with perfection, Aki thought. It looked like Houou Karin wasn’t such a good judge of character after all. Maybe she just wanted to taunt Azabu.

Then, even more so, we must show them that they are nowhere near our level.

Aki’s fighting spirit was lit ablaze.

♪ ♪ ♪

The first round was Haijima Ginka VS Shinonome Kazune.

Kazune was the type to have a pre-made playlist, and have in mind exactly how she was going to connect each song. Through repetitive practice, she had perfected her DJing.

‘It’s just like me to still be nervous...’

Her AR contact lenses made the vast audience area of the stadium appear to be absolutely packed with people, despite being completely empty in reality. Kazune realised that an insane amount of people were watching the battle online.

Moreover, her opponent was Haijima Ginka of Azabu, and she was not an opponent who could be beaten easily.

But, you never knew what could happen in a STACK battle.

Kazune swore to herself that she would do her absolute best.

She considered the impact that her start would have on the battle. She'd start with a slower, more graceful intro at first, and then suddenly grab the audience's attention again with high tension, fast paced game music.

Kazune started exactly how she practised. She quickly and carefully raised the vertical fader. Done.

Alright! Let's go!

Kazune began to get curious about what her opponent was doing. Naturally, she assumed Ginka would be playing the signature classy Azabu house music. They all knew Azabu would play that kind of music at devilishly high quality.

However-

The audience on the Azabu side of the floor seemed to be acting a little strangely. Even if Kazune knew it might break her heart a little to listen to Azabu, her curiosity won, and she switched the channel in one of her headphones to listen in on Azabu.

'Huh!?'

She heard Ginka's calm singing voice.

[I embraced my grey-coloured heart
Accept me and my cowardice,
And one day, I'll show you all of the real me]
(*Haiiro no kokoro* - Haijima Ginka (Shibuya Azuki), Prod. Pasocon Music Club)

Struck by surprise, Kazune looked in the direction of the other booth on the stage and saw Ginka singing live, microphone in hand. She sang a slow, beautiful ballad song, which was not at all like Azabu's usual style.

Where was the classy house music!?

Kazune told herself to calm down, and that Ginka probably had the same strategy of starting off slower. Surely she'd play more Azabu-like songs after this one.

She smoothly transitioned into her next track, and continued to monitor Ginka's set. Her next song sounded very nostalgic...

80's city pop!?

In a flash, Kazune changed her headphones back to the Akiba channel.

'Hey, Reina- Isn't Haijima Ginka acting super weird!?'

'Y-yeah, she is. I wonder what's up with her...'

Ginka's set was totally different from the Azabu genre. There was no sense of unity, so it was quite unflattering. Yet, Ginka seemed to be in a great mood, and was thoroughly enjoying herself.

'Is this some kind of trick!? Maybe she's trying to activate a bug in Iris where if you play certain songs in a certain order, it gives you infinite points!?'

'D-don't worry about Ginka's set, Kazune-chan! You're doing great!'

'Y-yeah, I should focus on what I'm doing!'

Kazune took a deep breath, and transitioned from the current song into her original song, 'Mani Mani'. This'll for sure hype up the audience! Kazune thought.

Meanwhile, Ginka's headphones reverberated with Aki's constant shouting.

'GINKA! What in the everloving FUCK are you doing!?'

'I'm DJing.'

'You can't call this DJing!! You're literally just playing random music!'

'Now, now, that isn't fair. These are all my favourite songs. Besides, it's been ages since I've actually enjoyed DJing.'

'...Tch!'

'If you really wanna win against Shibuya, Aki, you know it's already going to be tough for us as we are, right?'

‘Obviously!! But why on earth are you doing this!?’

‘Because. We need destruction and rebirth.’

‘But, such self destruction makes absolutely no sense!’

‘We’re bound by a lot of things. Worldly ties, the roles we’ve taken on, and the economic connections we have. Some of these can’t be helped. But, can’t I at least let my heart be free?’

‘Ginka...’

‘All this time, we’ve been looking for what we’ve been missing, for what we need to overcome Shibuya. I feel like there’s a wall between you and me... and to defeat Shibuya, I need to break it down at least once. I need to break down both Azabu’s style, and my relationship with you.’

‘NO!!!’

Aki’s yells bounced around in Ginka’s eardrums.

‘Does that mean me and you won’t have a relationship any more!?’

‘Aki?’

‘There’s nothing that ties you to me!! No economic ties, no contracts, nothing!! Our connection is like a spider thread... if that’s broken, it’ll never be the same again! We’ll be separated forever-’

Ginka lovingly listened to Aki’s tearful voice. ‘You’re so silly, Aki.’

‘What!? Is that all you’ve got to say to me!?’

‘You and I have no strings attached, and yet we’ve been together this long. We have a much stronger relationship than that of a business or contracted one, right?’

There was silence on Aki’s end.

As Ginka waited for Aki to say something, she realised her current song was about to finish. 30 seconds remaining. 5 seconds to select the next song, 15 seconds to transition into it. 5 seconds to fade out the previous song- plenty of time.

Whilst Ginka searched for another track, she heard Aki weakly reply.

‘Do you really think so?’

‘Of course. Now listen closely.’

Even if it might confuse Aki, this was the real Ginka.

Next, Ginka played an original track with a slow tempo and a mix of various music genres.

[I know if something's broken, then you feel it in the darkness.
I'll find a light, just for your broken heart.
As you can see with your eyes closed]

(Night Flying - Haijima Ginka (Shibuya Azuki), Prod. Banvox)

It was a sound that had never been heard before in Azabu; a very fresh and comfortable one. Ginka enjoyed seeing the surprised faces of Aki, the staff and the audience. She was unrestrained; no fixed flow, no nothing.

Oh, how free I am. I had no idea that I had so much potential within me, and right now, I feel like I could do anything.

I feel like an idiot for looking for what we were missing. Nothing was missing. I have it all right inside me. But could I recognise it? Could I face it?

That was all I needed to do, Ginka reflected.

Ginka spotted Reina on the floor, who met her gaze and danced happily. Perhaps, it had been her influence that had allowed Ginka to think more freely.

...Hidaka Reina. Daughter of Hidaka Reia, the legendary DJ.

The fact that my father went out of his way to mention her to me must mean there is something important about her. Houou Karin sensed something, too. So did this ‘me’, as well.

‘Nice. This is getting interesting.’

Ginka grabbed the microphone and sang along to the song, slowly and charmingly. Sometimes with a suggestive coolness, but also sometimes she wasn't afraid to be more feminine.

Ah, I should've worn a girlish outfit after all, thought Ginka. But, that isn't how people expect me to dress, though...

‘Ginka.’ Before Ginka knew it, Aki had come up to the DJ booth.

‘That was fast. You’ve got 2 minutes and 15 seconds left until we switch over.’

Sighing, Aki stood in front of the DJ unit. ‘You’ve already done your little show, Ginka.’

She was right, there was nothing more for Ginka to do. And so, she surrendered the DJ unit to Aki.

‘Are you sure this is the right thing to do?’ Aki murmured anxiously.

‘At the very least, our future is expanding.’

‘But today we’re going to lose.’

Ginka smiled gently and said in a soft voice; ‘Today might be grey, but tomorrow we will shine.’

She told her this, and then turned her back on Aki, starting to exit the stage.

‘Ginka.’

Ginka stopped in her tracks.

‘You were really cute.’

‘...Was I now.’

Ginka didn’t look back, and left the stage, not wanting Aki to see the massive grin that spread across her face.

‘You really... have a surprisingly adorable side to you.’ Unintentionally, Aki also smiled softly.

Now, it was Aki’s turn to face herself in the DJ booth.

A hologram floating above the floor showed the current winners and losers. Naturally, Akiba was in the lead. Second in line for Akiba was the timid-looking Kayano Futaba.

‘Fueee... it’s such a large venue... but, there’s no audience here, so it’s actually kind of relaxing...’

Futaba smiled, and played her first song.

With little interest in what Futaba was doing, Aki began with a safe choice of music, overlaying the outro of the last song played by Ginka. Fashionable, melodious, dignified, it was the definition of Azabu's smooth classy house style.

This choice could mean victory today.

...But was it enough for them to beat Shibuya?

When would this battle style be enough to defeat Shibuya?

Aki grimaced as she began to pursue her true self.

The thing was, her father's generation, who dominated Azabu, preferred the old style of music. Pandering to that demographic was necessary in order for them to keep sponsors. They walked the path they were expected to and exceeded expectations that way. The only way for Azabu to win was to keep that style.

However, was that truly the case?

Ginka's performance replayed in Aki's mind. It had been pretty terrible. But the difference was, Ginka had looked great doing it.

Aki remembered back to the first time she ever saw Tama DJ, and the other students' reactions to her. They were so flabbergasted that they jumped up and down with great gusto.

But that wasn't Azabu's style. So since then, Tama had been instructed to only DJ following the Azabu style. The students had been happy to be exposed to new music, though.

The Azabu Denonbu weren't allowed to destroy what they had. But if indeed me and Ginka have such a strong bond, if we break this style without breaking us apart-

'Can I also... be a little selfish, too?'

Aki selected a track from the DJ unit's selection list that she had secretly made herself. Doubting herself a little, she monitored the Akiba channel, wondering what to do.

'Huh?'

Aki heard idol songs through her headphones. Modern ones, not the 80s/90s ones that Ginka played.

Futaba was smiling and looked relatively relaxed as she DJed. In contrast, the other Akiba members, Reina and Kazune, had different expressions on their faces.

‘Futaba... what’s up with her? She hasn’t switched personalities at all...’

‘Earlier... didn’t Futaba-chan say she was scared to put her contacts in?’

Kazune gasped.

‘OH FUUUUUUCKKK!!’ she exclaimed.

The currently contact-less Futaba couldn’t see any audience. She really felt like she was DJing to absolutely no one.

Aki’s DJing wasn’t as praiseworthy as usual, and felt a little lopsided. But to Akiba, her DJing felt a little different. She played the same sorts of idol songs that Ginka had, seemingly following in her footsteps.

A forceful jealousy overcame Aki. She pressed the PLAY button, forcefully cutting into and blasting her next track.

She was the one who brought out the best in Ginka!!

[Feeling awkward because of music
Just isn’t possible, right?
Give yourself up to the rhythm, and
Let’s dance]

(MUSIC IS MAGIC - Shirokane Aki (Komiya Arisa) Prod. tofubeats)

Aki sang her own song live, mic in hand. She didn’t sing as her usual hunched over, mature, pretentious self, but her cute self.

She noticed that a stunned looking Tama had come over to the DJ booth, and at that moment Aki came back down to earth. She was so intensely embarrassed that she ran off stage straight away.

Ginka was waiting for her.

‘That was the best.’

‘Which part?’

‘I fell in love with you all over again.’

‘...OH!?’

Aki's cheeks unexpectedly heated up as she saw Ginka's grinning face.

‘S-seriously... will you please stop joking around!? More importantly, we may have paid a big cost but we'll take it back and win against Shibuya now! Our new style is-’

‘Ah- it looks like you won, Aki.’

‘Eh!? No way!!’

In the end, Futaba didn't enter idol berserker mode and finished her set peacefully. Therefore, the overhead display showed that Aki had won.

It was 1-1 now between Azabu and Akiba. The next matchup was Tama VS Reina, which would determine the outcome of the game.

‘What a godsend... you didn't lose.’

Despite her win, Aki looked unhappy.

‘I've lost so much!’

When she thought back to it, she got so embarrassed that her face felt like it was on fire. Besides, this was an online event and the video footage would remain... Aki intensely regretted singing live and overdoing the choreography.

‘If you say so. Now, let's go watch our ace, shall we? If things go right, Tama should win.’

‘Right... but...’ Aki glanced at Tama, who was onstage. ‘Tama also wants to perform how she wants...’

‘So you've told her she can, right?’

‘Ah...’ Aki tried to contact her so her voice would reach Tama's headphones, but it seemed Tama had switched the radio off, and she couldn't reach her.

On stage, Tama and Reina faced each other.

‘If you can afford to listen to me, you should!! I’m the black cat of the Roppongi bar! Azabu’s best maid DJ! This is how Kurogane Tama DJs!’

‘Wow, so cool!! I love those two names, they're like rival characters in an anime!’

‘An anime!? You’re such a nerd!!’

After their brief back and forth, both started playing their first songs.

Tama played an Azabu style house song with solid vocals. Reina, on the other hand, had chosen a future pop song. Tama smiled, knowing she had time to spare, and checked what Reina was playing. She was the type to DJ for the audience on the same floor as her. She was certainly skilled, and had a unique sense of style.

But I’m better. I’ve spent far more time DJing than she has. I’ve been subjected to selfish nagging audience members for nearly a decade. Aki’s orders seem almost cute compared to those people, mused Tama.

Today’s audience seemed fairly standard. Azabu was way more popular than Akiba, so surely there’d be more Azabu fans watching. The other judges were Iris and the organising staff, who’d probably be pretty fair. In that case, surely the music genre wouldn’t matter in this particular battle. The more different styles you could pull off and the more skilled you were, the more you’d win.

There were two ways in which Akiba could win. One is if they’d researched the favourite music of the event staff beforehand. However, the Shirokane family maids had checked this, and it wasn’t a possibility.

The second way in which they could win is if Akiba enters Azabu’s ring and wins a tough battle. However, that should be harder for them than playing each other’s genres.

In other words, they couldn’t shake Azabu’s victory.

Tama smirked.

At any rate, her job as a Shirokane maid was on the line here too. If she lost the battle, she lost her job. If she won, she could get a special bonus.

‘Why should I put in extra effort...?’

When Tama looked at the Akiba booth, she saw Reina holding an unfamiliar disc.

‘...?’

Reina held a round black vinyl disc, with fine grooves carved into it. She spun it around on her finger and smiled at it.

Tama let out a sigh. Analogue records? Vinyls were long dead. There had been a few vinyl reprint trends, but none in recent decades.

‘What the hell is she doing...’

Nowadays, vinyl records were just a symbol of nostalgia. A DJ unit and an Iris database were enough. The only thing Tama would add was equipment to add extra sound material, loops and effects, such as the new equipment that Aki had bought her.

‘To take out an old thing like that, what would you even do with it... how would you even play it!?’

There were turntables placed on both sides of Reina’s DJ unit. This was a famous machine that was used as the de facto standard until a few decades ago.

Aki, who was looking up at the DJ booth, was also stunned, her mouth half open.

‘So the reason she was arguing with the staff earlier was... that...?’

Next to her, Ginka’s eyes sparkled.

‘You’re very interesting, you know... Hidaka Reina.’

Reina placed the needle on the record. Listening to the sound with one ear, she adjusted the pitch and set the BPM, relying on her own ears and sense of rhythm. She rotated the record with her finger to find a starting place, and when she released it, she moved the EQ and fader.

‘What the hell is she doing with that...’ Tama’s curiosity got the better of her and she monitored Akiba’s sound.

At that moment, Reina lifted the fader and switched songs.

‘...Huh!?’

Tama’s eyes widened when she realised what she was hearing. This was the song that she had played for Reina in BABEL. The one on the worn out mixtape which Tama loved.

‘Wha...’

What is the meaning of this!? Tama wanted to shout, but she was speechless.

How did she find it? Where was it? The song title, the artist? Give Tama the details!

As if Reina could somehow hear her thoughts, she lifted the vinyl sleeve and showed it to Tama. She’d found the record and taken it from her father’s warehouse in the basement of the Hidaka model shop.

That wasn’t all she’d brought with her. Reina opened the duralumin case under her feet, and Tama saw that it was packed full of records. She selected one of them and pulled it out.

‘I’ve been spinning turntables ever since I was little, you know? I’ve listened to everything in my dad’s collection, and I remember all of it.’

Next up was the Eurobeat super anthem that took the world by storm.

‘GH.....’

Tama gritted her teeth. It was an anthem that always made you want to dance, and the way Reina used it was so good. That’s what was so frustrating. Above all, the sound was amazing. In terms of specifications, the latest equipment should sound better. And yet, the unique grating was indescribable and irresistible.

Tama’s eyes began to blaze.

‘Let’s go!’

To get back into the swing of things, she put her hat back on.

‘I’ll take it from here!!’

Tama searched up a list of the greatest Eurobeat hits from the Iris database, and from the loop machine bought for her by Aki, used a loop of bold bass and intense rhythms.

From underneath the elegant sound of Azabu, riskier sounds began to reverberate.

Reina felt connected to Tama at that moment.

...Music really was a great way to connect with others.

She didn't need money or promises for that. Reina could just play a song she liked, recommend a song she thought the other would like and that interesting mix would create a bond between them.

We can understand each other. We can get along. We can become friends.

She could communicate through sound.

And that was why DJing was so amazing!! Reina was super hyped up at that moment.

Maybe right now, she and Mitsuki had no connection. But if they talked through music, surely they could create a new relationship. Reina could share her feelings like this with the Harajuku girls, even with Tama.

So-!

At that point, Tama grabbed the microphone.

[My heart beats fast
Frontal lobe going at full speed
Yeah, I feel amazing
Removing the limit on my cravings, hey
The view from here is great
My overwhelming odds are strong
Riding the wave of momentum]
(Catch a Fire - Kurogane Tama (Akina) Prod. Kenmochi Hidefumi)

...Rap?!

Reina shuddered at this unexpected development, and she felt a pang in her chest. When she looked at Tama in surprise, Tama gave her a huge winning grin.

'I don't just play Eurobeat, you know! Do you even know how many people I've DJed for?!'

Tama was mixing various genres and creating amazing drops at will.

'Tama-chan is just as amazing as I thought...'

A smile naturally appeared on Reina's face as well.

'This is fire!!'

Reina improvised a mash-up of the vinyl's Eurobeat and Iris's EDM. Both songs were ones she loved. There was a lot to like about music. There were many ways of expressing what you liked, and no right answer in doing so.

Reina wanted to value what she liked, and what other people liked, too.

In the case of Aki, she had an attitude of denying all but the best of herself, and that was her own expression of what she liked.

But, just because you know what the other party wants, doesn't mean you should have to do it yourself. Everyone is different, and that's ok. People can accept and swallow anything; club music had such a magnitude. There was no music here that couldn't be played. It was all acceptable for everyone present.

'That's why here, I can be myself!'

Reina was also using sounds from all genres, creating a much enhanced build up.

...Now to decide on the final drop.

The audience, shown through Reina's AR contact lenses, were so hyped up that she could almost feel them in the venue.

Despite the fact the audience weren't physically there, the floor shook.

♪ ♪ ♪

'Uuuu... Aki-sama, I'm sorry...' Tama dejectedly apologised in front of Aki.

The win had been narrowly stolen from Azabu by Reina. No matter how small the difference, a loss was a loss.

The contract stated that Tama would be sacked for losing the battle.

'Thank you for everything you've done for me...'

When Tama started to trudge away sadly, Aki called out to her.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going... because we lost.'

'Is that right... well, you'll have to make that loss up to us in the next match.'

Aki approached the puzzled Tama and held out an envelope to her.

‘Your DJing today was the best performance I’ve ever seen you do. As a reward, I’m giving you a special bonus.’

‘...EH!?’

Tama looked up at Aki, her eyes sparkling.

‘Aki-sama...’

Aki blushed, slightly embarrassed.

‘Keep on doing what you do best. For my sake.’

‘Yes! I will, Aki-sama!’

Tama instantly turned around and checked what was in the envelope she’d just received.

‘WOAAAHH! As expected from Aki-sama, this is very generous!! This wad of cash is thicker than her thighs. I’ll for sure be having a grand outing tonight!! I’m gonna shine with the prestige of working for the Shirokane family in that restaurant where I got treated like a little kid!!’

‘Tama! Stop wasting money and using the Shirokane family name without permission! And don’t you dare mention my thighs again!’

‘Ummm... hi, Azabu girls.’

The three Akiba girls had come over. Reina looked straight at Aki. The way she looked at her was very different to the anxious, unsure look in her eyes that Aki had seen before.

‘Aki-san... I think I’ve found my answer to the question you asked me. I...’

Aki raised a hand to signal Reina to stop talking.

‘I’ve already heard your answer.’

‘Huh?’

‘Didn’t you communicate it to me when you DJed?’

Reina's face brightened as if a sunflower had bloomed.

'It would be pointless to exchange any more words, really.' Aki brushed aside her shining blonde hair, turned away from the Akiba girls and left the stage. 'I'm looking forward to seeing you and Shibuya battle.'

'Y-yes! Thank you very much!' Reina bowed her head respectfully.

'...Reina.'

Kazune tapped her on the shoulder. When Reina looked up at her, the three Azabu girls had gone.

'Kazune-chan. We... really won.'

'We did. And now we can fight Shibuya.'

Kazune smiled a little awkwardly as she said that, probably because of the tension. The same was true for Futaba.

'Maybe... you can make time to talk with your sister there!'

'Yeah. Thank you... both of you.'

Reina looked up at the DJ booth on stage.

'Next time me and my sister are over there...'

She clenched her fists tightly.

'I'll bring my sound to her.'

♪ ♪ ♪

The Denonbu clubroom of Teion International High School was located in a building overlooking the big crossing in front of Shibuya station.

'Karin!'

Seto Mitsuki barged into the room with such force she almost broke down the door. The clubroom was on the third floor, and it was essentially a lounge for club members to hold meetings and various other events.

However, it was now home to Houou Karin. The DJ equipment was messily stacked and there were cables strewn across the floor.

If it was just equipment related it wouldn't be too bad, but there were both outer and undergarments, cardboard boxes of magazines and deliveries scattered everywhere in this dirty room, and the Emperor of Shibuya was lying down as if she had fallen.

Mitsuki looked down at her in disgust.

'Karin! What does it mean that our next New Legend opponent is Akiba?'

'Wha...' Karin woke up with a start, opening her sleepy eyes. 'Right... they beat Azabu.'

Mitsuki stared down at Karin with murderous eyes. 'They told me you vouched for Akiba.'

'Ah.'

Groaning, Karin got up and carelessly ruffled her hair.

'I thought it'd just be kinda fun.'

'I'm warning you, Karin. Don't you enter my private life without permission.'

'Don't get me wrong. I'm not interested in your family, y'know.'

Karin's eyes gleamed, as if a sleeping beast had been awakened.

'What I want is an enemy, and a damn good one at that.'

A normal student would either look away or run for cover at the mere sight of Karin staring at them. But Mitsuki glared back at her head-on.

'Do you really think Akiba are such worthy opponents for you?'

'They could be.'

Karin picked up her wrinkled jacket from the floor and tossed it around her shoulders.

'Imma get breakfast. Wanna come with?'

'It's almost noon.'

Karin exhaled in annoyance. 'I'll take on any fucker strong enough to beat me. I don't care if it's you, Lucia, or your sister.'

Mitsuki ground her teeth in anger.

'No. You won't go near Reina.'

'Huh?'

Mitsuki shot Karin with a suspicious look, but Karin stared right back.

Mitsuki's whole body was filled with a murderous spirit. Her state of being at that moment felt as if grudges, obsessions and delusions took on a human form.

'Reina is my prey.'

♪ ♪ ♪

Thanks for reading!!! Please share with your friends and drag them into denonbu hell with you if you enjoyed (💎ω💎)

TL: @syrupsealpha on twitter

Shibuya novel:

[Part 1 Shibuya novel english translation](#)