

SENPAI III

SITHU AYE

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Preface

...So first off, it was never meant to get to this point.

The series of Senpai releases started out as an idea I had when I had gotten a new guitar and an Axe-FX II. As I always do when I get new pieces of gear, I want to try them out and I usually do that through mix-tests that I upload onto the internet, usually on SoundCloud. I had done a few more traditional progressive-metal styled tests before this idea struck me; what if I did a mix-test in the style of a J-Rock anime opening?

Generally, my impression of anime openings was that they were fairly formulaic so all I had to do was use a lot of the elements for that distinctive sound associated with J-Rock/J-Pop and anime music. In the case of *Senpai, Please Notice Me!* (the name of which is a reference to the memes about trying to get Senpai to notice you), I made sure the track was at a fast tempo, had a very prominent melody line in the chorus backed up by piano and strings, and used a harmonic resolution that is very common in anime music called a Picardy third.

To elaborate on the Picardy third, *Senpai, Please Notice Me!* is in the key of F minor so the final chord in the chorus should have been an F minor to resolve fully but instead I used an Fsus4 into an F major chord, resolving into the major version of the root chord. This resolution is used liberally in anime music and is something your ears will pick up on if you are familiar with it.

So with those tick-boxes checked, the mix-test version of *Senpai, Please Notice Me!*, which was also one-minute thirty

seconds in length like almost all anime openings, was released on Soundcloud¹ as well as a version on YouTube² that was released shortly afterwards. To my surprise, the mix-test attracted a lot more attention than I anticipated which either spoke to my ignorance to the amount of people in my fanbase who liked anime or to the amount of closet ‘weebs’ amongst my listeners who were just waiting for the right opportunity to out themselves.

This was when the seed of an idea was planted; what if I made an EP based on anime music? The decision to veer off into this direction was harder than you may have initially thought. My music to that point was definitely more in the ‘serious’ vein of progressive metal and to do something like an anime inspired release would definitely seem like something out of left field compared to my space and cosmology inspired releases like *Cassini* or *Invent the Universe*.

I thought about it for a few weeks while working my full-time job as this was in 2015 before the idea of doing music as a career had even occurred to me. I slowly warmed to the idea as I thought about it because even though it wouldn’t be ‘serious’, I was confident in my ability to inject my own style into the music so it would still be distinctly ‘me’. A definite turning point was a brief, lunchtime conversation I had with one of my oldest friends Jack which I still reference to this day when explaining the genesis of the Senpai releases.

I was working at the Edinburgh office of my old company where my friend Jack was based at the time. It was a lovely day in May (well, lovely for Scotland’s standards) and we decided

1. <https://soundcloud.com/c2aye/senpai-please-notice-me>

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VDx9ZRW_ws

to eat lunch outside in a park near the office. The pair of us have known each other since we were about twelve or thirteen so it's not surprising that we would always have much to talk about and discuss. Jack would often serve as a foil to my own thoughts, as well as a quality-check to my ideas.

One of our frequent topics of conversation was our musical endeavours and I brought up the possibility of doing an anime inspired release. Jack looked at me with an incredulous look in his eyes before he turned away and scoffed. It took a short moment for him to run the idea over in his head. He then looked back towards me, the beginnings of a smile creeping onto the corners of his mouth.

"Sithu," Jack began, "that's the worst idea you've ever had." Jack shook his head and then let out a laugh, as if he couldn't believe what he was about to say. "You absolutely have to do it." I think I was already set on doing what would become the first *Senpai EP* at that point, but those words were the final push I needed to really get going with it.

I began work in earnest on *Senpai EP* after that. I expanded on the 'meme' nature of the first song's title where each song would be based on an anime trope. The first track, *Oh Shit, I'm Late for School!*, was based on the trope of waking up late and running to school with a piece of toast in your mouth, a trope that itself has been used and parodied to death in anime. The second song was a full-length version of *Senpai, Please Notice Me!* and the third was called *The Power of Love and Friendship!*, another common trope that is used and parodied in equal measure. However, for some reason still lost to me to this day, I thought that just the music wouldn't be enough.

I usually do a YouTube video where you can listen to each of my releases in full and *Senpai EP* was no exception. However, for this video I had decided to do something

different. Instead of having each song just being based on its associated trope, I would actually create and design three characters and have a ‘story’ of sorts that would be told through text and, shall we say, drawings of questionable quality that I would produce for the video.

Granted, the extent of the story was ‘girl wakes up late and has to run to school’, ‘girl has underclassman that bugs her to teach underclassman guitar while making childhood friend jealous’, and ‘girl falls asleep in class and has dream about being a magical girl along with her friends’, but my excuse is that it was early days for the *Senpai* releases. I went into more detail on the plot of each song in a series of manga panels I did for the *Senpai EP* tab book³.

There was something more to each character though and while I can’t decide whether it was decided by me after the fact or whether it was more subconscious, each of these characters has a bit of my own personality in them. Megumi Uehara, the de facto main character, is the side of me that is impulsive, does things just because they are fun, and rushes into decisions just because it allows me to play music.

Hanako Todoroki, Megumi’s childhood friend, is the side of me that works hard at school, is academically successful, and tries to be more measured against the more impulsive side but gets dragged along anyway. Hanako is also reserved and shy, a pair of traits I definitely had when I was younger. Finally, Mari Matsumoto is the bubbly, enthusiastic side of me that idolises highly skilled guitar players, and just wants to learn as much as they can on the instrument.

3. <https://www.sheethappenspublishing.com/shop/580/sithu-aye-senpai-ep-complete-guitar-transcription>

I'm not going to claim that these characters are anything unique or special. In fact, they're incredibly derivative and based on the main characters of *K-On!* in concept, the anime by Kyoto Animation, which also happens to be one of my favourite anime series ever. Anybody familiar with *K-On!* will immediately recognise the concept of a bunch of Japanese high school girls playing together in a band; all I did was add a progressive metal twist to my characters.

Senpai EP II followed up in the same vein as the first one, with songs based on anime tropes and the story being told through text and drawings (improved slightly this time) in the YouTube video⁴ for the release. I also introduced a new character, Reina Sugiyama, as a drummer character since a drummer was conspicuously absent from the first *Senpai EP*. I will always view *Senpai EP* and *Senpai EP II* as two fun releases that make light of anime tropes and tell a light-hearted story about four girls who want to play music in a band together.

So while you'll catch me doing the same thing twice, shame on me if I do the same thing three times in a row. I had originally planned for *Senpai III* to be an EP like the first two *Senpai* releases, playing on yet more anime tropes. However, the original *Senpai EP* came out five years ago at the time of writing. My own interests and goals had changed a lot since then and I really wanted to do something different for *Senpai III*.

As sad as it may be, this will most likely be the last *Senpai* release and I wanted to do right by these characters I had created. My interest in storytelling, character, and narrative had grown over the years since *Senpai EP* and what better way to explore that than with a full length release with an associated

4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Vb3yPxv6rA>

novella exploring how these girls deal with the challenge of how to keep music in your life after leaving school when dealing with pursuits like further education and employment.

The story of *Senpai III* is a fairly common one that you yourself may have gone through. You realise that after high school that you may need a university degree, that you need a job, and you need a way to put food on the table. Music and the instrument you play become secondary to all of that and for many it remains a hobby. Whether that is sad to you or not depends on your point of view; personally, I think the more people who engage in music, in any capacity, the better.

For the four girls in this story, it's about them as people and how they decide what to do in the future, and how they manage to keep their music a part of that future. We also look at how these characters got to where they are now in life. In some parts, this story will be funny, in others it will be sad and bittersweet, but hopefully it can be a relatable tale of how passionate individuals stay connected to the music that they love and the friends they share it with.

1. Choices on a Piece of Paper

The sound of paper rustling could be heard over the murmurings of the students in the class. The windows were left slightly open, occasionally letting the soft spring breeze blow in. “Remember to take one and pass one back,” said the teacher in a soft, feminine but firm voice, browsing over her class and ensuring that they were following her directions. “This isn’t like when you did this in first or second year; you’re going to have to seriously decide whether you want to pursue going to university, vocational school, or enter the workforce.”

Megumi’s eyes glanced up towards the teacher and the students in front of her ever so slightly. She hadn’t fully been paying attention as usual, not helped that they only had a half-day after the opening ceremony of the new school year, but she felt that something was off.

It was like the teacher’s words about making a choice made her feel uneasy. Megumi watched from her seat at the back of the class and counted how many more of her classmates needed to pass the pile of paper they were holding until it got to her. *Four...three...two...one.* A familiar face turned back to look at Megumi from in front of her, placing a single piece of paper on her desk.

“Megumi, here you go,” she said, smiling softly at her. “Thank you Hanako,” Megumi responded with a half-hearted smile in return to her childhood friend, who sat in front of her and was in the same class for the third year in a row.

“You don’t look so good, are you okay?”

The question seemed to pierce through Megumi. The feeling of uneasiness didn’t seem to dissipate even if the

reassuring presence of one of her oldest friends was there right in front of her. Megumi turned her eyes quickly to the piece of paper on the desk in front of her. It was upside-down. Even still, she could make out the large title written in bold text.

“Career/Future Survey”

Megumi promptly looked back up towards Hanako and replied, “What makes you say that?” She tried to smile as honestly as possible but there was that uneasiness and uncertainty she couldn’t quite shake.

“Are you worried about something?” Hanako asked, pressing the issue. “We can talk more-”

“You have two weeks to fill these out,” their teacher said, cutting Hanako off and causing her to look back towards the front of the classroom.

Ever the honour student, Megumi thought to herself with a smile.

“I’m sure you’ve already looked into prospective universities and career paths but take your time to really firm up your choices,” their teacher continued. “The other teachers and I will do our best to answer any questions you have, as well as to give you advice, but in the end the choice is up to you.”

There was a small crescendo of whispers and murmurs as other students in the class tried to ask each other what they planned to write. Megumi and Hanako stayed silent; they had a feeling the nature of their discussion would require more than classroom whispers.

“Yes, yes, it’s all very exciting and scary,” the teacher interjected, “but you’re still technically in class even if school finishes early today after homeroom.”

“Kaori-chan⁵, Kaori-chan!” yelled a female student sitting on the righthand side of the classroom, raising and waving her hand as she did.

“That’s Izumi-sensei⁶ to you,” the teacher replied with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

The classroom erupted into a short fit of laughter over the exchange. Kaori Izumi had been this class’s homeroom teacher since they entered school two years ago and many of the students had taken to calling her ‘Kaori-chan’ over how open and friendly she was with them during their time in high school. Kaori herself had started her teaching career with this as her first ever homeroom class.

It was apparent that she was not much older than the students in this third-year class with a youthful appearance, dressed casually in a blouse, cardigan, and loose skirt that hung below her knees. She had her hair in a ponytail that went just below her shoulder blades.

“Izumi Kaori-chan-sensei, did you write down studying teaching as your first choice at university?” the student

5. It is common practice in Japan to add honorifics to the end of names when referring to people. The most commonly used honorific is *さん*, *san*, so for example, when referring to Megumi, she would be called Megumi-san. The honorific used here is *ちゃん*, *chan*, which is normally used among girls as a term of endearment. It can also be used for things considered ‘cute’, such as small children or pets. I’ve taken a bit of creative license here as it would be exceptionally rare for students to refer to their teacher so familiarly using the honorific *chan*, but it’s a common enough trope in anime so we’ll just go with it. Also, for the purposes of better representing spoken dialogue, honorifics will be used when appropriate when characters speak.

6. Likewise, here the honorific or title used for a teacher is *先生* *Sensei*, and is often used on its own, or in a last name-title format.

continued after the laughter died down, making a complete mockery of the honorifics required.

“Yes, despite how little respect you all seem to have for me I always wanted to be a teacher,” Kaori replied, her fingers clasped over her furrowed brow. “I just would have hoped that my first ever homeroom class would have taken me more seriously over the past two years.”

The class erupted into yells of ‘Don’t be like that, Sensei!’ and ‘we love you too, Sensei!’ while Megumi stayed silent, the corners of her lips rising into a faint smile. Kaori’s words, ‘I always wanted to be a teacher’, seemed to sting Megumi. The thought of having a dream that you can clearly envision and follow through on seemed appealing yet wholly unrelatable to her.

It wasn’t really in Megumi’s character to think things through and while it never really bothered her before, the thought of it now was making her uncomfortable. She resolved herself to follow-up on this train of thought with her teacher.

The bell rang, signifying the end of homeroom and the shortened school day. Hanako, being last year’s class rep, took the duty of getting the students to stand and bow to their teacher before everybody packed their things away and got ready to leave. “Don’t fool about on your way home and enjoy having the rest of the day off,” Kaori said. Students waved her goodbye as they passed her on the door out.

As Hanako stood up and slung her bag around her shoulder, she turned to her friend and asked, “Are you ready to go Megumi?”

7. On the topic of honorifics, you may have noticed that Megumi and Hanako don’t use them with each other. As they have known each other, and have been friends for a long time, they forgo the use of honorifics.

“I’m going to ask Kaori-chan something,” Megumi replied. “Do you mind waiting outside the classroom for me Hanako? I won’t be long.”

“Sure thing, I’ll be waiting,” Hanako responded, taking her leave.

Megumi slung her own bag over her shoulder and instead of taking the back door out the classroom that was closest to her seat, she manoeuvred her way through the desks, chairs, and remaining students up to the front of the class to Kaori’s desk.

Megumi glanced over to the corner of the classroom by the teacher’s desk, seeing the familiar sight of the upright piano in the classroom. Kaori Izumi was a music teacher by trade and there was something about her answer about always wanting to be a teacher that Megumi wanted to get to the bottom of.

Megumi approached her teacher and began meekly, “Kaori...sensei.”

“Oh my,” Kaori said, seemingly stunned. “Megumi-san, you are the last person I ever expected to actually call me sensei, although I guess you still used my first name.”

Megumi couldn’t help but smile, and replied, “Well, it’s no fair if you get to use my first name as well!”

The two laughed. Kaori ran her hair behind her ear with her fingers and let out a sigh through a smile. “I guess I’m partly to blame; being a new teacher and all, I thought I would try to be cool and get familiar with my first ever homeroom class. I just never imagined that all of you would get *too* familiar.”

Kaori inwardly cringed at the memory of her first day as this class’s homeroom teacher, nervously telling them, ‘If calling me Izumi-sensei seems too formal, feel free to call me Kaori-sensei!’ Within weeks the girls in her class were calling

her 'Kaori-chan' and her retort of 'It's Izumi-sensei!' had become a running joke.

"We wouldn't have it any other way Kaori-chan!" Megumi said with a beaming grin on her face.

"There's the Megumi-san I know. Anyway, did you need something?" Kaori asked, getting down to business.

"Yes, I did actually."

Megumi fidgeted as she tried to find her words. She wanted to ask whether it was true what Kaori had said about always wanting to be a teacher. In her time as Megumi's homeroom and music teacher it was clear that Kaori loved music deeply in all aspects, whether it be listening to it, performing it, or even just talking about it.

That passion for music was something Megumi found a connection to and there had been times when she, Hanako, and their underclassman Mari spent entire lunchtimes talking with Kaori about music. Even though their musical tastes were different, Kaori couldn't help but match the enthusiasm shown by her pupils who simply wanted to talk and learn more about music.

"I was wondering, Kaori-chan," Megumi began, "is it true that you always wanted to be a teacher? Didn't you ever want to become a professional musician? Your piano playing is amazing, so it seemed like maybe you had other options."

The question surprised her. While Megumi was passionate about music, she never struck Kaori as somebody who really thought things through fully. Megumi was very spontaneous and prone to being drawn to new and novel ideas, in both music and life. She was somebody who very much went with the flow. The fact that she was asking Kaori about this must have meant that for once, she was thinking over something seriously.

“Well,” Kaori began, “it’s more like a half-truth. Life is always more complicated than simple platitudes like ‘I’ve always dreamed of being a teacher’ and things of that sort.”

“A half-truth?” Megumi pressed.

“It’s not untrue that I wanted to be a teacher, it’s just that there was a lot that got me to that conclusion,” Kaori explained. “I love playing piano. I don’t think I cared about much else when I was your age. But there comes a time when you have to face reality and make a choice, much like the position you’re in now.”

Kaori turned towards Megumi with a serious look on her face. “Let me ask you something. Do you think you’re good enough to be a professional guitarist?”

“Uh, I’m not honestly sure,” Megumi replied with an embarrassed laugh.

“Well, let me tell you something Megumi-san, with your passion and dedication to the instrument you could probably get into most music schools that offer contemporary guitar courses,” Kaori said, smiling softly as she did. “But then what happens? You graduate with a music degree, but nothing is guaranteed. You might get some work here and there, you might not. And it’s not like the guitarists in popular bands all went to music school.”

Megumi frowned and noted, “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

“That’s just the reality of music and all other creative endeavours I’m afraid. I’m pretty sure any aspiring musician would have had to make this decision at some point in their lives,” Kaori continued, her smile seeming sadder as she spoke. “As for me...”

Kaori looked downwards with a tinge of pain and regret in her face despite her smile. “As for me, I was never brave enough to take the risk of diving fully into the music world.”

Megumi was shocked by Kaori's frankness. Despite how friendly and open she was to all her students, she always had this air of being a reliable and dependable teacher. She was the kind of teacher who was always willing to lend an ear for the worries of her students, to be a shoulder to cry on for a heartbroken girl whose confession of love was rejected, and to be that final push that some students needed to really pursue something.

For Kaori to show her vulnerabilities like that, Megumi knew that it was something that she had agonised over and was possibly still agonising over to this day.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to ask about something sensitive," Megumi said softly.

"It's okay, that's just how life is for aspiring musicians," Kaori responded, smiling warmly to reassure her pupil. "But you know, I always loved to talk about music. I loved to talk to other people about music. When I was still in high school, I was always helping my classmates with their music homework and I would be helping out my juniors in my club. As a result, I often got told that I would be a good teacher."

Megumi looked up at Kaori's face and saw her looking off to the side. The pained expression she had been wearing had been replaced by a more hopeful one.

"Then it struck me; the way I can express my love of music and still be involved with music is through teaching it. It might seem like a step down from fanciful dreams of being a famous concert pianist, but young people will always need teachers and for me it was a way to stay connected with music, even as part of my career," Kaori explained. "So, in the end, it's not like things ended up badly or anything."

She looked back towards Megumi with a warm, reassuring smile which Megumi couldn't help but return with a smile of her own.

"You know, I'm not that much older than you, Megumi-san," Kaori continued. "I'm what, twenty-five, turning twenty-six this year? I went through some of the same troubles and worries you're probably having now about seven or eight years ago. I'm not going to tell you that it'll be easy because it won't be. But having been your homeroom and music teacher for the past two years, I know how passionate you are about music, about playing guitar, and the band you have with your friends. Regardless of what you decide to do, you'll find a way to stay connected to music."

Megumi couldn't help but smile at her teacher's words. For a talk about the stark reality that faced most people pursuing a career in a creative field, Megumi couldn't help but feel optimistic after hearing that conclusion.

"Jeez Kaori-chan, you could have just said yes or no to my question!" Megumi exclaimed with an embarrassed laugh.

"Oh my, I guess I did just ramble on at you," Kaori responded with a laugh of her own.

"But no, thank you, seriously. You've given me a lot to think about," Megumi said. "Hanako is waiting for me so I better go! See you tomorrow Kaori-chan!"

"See you tomorrow. And remember, it's Izumi-sensei!"

2. Differing Paths

Hanako had been friends with Megumi long enough to realise that something was bothering her. She had waited diligently outside the classroom for Megumi to finish speaking with Kaori-sensei, fighting the urge to eavesdrop on their conversation. However, Hanako knew that if Megumi wanted to speak with their homeroom teacher alone it must have been important.

The pair had been inseparable since before primary school and it was exceptionally rare for Megumi to have wanted to do something without Hanako standing by her side. Even if Hanako wasn't keen on one of Megumi's various exploits, she ended up unwillingly getting dragged into them.

As the pair of them walked towards the train station on their way home Megumi nattered away about the shortened school day's events, acting as if nothing was going on. However, Hanako noticed the tone of Megumi's voice drop every now and again, as well as the occasional, uncharacteristic pause in her usually scattershot way of speaking. The pair approached a pedestrian crossing, stopping for the red light. Hanako glanced over at Megumi's face. She was smiling while talking as usual, but her smile seemed forced.

"Megumi," Hanako began, her voice not hiding her worry, "is something wrong?"

Megumi stopped smiling almost immediately. She glanced up at the traffic lights momentarily, sighing softly.

"Nothing ever gets past you," Megumi said with a defeated smile.

“Well, it’s just that nothing usually gets you down,” Hanako noted.

The traffic lights for the crossing turned green and let out a repeating, bird-like chirp. The pair walked across the street and stopped by a vending machine on the other side. Megumi bought herself a canned café au lait and instinctively bought a bottled green tea, handing it over to Hanako. The two of them continued to walk forward in silence to a small playground on the way to their station. After making their way inside the park, they perched themselves on two swings.

Megumi opened her canned café au lait and took a sip. She fidgeted with her feet for a moment, pushing herself backwards and forwards on the swing slightly. Megumi glanced around the playground before summoning the courage to speak. Hanako seemed more than happy to let her friend take her time.

“I...I don’t know what to put down on my career survey,” Megumi began. “I know that we’re third years now and that I should have a rough idea what I want to do but I’m just really not sure.”

She looked over to Hanako, expecting her to say something along the lines of Megumi needing to get her act together. Hanako had always been an exemplary student, also having just been made the vice president of the student council midway through their second year.

That came with its own set of challenges, however. As well as performing her duties in the student council, Hanako was also expected to keep up her grades which had been consistently among the top in her year. The expectation was also that she would go to a top university and set herself up for a prestigious career track.

Of course, few of Hanako's teachers asked her what she thought of all these expectations. She took it in her stride however, as she genuinely enjoyed studying and learning as well as the responsibilities of her student council work. As long as she could spend time with her friends and her band, she was happy enough to go along with it all.

Megumi was a different case; she did well enough in school but was definitely a person you would describe as lacking an academic focus. She did enough to get by so that she could focus on her true passions of music and playing guitar without drawing undue attention from her teachers and parents.

To anyone who didn't know about her hobbies, it seemed that she drifted through school somewhat aimlessly and the only teacher who would seriously hear her out on matters of music was Kaori-sensei. It was because of this that Hanako wasn't all that surprised that Megumi didn't know what to put down as her options on the career survey. The thing that caught Hanako off guard was that Megumi was at all worried about it.

"Well," Hanako said, slowly opening her bottle of green tea before taking a drink, "why not start with what you really want to do?"

Megumi smiled softly before letting out a sigh. "Well, I know what I *want* to do," she began. "I've had it in my head that I want to be a musician. But I know that's not easy and I haven't thought about how I would even do that."

Megumi continued to gently rock back and forward on the swing while Hanako pondered her words. "You aren't thinking of going to a music school?" Hanako asked.

"I mean, I'm thinking about it and I'm not at the same time," Megumi replied. "Like, I want to go to music school to focus on guitar but then I'm not sure what I would do after

that and then I don't want to go suddenly. And then there's real life stuff, like money and getting a job. I can't just rely on my parents forever you know." Megumi shook her head and clutched at her hair, "Argh, I just don't know!"

"Is this what you asked Kaori-sensei about?" Hanako inquired.

"Yeah," Megumi replied, releasing her grip on her hair. "It was good speaking to her to get her perspective on everything. But like, she didn't give me an answer because I guess there really isn't an answer. I have to make my mind up, but I don't know where to start."

Hanako looked down at her feet and stayed silent. While she loved playing in a band with Megumi, Mari, and Reina, as well as having grown to love the bass guitar as an instrument, she was perfectly content to keep it as a hobby. The internal conflict going on within Megumi's mind simply wasn't happening in Hanako's, which is why she felt she couldn't say anything constructive or reassuring. As her oldest friend, the least she could do though was to lend an ear to Megumi's troubles.

Suddenly, Megumi stopped swinging, leapt off of the swing and turned abruptly to face Hanako. Her eyes locked on intensely onto Hanako's, which the latter found somewhat embarrassing. It was clear however that Megumi had found another train of thought to pursue and it very intimately involved Hanako.

"Hanako, what are *you* doing?" Megumi asked, still staring intensely at Hanako.

"W-what am I doing about what?" Hanako stammered in response.

"Your career survey! Your future, like, all of that stuff!"

Hanako peeled herself away from Megumi's gaze for a moment to regain her composure. Megumi was oddly intense when she latched onto an idea or train of thought but whatever had her attention usually changed very quickly, hence her reputation for being a free spirit. Hanako breathed out slowly, knowing that they were probably going to have this conversation at some point or another.

Hanako had played this scenario out over and over in her head of how Megumi and her talking about how their choice of university would invariably lead to them being separated.

"Well," Hanako began meekly, "I'm thinking about applying to the University of Tokyo as my first choice."

"University of Tokyo, as in *Toudai*?!⁸ You're applying to *Toudai*?!" Megumi exclaimed.

Her surprise was not unfounded. The University of Tokyo, or *Toudai* as its colloquially known, had a reputation for being one of the most prestigious universities in all of Japan, as well as being very difficult to get into. Being accepted to the University of Tokyo carried its own prestige as a result.

Megumi dialled back her surprise a touch and calmed herself down. "Well, if anybody can get into *Toudai* it's you Hanako," Megumi said with a soft smile.

"Thanks," Hanako replied shyly. "I think that with my grades and my student council activities, I should have a good shot at getting in, so it made sense to apply."

"I could never get into *Toudai*. I guess that means we're going to go separate ways after high school," Megumi observed with a hint of sadness in her voice.

8. *Toudai*, 東大, is an abbreviation of the full Japanese name, which is *Tōkyō daigaku*, 東京大学.

Those words hit Hanako harder than she had imagined when she had gone over this in her head. She knew that Megumi had neither the interest or the grades to apply to the University of Tokyo and that the inseparable pair would be separated. Knowing and accepting that didn't make it any easier to hear those words come out from Megumi's mouth, however.

Adjusting to a daily routine where they no longer walk to school together, eat lunch together, go home together, and laugh and cry together just felt incredibly sad to Hanako. Megumi reached her hand out and placed it softly on Hanako's shoulder. "It means all your hard work is paying off," Megumi said with a smile. "If anybody can get accepted to *Toudai*, it's you Hanako."

Hanako looked back at Megumi and saw no hint of the anxiety that was plaguing her just a moment ago. Instead on her face was a look of genuine happiness and encouragement, which Hanako couldn't help but smile at in return. Megumi wore her emotions on her sleeve and hid nothing; when she said something, she truly meant it.

"Hanako, you're crying."

Hanako hastily wiped her eyes with the back of her left arm and indeed felt tears flowing from her eyes. She had started crying without even realising it.

"Huh, I guess I am," Hanako said, placing her head into her hands.

Megumi moved herself over to her friend who was still sat in her swing and hugged her gently.

"It's okay, we'll still be friends, we'll still see each other all the time," Megumi reassured softly. "Don't be sad, you're doing something amazing and I'm happy for you."

Hanako sniffed loudly and tried again in vain to wipe her eyes only to look up and see Megumi herself crying. Despite that, she also wore a beaming smile. All her emotions, her sadness at their differing paths, her pride in seeing her best friend choosing a path for herself, they all came to the fore.

“You’re crying as well,” Hanako said, unable to stop herself from laughing at their situation.

“I guess I am,” Megumi replied, mirroring Hanako’s earlier statement.

The two spent a moment collecting themselves and stopping themselves from crying and laughing. They sat in silence for a while, just rocking on the swings and listening to the sound of cars driving by.

“It’s a little sad,” Megumi remarked. “I know that we’ll both miss being around each other every day, but like, it doesn’t change that we’ve been best friends since we were little kids and that we’ll always be best friends.”

“Megumi...” Hanako said, only managing to say her name.

“I’m not going to lie to you or myself and say I’ve got a chance of getting into *Toudai*. I still have no idea what I want to do,” Megumi continued. “But the one thing I’m absolutely sure of is regardless of where either of us go, nothing will change between us.”

* * * * *

Megumi opened the door to her room and tossed her school bag on her bed before slumping into the chair at her desk. She hadn’t even considered the prospect of not seeing her best and oldest friend on a daily basis. All things considered, going your separate ways was a normal part of growing up but Megumi had taken it for granted that things

would stay the same, at least for their last year of high school. Her conversations with Kaori and Hanako had been a reality check, however.

She lifted herself out of her chair and back to her bag which she had hastily cast away before. After a brief rummage through the contents, Megumi pulled out the sheet of paper that had been the cause of so much anxiety.

Three boxes made up the majority of the page, one for each option of further education or career choice in order of preference. Megumi had done these before in previous years but had always filled in music school as her main option without much consideration. As she was in her final year, this time it really mattered, and the school considered the choices as close to final.

Sitting down back at her desk, she picked up a mechanical pencil and clicked down on the end three times, exposing enough pencil lead to write. Tapping on her desk with the rear end of the pencil, she considered her options. The main choice to make was between going to a music school or going to a regular university and keeping music as a hobby.

Going to music school put her passion at the forefront of her education, but her chances of actually working in the music industry as a professional guitarist were up in the air. Going down the traditional path of further education increased her chances of getting a decent job after university, but in her mind, music would remain as a hobby at most.

Megumi clutched at her hair, frustrated at her inability to decide. The prospects of her 'making it' as a guitarist seemed so uncertain, despite the efforts that she and her bandmates had made over the last year. She hadn't even thought about becoming a musician in all honesty; it was just something she really enjoyed with people who she enjoyed being around.

At the same time however, Megumi was unsure if she would be satisfied if music was just something she just did for fun in her spare time after graduating high school. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted music to be what she lived and breathed and the more agonising it was to think about how she would even get to that.

Megumi let out an exasperated sigh and put her pencil down. She slumped backwards into her chair and stared at the ceiling for a moment, recalling her conversation with Hanako. *She's really applying for Toudai, huh?* Megumi thought to herself. That thought led her to think about the other two members of her band, Mari and Reina.

Mari was still in second year so after the three third years in the band had graduated, she would still be in school in her final year. Megumi had never asked her what her plans were after school and now seemed as good a time as ever. She grabbed her phone from her desk and quickly picked out 'Mari-chan' from her list of contacts to call her.

After a brief ring, Mari answered in her usual exuberant manner, "Megumi-senpai⁹! How can I help you?"

"Hi Mari-chan," Megumi replied. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine! I'm looking forward to our practise this weekend. How are you?"

"I'm good thanks. Listen, I wanted to ask you something."

"Anything for you Megumi-senpai!"

9. *Senpai*, 先輩, is the honorific used for somebody who is a senior to you in either school or work. Megumi is in the year above Mari at school, so she refers to Megumi as *Megumi-senpai*. It is also possible for Mari to simply refer to Megumi as *senpai*. Conversely, somebody who is junior at school or work is known as a *koubai*, 後輩. However, *koubai* is only used as a noun and not as an honorific, or replacement for somebody's name.

Megumi exhaled slowly and asked, “So um, what are your plans for after you graduate high school?”

“Music school probably,” Mari answered almost instantly.

“Oh?” Megumi said, taken aback by how quickly she had responded.

“I mean, it’s like my plan for now and things could change but yeah, I think I want to go to music school,” Mari expanded. “What about you?”

“I’m not sure just yet,” Megumi responded. “I can’t make my mind up about going to music school or going to university.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out senpai!” Mari said in a confident tone. “Oh sorry, I’ve got to go help my mum with dinner. Call me later tonight if you want to talk, okay?”

“Sure thing, Mari-chan. Speak to you later.”

Megumi hung up and sighed. It was possible Mari hadn’t considered all the options and possibilities but knowing her personality, it was more than likely that she had just set her sights on music school and was aiming for it no matter what.

Megumi was reminded of when the pair had first met and how Mari dedicated herself to learning progressive metal music after hearing Megumi play it, becoming enamoured with that style of music and becoming fast friends with both Megumi and Hanako.

Staring at her phone, Megumi was reminded that there was someone else she needed to ask about their plans. She scrolled down her contacts to find ‘Reina’, pausing briefly before pressing on her name to call her. Megumi didn’t see Reina as often as either Hanako or Mari as she went to a different high school but the pair had grown close in the year or so since they met and as a four, they made good friends and bandmates.

Reina had actually gone to the same middle school as both Megumi and Hanako, however Megumi had forgotten that fact when they had next met a few years later in their second year of high school. Out of all the girls in their band, Reina was probably the one most singularly dedicated to practising her instrument. She had an electric drum kit for practising at home and had played the drums religiously since a young age.

Even today with a third-year high school workload, looming entrance exams, and the demands of their own band Reina managed to practise every day that she was home. Megumi admired that about her as she was prone to having lazy days where she would watch videos online or play mobile games in her free time at home, time that Reina would most likely have used to practise drumming.

Megumi placed her phone to her ear and listened hesitantly to the ringing, waiting to see if Reina would pick up or not. She heard a click in the earpiece of her phone as Reina answered. “Hello?”

Megumi smiled and responded, “Hi Reina, how are you doing?”

“I was just about to practise some of the new songs we wrote over the winter break. How about you?”

That’s so like you, Megumi thought, smiling as she did. It was hard to tell if Reina was a talented drummer or not because she worked so hard that it would either make up for any deficit in talent or solidify it.

“I just got home from school, it was a half day because of the opening ceremony,” Megumi said in reply to Reina’s question. “You don’t start school until next week, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty happy to get another week to just play drums!” Reina exclaimed gleefully.

Megumi laughed. There was a wholesome innocence in the way Reina took joy at the prospect of just being able to play her instrument. It's something that had rubbed off on Megumi who would have described herself as someone who is passionate about playing guitar.

Playing music with Reina reminded her to keep things simple and to enjoy the act of simply playing your instrument. She also reminded Megumi that more often than not, the most important thing was to have fun.

"What are you laughing about?" Reina asked, with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"Sorry, I always just like, find it so cute how much fun you have playing drums," Megumi replied with a giggle. "Anyway, do you have time to talk?"

"I-i-it's n-not cute...I mean...uh..." Reina began, fumbling all over her words. "...Yeah, I have time to talk."

Megumi smiled. Reina was awkward around receiving compliments and praise, a fact which both Mari and Megumi used to constantly tease her. There was something about that awkwardness that also made Reina incredibly endearing to the rest of the girls in the band.

"Thanks Reina," Megumi responded, still smiling. "So...we got career surveys before we left school today and it got me thinking that I haven't asked you about your plans after school."

"My plans after school?" Reina began, pausing for a moment to think. "So um, you know how my dad is a saxophonist?"

"Yeah, you're always so proud of him whenever he does shows!"

Megumi felt like she could almost hear Reina audibly pouting in protest over the phone at her comment. Reina's

parents were both very musical with Reina's father being a professional saxophonist and her mother being a very capable piano player.

She had talked previously about how her father had played in various ensembles and jazz groups before accepting a teaching position at a music school in Tokyo. Reina's mother was, like Kaori, also a music teacher albeit for middle school.

"Y-yes, I am proud of him when he plays," Reina responded with an embarrassed tone. "But okay, so when my dad finished high school, he studied overseas in America at the Berklee College of Music. He still knows a few people over there and suggested that I apply."

Her response came as a shock to Megumi. While Reina was always happy behind a drumkit, Megumi had never imagined that she would have aspirations this lofty. Studying overseas was a daunting prospect for any student with a new country, language, and culture to contend with. Megumi could never imagine herself doing it and even thinking about it made her nervous.

"So...you're really going to America after you graduate?" Megumi asked, looking for confirmation.

"I mean, it's not like it's a sure thing or anything. I still have to apply and audition," Reina replied. "But I like the idea of it. I'm definitely going to try my best to get in."

"I'm sure you'll get in," Megumi encouraged. "I just never imagined you'd be going so far away."

"Like I said, there's no guarantee about it. Also, just because I'm going to America for a few years doesn't mean we won't see each other during the holidays. And don't you dare think that our band is going to break up! I'm expecting you to keep writing new music and send me what you've done so I can write drum parts!"

Megumi let out a laugh. She didn't even consider that even while they were going to different universities or even countries their band could still continue. It might be a long-distance band, but the prospect of continuing to write music with these friends who Megumi had grown to adore reassured her greatly. It still didn't bring her any closer to deciding what path she would take towards her future but maybe everything didn't have to change in the process.

"What about you Megumi, what are your plans?" Reina asked.

"I'll be honest with you; I'm not sure yet," Megumi replied. "But it's made me much happier to realise that regardless of whether I go to university or music school, I'll always have people I can play music with."

"Well, of course!" Reina said smugly. "Don't think something like me studying overseas would get in the way of us playing music together!"

The pair laughed and continued their phone conversation for the next half an hour, talking about Megumi's conversations with Hanako and Mari, as well as considering what Megumi's options could be. They also made small talk and caught up since they hadn't seen each other in two weeks. Speaking to Reina always managed to make Megumi go back to basics and realise the simple, yet important things.

A difficult decision still lay ahead of her and the prospect of being separated from her friends was not a pleasant one. But nothing would take away Megumi's love and passion for playing music and nothing would take away the friends she played music with. She would do her utmost to stay connected to music regardless of the path she would choose to walk.

3. A Future with No Colour

“One tall latte please, to go.”

After paying, the barista confirmed Megumi’s order to the rest of the staff in the coffee shop as they set about preparing her drink and serving the next in a long line of customers. Megumi shuffled along the front counter, checking her watch as she did. It had just hit six o’clock in the evening. She glanced outside the coffee shop and saw swathes of people walking in either direction outside.

Even in the basement of Tokyo Station below where access to all the train platforms was, commuters moved *en masse* as the day’s rush hour continued. Megumi sighed at the prospect of how unpleasant today’s commute home would be.

“Tall latte for Uehara-san!” yelled the clerk at the end of the counter. Megumi gave a soft thank you as she picked up her coffee and walked out into the crowds. Trying her best to not bump into anybody, Megumi glanced up at the signs marking directions to the Chiyoda metro line, slowly sipping her coffee as she did.

She made this commute every workday yet the sea of unfamiliar faces walking by made her feel uneasy. The signs marking directions to the myriad of train and metro lines in this maze of a station felt like Megumi’s only connection to the outside world.

She briefly tapped her IC card¹⁰ onto the reader on the ticket barrier and made her way to the platform. Megumi sighed again as she stood in a line of about a dozen people waiting to board the next train. All but one of the people waiting in line were in business attire, the last being a man holding onto a guitar case.

One older gentleman in the line was reading a novel, most were browsing on their phones, and a pair of women were chatting to each other about their day's work. All along the platform it was a similar story with queues of people waiting to board a train that was in all likelihood already near capacity. Heads turned as the rush of noise of the arriving train flooded in, with announcements warning to stay away from the platform edge playing over the station intercom.

Megumi gingerly climbed aboard the train car and grabbed the nearest handrail, trying to create enough space for herself in the crush of travellers. After the train began to move, keeping her left arm as close to her body as possible, she pulled her phone out of her bag and checked her Line app¹¹.

She had sent a message to Hanako earlier to see if she was free to catch up that evening and saw a reply in her notification tray. 'Sorry Megumi, I'm still super busy with work and won't finish until late. We can try and catch-up this weekend,' the message read.

That's what you said last week as well, Megumi thought to herself, letting out a soft sigh.

10. An IC Card is a reusable smartcard, similar to London's Oyster Card, that is used in order to pay for public transport such as trains and buses all throughout Japan. They are also increasingly accepted by vending machines, and even certain shops and restaurants.

11. Line is an instant messaging app that is almost ubiquitous in Japan. It is similar in features to apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, or Viber.

Her life had become an endless cycle of waking up, going to work, working, going home, sleeping, and repeating. On weekends, she either felt no motivation to go out and whenever she did, her friends were busy. In the eyes of Japanese society however, she was becoming a model citizen. She had a good job at a large firm and stayed out of trouble but despite that she had never felt so tired and without purpose.

While she didn't hate her job, she felt like she was working for the sake of working so that she could pay her rent and bills, without receiving any sense of fulfilment from her work. There were also days when things got hectic and she would spend ten to twelve hours at work, or even more on particularly bad days, which never seemed worth it to her.

Megumi spent the rest of her forty-five-minute commute staring at her phone, mindlessly scrolling through her Twitter and Instagram feeds and finding nothing that interested her. She would periodically look around at the other people in the train car with her and saw many people doing the same as her.

Everybody seemed absorbed in their own world. She then glanced up at the advertisement boards hanging from the ceiling of the train car. 'See virtuoso pianist Kaori Izumi in concert, on tour in April!' one read. Megumi had heard and seen the name before previously but now, like back then, paid no further heed to it.

The train eventually arrived at her stop and Megumi was relieved to finally get off. Before heading home, she stopped by a convenience store near the station to buy a ready-made dinner. After buying her meal for the evening, she headed home in earnest. The walk to her flat took her ten minutes. The sights and scenes of the ward of Tokyo that she lived in passed her by without notice like it did every other day.

Arriving at the apartment complex in which she lived, she climbed the two flights of stairs to her floor, opened her door, and flung her shoes off into the landing with abandon. She put her work bag and her shopping bag on her kitchen counter before collapsing onto her sofa, still in her suit and skirt.

She clutched at a cushion on the sofa and glanced around her flat. It was a modest but comfortable one-bedroom property with an open kitchen and living space. Most working denizens of Tokyo would be happy to call this home after only being in the workforce for a few years and it served Megumi well enough.

The problem was that it just didn't make her feel *anything*. It was just a place to come back to after work where she ate and slept; she didn't really consider it a home. After laying on her sofa for a few minutes, Megumi felt a pang of hunger and so changed into casual clothes before heating her meal in the microwave. She grabbed a small can of beer out of her fridge before sitting back down on her sofa to eat her dinner.

The ready meal tasted adequate and the beer was refreshing for the most part although Megumi didn't care too much as long as it filled her up. As she ate, Megumi picked up the remote for her TV and switched it on, more looking for something to play in the background while she ate instead of actively watching. She flicked through channels with her mouth full of rice and pork cutlet and settled on a variety show that she didn't particularly care about.

While eating, Megumi felt her energy sapping away bit by bit despite it still being relatively early at night. This was a common occurrence; she would get home, eat dinner, and fall asleep before ten o'clock while browsing her phone in bed and tonight would be no different. Megumi didn't fully realise it, but she had become a slave to her routine and her routine left

her no room after anything else in life other than working and sleeping.

* * * * *

“One latte please, to go.”

“What size?” the barista asked. Megumi looked up at the young woman serving her with glazed over eyes. She could barely focus on the words being spoken to her.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” Megumi responded, still half in a daze.

“What size latte did you want?”

“Oh sorry, tall please.”

The barista raised an eyebrow before taking payment and confirming Megumi’s order to the rest of the staff. It was all too common a sight at this time of night. It had just gone eight-thirty and there were still droves of people returning home from work in amongst the folks going out for dinner or drinks. Megumi let out a heavy sigh as she waited for her coffee. It had just been one of those days at work.

Their client had been late in forwarding some data and since the documentation that needed that data had a deadline of first thing tomorrow morning, that obviously meant that Megumi’s team had to stay late to get everything done in time.

Her manager was also very by the book and insisted that everybody stay while she reviewed everything in case any changes needed to be made. All things considered; she was lucky to leave as ‘early’ as ten past eight. There had been instances in the past where she left work so late, she had to get the last train back.

On her commute back home Megumi checked her phone, intending to occupy herself with her Instagram and Twitter

feeds. She noticed a Line notification on her phone and opened the app to see a message from Hanako. ‘Sorry, going to have to take a rain-check on this weekend, work has me travelling to Osaka on a client project. I’m back next week though, let’s do something then!’ it read.

Megumi’s arm slumped down to her side, phone still in hand. It was the same story; they would enthusiastically message each other about catching up before work or other things inevitably got in the way. They were lucky to see each other once every few months.

It was understandable to Megumi why Hanako was so busy. She was a rising star at the finance firm she worked at, having already been promoted to a managerial position despite how young she was. That reputation meant that the expectations placed on her were exceedingly high and Hanako was the type of person who always did her utmost to live up to them.

Megumi didn’t feel like replying to Hanako’s message and spent the rest of her train journey either staring at the ceiling of the train car or outside the window as night-time Tokyo rushed by.

She saw more advertisements for the upcoming tour of the pianist Kaori Izumi and she pondered again for a moment why that name seemed so familiar to her. Maybe she had seen the name and face on TV before but couldn’t exactly place it. Putting it out of her mind, Megumi then counted the stops before she got to her station.

Megumi went through her usual routine of collapsing on her sofa after arriving home, this time spending a few more minutes than usual laying there after the day she just had. Resolving to get up and eat, she changed clothes, warmed her convenience store meal, and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

Going through the same routine as the previous evening, and many an evening before that, she switched on her TV and flicked through the channels, looking for suitable background noise. Tonight, she settled on a talk show while she set about eating her rice and teriyaki salmon.

While sipping on her beer, she glanced up and saw a woman that she immediately recognised. She was also holding a guitar while she was being interviewed, which further piqued her interest. Still holding her beer, Megumi grabbed the TV remote with her free hand and turned up the volume so that she could properly hear the interview.

“So, Mari-san, your latest album is out and you made a point to record all the guitars yourself. Tell us why it was important to you to play guitar on the record?” the interviewer asked.

In front of her on the screen was Mari Matsumoto, her junior and former bandmate from high school. The two had fallen out of contact after Megumi went to university with neither seemingly having either the time or the will to reach out to each other.

As far as she was aware, Mari had gone to a music school in Tokyo but didn't know which one. During university and after starting work, Megumi had never thought to reach out to Mari despite how close they were during school. Seeing her on TV genuinely surprised Megumi and made her curious as to what she had to say.

“I've been playing guitar since I was ten but by the time I had entered high school, I had sort of fallen out of love with the instrument,” Mari replied to the interviewer. “I was about ready to give up guitar when I heard a senpai of mine playing guitar.”

“So, this senpai of yours inspired you to play guitar again?”

“Yes, exactly!” Mari answered enthusiastically. “She was playing a style of music I had never heard before where the guitar was at the forefront. I think that was the moment I realised I could do so much more with guitar and the moment where I fell back in love with the instrument.”

Mari said all of this with a beaming smile on her face. It was clear to Megumi that Mari hadn’t changed at all. She remembered how back in high school they would spend hours talking about the most trivial, guitar related things, and loving every moment of it. While Mari had continued to follow her passion, Megumi couldn’t remember the last time that she had even picked up a guitar, never mind played one.

“My music now is different from what I played back then, but I love playing guitar and I wanted to make it a big part of my new album,” Mari continued. “That’s why I wanted to play all the guitars on the album myself. My manager said there are so many other session guitarists who could have played on the record meaning I would have to do less work but when it’s fun it’s not really work is it?”

“When work is what you love, you love your work!” the interviewer agreed in a corny fashion. “And where is this senpai of yours now?”

“We haven’t spoken in years, but I hope she’s doing well. She’s definitely a huge part of why I’m here now and I hope she still loves playing guitar, like she always has!”

Megumi immediately switched off the TV, stopped eating, and placed her chopsticks down on the table. She leapt off of her sofa and sprinted towards her bedroom. Furiously opening her wardrobe, she began tossing aside her neatly folded clothes in order to access the back. Out of breath, she panted, surrounded by a pile of clothes. In front of her at the very rear of her wardrobe was a single, black guitar hard case.

She grabbed the case and catapulted it onto her bed. Feverishly, Megumi undid the latches holding the case shut, sending the dust that had collected on the case around her room as she did. After desperately clawing the case open, she saw inside her prized possession from high school.

She ran her hand over the matte finish of the guitar top, following the pattern of the flamed maple. The purple finish had remained pristine during its time in the case and, as if a floodgate had opened in her mind, the memories of the time she had spent with this guitar came back to her.

The hours she spent practising instead of doing homework, the time she spent learning and writing songs, and the time she spent playing music with her band from high school; they all vividly replayed in her head. She hesitantly picked the guitar up by the neck, handling it as if it would break and shatter at any moment and sat down on the edge of her bed, placing the guitar in her lap.

Megumi ran her fingers across the strings, softly strumming each of them and hearing that it was woefully out of tune. She did her best to tune the guitar by ear and settled on when each string sounded in tune relative to each other. Looking around her bedroom for a guitar plectrum, Megumi realised that in all those years she hadn't played guitar she didn't have a single one lying around.

She remembered back to when she was in high school that her desk at home was a mess of plectrums of various sorts and all she had to do was reach out to a random point on her desk to pick one up. Megumi resorted to using her fingernails as a makeshift plectrum.

As she struggled to make the shapes of chords she had once known very well, she desperately tried to play one of her favourite songs. The tips of the fingers on her left hand ached

as she pressed down on the strings but as she started playing, that hardly mattered to her at all. Megumi struggled with the chord changes, the fingers on both her hands hurting, but despite that she felt a joy she had not experienced in years.

This was what she used to love; this was what she used to be passionate about. This collection of wood and thin metal wires in her hands and the times she spent playing it with her friends; they used to be the most important things in the world to her.

Megumi then wondered how she fell out of contact with both Mari and Reina and why she never ever mentioned music to Hanako on the rare occasions that they met up. The fact that Mari still fondly remembered their time together while Megumi hadn't even known that she was pursuing music so deeply hurt her. She could have been there for Mari, helping her become the artist that she is now but was instead a footnote in Mari's biography.

Megumi then thought about Reina and how she didn't even know where she was and what she was doing. She didn't even know if Reina had returned to Japan from America and at this point, didn't even know how to start reaching out to her. Reina and Mari were so important to her and now she didn't even know if she could look the pair of them in the eyes.

How did I get to this point? How could I forget about my friends, how much I loved playing guitar? Megumi thought to herself. The monotonous routine she had ended up accepting, the job that she wasn't sure whether she hated or felt completely indifferent about, feeling tired every day after coming back to her flat despite sitting at a desk all day, she wondered and wondered how and why she let herself get to this point.

It was as if she had been living in a world without colour and this guitar and the music she could play on it was the brush

that could paint it all back. Megumi's vision began to blur as she felt tears dropping down onto her thighs. The emotion of reconnecting with something she loved so much became overwhelming.

At the same time, she chastised herself for somehow letting this instrument, the music she played, and her friends go. She had traded her passion for stability and routine at the cost of her own happiness. As she wept, her only wish was that she could somehow go back and undo whatever had led her to get to this point.

* * * * *

The sound of Megumi's phone alarm blared around her room. She felt an unfamiliar hardness on her back. As she tried to sit up, she realised that her duvet had become entangled around her body. Wriggling herself free from the confines of her duvet, Megumi looked around her bedroom in confusion.

To her right was her bed. Megumi had somehow rolled off of her bed when her alarm sounded and had ended up on her bedroom floor. Slowly getting to her feet, Megumi stretched her arms before turning off her alarm. She wearily rubbed her eyes, walked out of her bedroom, and headed to the bathroom.

She splashed cold water over her face in an attempt to wake herself up. Megumi was not a morning person and had to make a considerable effort in order to get herself going after getting up. While brushing her teeth, she stared into the bathroom mirror and slowly began to recount the dream she had last night. She remembered being in a coffee shop, on a train, and sitting by herself eating dinner in a flat.

Little by little, the details became clearer in her mind. It was a dream about herself in the future it seemed, about how

Megumi had entered the workforce. The feelings she had experienced in that dream also came back to her as she dried her face with a towel, feelings of monotony, of loneliness, and apathy.

As she changed into her school uniform, some of the finer details became clearer. She remembered how the Hanako in her dream was always too busy to see her. She remembered seeing her teacher's name on advertisement boards on a train.

Apparently in the future she had dreamed, Kaori Izumi never became a schoolteacher and had instead pursued her dream to become a famous pianist. Megumi chuckled at the prospect of seeing her teacher in an elegant dress, sitting at a grand piano in a packed-out concert hall. While doing up her hair, Megumi recollected more of her dream.

She had seen Mari on a TV talk show, talking about her new album. Mari had apparently become a famous singer-songwriter. She was quite a good singer, by far the best in their band, so Megumi could imagine that happening. The details of what Mari had said in the dream interview were still hazy, but Megumi recalled a feeling of loss while watching that interview, of feeling like there was something she had forgotten about and left behind.

She walked towards the living room and kitchen of her family apartment. Her mother was in the kitchen, paradoxically wearing an apron over her suit and her father was sat at their dining table, reading the news on his tablet while sipping a coffee.

Megumi could hear her little sister shuffling about in the bathroom behind her. It was a typical scene in the Uehara household every morning. Both her parents worked but insisted that they all have breakfast together. Megumi had no

complaints about that; she got on well with her parents and little sister and enjoyed moments like this with her family.

Megumi took a seat at the dining table and greeted her parents. They both replied with a smile. As she waited for her mother to finish preparing breakfast, she recalled the final part of her dream. She remembered herself rummaging through her wardrobe and finding a guitar case. Recalling the sadness the Megumi in her dream felt, she saw how she had lost her connection to music and guitar, her friendships, and had been living a dreary existence where all she did was work and sleep.

She didn't know whether she had that dream because of her worries over what to do with her future but it seemed too much of a coincidence for it not to have been. Maybe it was a warning of what would happen if she became detached from music. She didn't know for sure, but what she did know was that she did not want to experience the feelings that the Megumi in her dream had experienced.

Megumi's little sister sat down beside her and greeted everybody, to which they all responded in kind. Megumi's mother laid bowls of rice and miso soup in front of all the members of the Uehara family and said 'itadakimasu'¹² before eating, as was customary in Japan before having a meal. As they ate, Megumi talked about the dream she had the previous night and the feelings that her dream counterpart had felt.

Her family listened with interest and they mused that it definitely had to do with the fact that she had a choice to make about her future. However, her parents and sister reassured her

12. The Japanese language is full of phrases used for certain contexts, with longstanding cultural roots behind the use of these phrases and no direct translation to English as they depend entirely on the context. *itadakimasu*, translates roughly as 'I humbly receive' but is most often used before meals, taking on a meaning similar to 'let's eat' or 'bon appétit'.

that they would support her regardless of what she decided to do. Megumi smiled, thankful for their words of backing and encouragement.

“Do you think that I would stop playing guitar after I got a job?” Megumi asked.

“Not a chance,” her father replied with a chuckle.

“Yeah, all you ever do is like, play and talk about guitar,” her sister said with a giggle of her own.

“I feel like after you move out, I would have to call you and ask if you’re taking proper care of your guitar, as if it were a pet or something!” Megumi’s mother added.

Megumi smiled while staring down at her food and remarked, “Yeah, I guess there’s no way I would let the future in that dream happen.”

4. Hanako's Shoujo Manga Spinoff!

As the school day ended Hanako went about her usual routine, packing away her textbooks and notebooks into her bag, and saying her goodbyes to Megumi and her classmates before making her way to the student council room. The hallways of her school were brimming with activity as students either made their way to the exit or to their various clubs.

Third year students generally retired from their clubs after the cultural festival and the student council was no exception to this rule; Hanako started as the vice president of the student council after the cultural festival in her second year. Having been in the role for a few months, she had gotten used to her responsibilities.

It was difficult making time for schoolwork, preparations for entrance exams, and her band, but she was determined to make it work. As she approached the student council room, she opened the door and saw only one person inside. Hanako smiled, looking forward to her work and her conversations with that person.

“Good afternoon, *kaichou*¹³,” Hanako greeted. As the student council president returned her salutation, Hanako couldn't help but remember how they had gotten off on completely the wrong foot the day that they started in the student council together.

13. Hanako refers to Kenta as 会長, *kaichou*, which translates to president or chairman, and in this context, is short for 生徒会長, *seito-kaichou*, meaning ‘student council president’. It is common practise for students and members of the student council to refer to the student council president as *kaichou* as a sign of respect, especially in this case where Hanako and Kenta are not well acquainted.

It had happened several months ago in her second year, just after the student council elections had ended and she had been assigned to the position of vice-president through staff recommendation. She remembered her first day with the student council president as if it were yesterday.

* * * * *

Hanako gently tapped the pile of paper she was holding against the desk multiple times, lining up all the sheets with one another. She glanced over to the clock in the student council room to check the time. It had just gone four o'clock and with her first day of student council work done for the day, Hanako packed her things and got ready to leave. "You're leaving, Todoroki-san?" the student council president asked.

Hanako nodded in response, not making eye contact. The student council president was a young man by the name of Kenta Igarashi. Hanako didn't know him very well and had only really heard of him through his popularity within the school. He was fairly tall young man with a slim frame, standing about a head taller than Hanako, who herself was the tallest girl amongst her immediate friend group.

Kenta placed the pile of papers he was holding down on the desk and took off his glasses to wipe them with his shirt. He ran his fingers through his medium-length hair for a moment, which reached down to just below his eyebrows, before putting his glasses back on.

"Okay, I should be finishing soon too so do you mind waiting?" Kenta asked. He had an intense look that accentuated his handsome face, which definitely contributed to his popularity. Another factor in his notoriety was due to having been a star player in their school's baseball team. When

he entered the running for student council president, he won the subsequent election by a large margin. With good grades, his spot on the baseball team, his popularity, and being well liked by the faculty, his victory had been assured.

Other positions in the student council were made up either from volunteers that had to be vetted by the faculty or through recommendations from the school's teachers themselves. Hanako was recommended to take the position of student council vice-president because of her grades and good standing among the staff and she saw no reason to refuse, despite having no real desire for a student council position. If anything, once expectations were placed on her she earnestly set out to meet them.

"Sorry *kaichou*, I'm going over to my friend's house today and I don't want to keep her or my other friends waiting," Hanako replied, bowing her head slightly in apology.

"Oh, is it your band thing?"

Band thing. The way he phrased it annoyed her slightly. Referring to it that way came across as incredibly dismissive to Hanako. Still, she humoured Kenta with a reply, "Yes, we're writing music today."

"You play guitar, right?" Kenta asked, continuing his line of questioning.

"Bass guitar," Hanako corrected.

"My bad, bass guitar," Kenta said with a chuckle. "I just never thought that you, one of the top students in the school of all people, playing in a band."

"We all have our hobbies," Hanako responded with a forced smile.

"True, true," Kenta conceded. "I just can't imagine a group of high school girls meeting up to write music, surely it can't be that fun."

It had been a while since Hanako had been this annoyed by something said to her. She normally avoided speaking to people if she could help it due to her shyness, but her getting ticked off was something she usually reserved for when Megumi's antics inevitably got out of hand. However, Hanako felt like she could not let Kenta's statement go unchallenged.

"Well, I'm pretty sure what gender you are is irrelevant when it comes to wanting to write and play music," Hanako began, the irritation apparent in her voice. "And *since you aren't a musician yourself Igarashi-san*, I can't imagine that you would understand the fun in it."

Kenta was visibly taken aback. As far as he knew, Hanako was an honours student who mostly kept to herself and her friends and the teachers he had spoken to about her after her recommendation to the student council said that she was diligent and hardworking, but also shy and reserved.

Kenta was tasked with helping her get out of her shell through their student council work. The fact that she had responded in such a manner surprised him as well as her referring to him by his name and not by his title of *kaichou*.

"I'm really sorry Todoroki-san, I didn't mean to offend you," Kenta said, raising his hands in apology.

"I understand what you're trying to do Igarashi-san," Hanako began, trying to stay collected. "We've just started as the president and vice-president of the student council and you want to get to know me better by making small talk."

"The teachers probably also said something about making me less shy and better at talking to people," Hanako continued. "I appreciate the sentiment and I know you mean no harm by it. But don't worry about me, we're both here to do a job and we'll get to know each other as the year goes on."

Kenta was still shocked at the tenacity and the candour of her response. Hanako was quite a bit different from the girls that fawned over him because of his looks and his popularity. It had been clear when they had first met after beginning their student council duties that she was shy. She didn't make much eye contact and only spoke when it seemed absolutely necessary for her. Right now however, she was staring him in the eyes with an intensity and resolve that he had not expected out of her.

"Sorry, you're right," Kenta apologised again, lowering his head slightly. "It was wrong of me to make assumptions about your band and writing music together."

"Apology accepted *kaichou*," Hanako replied, referring to Kenta again by his student council title.

"...If it's any consolation, I'm glad we talked. I feel like I know you a little better now," Kenta added with a nervous laugh.

"Good," Hanako said with a slightly smug tone to her voice. "If you'll excuse me, I'll be going now. I'll see you next time the student council meets."

Kenta nodded in response as Hanako left the room. After she was out of sight, he collapsed backwards onto the nearest seat and breathed a pained sigh of relief. It turned out that the teachers that had advised him to help her out of her shell were mistaken; while she was quiet and didn't go out of her way to be sociable, she was definitely willing to stand up for herself and the things she cared about. He felt like if he had gotten her talking about one of her interests, they would be able to have a conversation.

However, Kenta's ignorance about her interest in music had led him to speak without thinking, ending with him talking to her in a condescending manner. Despite the obvious ire that

Hanako had directed at him, he couldn't help but be impressed by her.

What started out as a request from his teachers had started to develop into genuine curiosity and a real interest in getting to know her better. Sitting up straight in his seat, Kenta pulled out his phone and opened up its internet browser. Typing the words 'bass guitar' into Google, he thought he may as well start now in his bid to understand her.

* * * * *

Hanako walked as briskly from the student council room as her walking pace allowed. She was breathing heavily, trying to recollect herself after her exchange with the student council president. When she arrived at the shoe lockers at the main doors of the school, she leaned back against a row of lockers and exhaled.

I can't believe I said all of that to him! Hanako thought to herself with her hands on her face, both embarrassed and surprised at herself. It was rare for Hanako to be that annoyed and even rarer for her to speak out as she had done. Trying to piece together why she had gotten so worked up, Hanako could only come to a single conclusion; the way that Kenta had spoken about her band and them writing music together had struck a nerve.

In realising why she had gotten mad at Kenta, Hanako also learned something else about herself. She genuinely cared about her friends in the band and their music and she was passionate enough about those things that she would defend them in the face of detractors. Hanako had assumed for the longest time that she had just been playing music because she

had been dragged along with one of Megumi's many schemes over the years.

That may have been true in the beginning. She remembered how when they started middle school, Megumi enthusiastically told Hanako that she had joined their school's guitar club which needed a bass player at the time. Hanako then told a white lie, that she could play bass, to her oblivious friend who would have known after just a moment's scrutiny that Hanako could do no such thing.

Megumi's joy and excitement at the prospect of being in the same club as her childhood friend forced Hanako's hand; that weekend she bought a cheap bass guitar and learned as much as she could so that she would have the very basics down. Hanako still remembered how she hid her left hand from Megumi for almost a week due to her wrapping bandages around all her aching fingers. What started as a ploy to join the same club as her childhood friend had turned into a genuine love for the bass guitar and music.

As Hanako regained her composure and set about replacing her indoor shoes with her outdoor shoes¹⁴, she thought again

14. As with most Asian cultures, Japanese people take off their shoes when entering places such as a person's home or shared community spaces. Nowadays, the reason is mostly practical, as it's easier to keep places clean when you're not bringing whatever is stuck at the bottom of your shoes indoors. However, this custom has its roots in the Shinto concept of 内, *uchi* and 外, *soto*. The outside, the *soto*, is impure, so when crossing the threshold between the outside and the inside, the *uchi*, which is considered safe and pure, one must take care not to bring impure elements from the outside to the inside. It is important to note that the concept of *uchi-soto* goes far beyond not wearing shoes inside and permeates throughout Japanese culture and language. Schools are considered a shared community space, so in order to help keep them clean, students change from their outside shoes to inside shoes, or 上履き, *uwabaki*, which is done at shoe lockers (下駄, *getabako*) at the entrance of the school.

about her interaction with the student council president. In Kenta's case, she did believe that he meant no malice, it was that he was just ignorant of what makes a musician tick. It was also possible that his main exposure to girls and women in music was through female idols and idol groups and as a result, he genuinely thought that an all-female rock or metal band was a novel concept.

That was Hanako's charitable interpretation of his words and while it would have been easy to fall into the trap of assuming the worst, she hadn't heard of anything regarding Kenta's reputation that would have led her to believe otherwise. She concluded that he probably wasn't a bad person, he just handled their interaction rather clumsily.

She wondered what her outburst would mean for their future relationship. Hanako went in without any intention of making friends in the student council, seeing the other students involved more like work colleagues that she would maintain a professional relationship with. Hanako sighed as she thought this, however.

It may have just been another excuse for herself to not try and step outside her usual group of friends again. She had been like this for as long as she could remember and realised that her current friends were mostly people that Megumi had brought into her life. Hanako possibly had a chance of making a friend by herself for once in Kenta but wondered if she had thrown away the opportunity.

As Hanako stepped outside, she heard her phone go off. She had received a Line message from Megumi which read, *'Mari-chan and Reina have arrived and we are ready to go! Just waiting for you!'*

Hanako smiled softly and typed her reply, *'I'm on my way. See you soon.'*

* * * * *

As usual, the group's writing session had devolved into the four girls chatting, messing around, and eating snacks instead of actually working for the time they were over at Megumi's house. The topic of Hanako's conversation with the student council president came about while they talked which immediately piqued Mari's interest.

"I didn't realise that when you became student council vice-president, you would be working side-by-side with *the* Kenta Igarashi!" Mari exclaimed, her expression bubbling with enthusiasm. Hanako blushed in embarrassment as Mari was leaning forward, her face moving closer and closer to Hanako's.

"You know about the president?" Hanako asked nervously, averting Mari's gaze.

"*Everybody* knows about Igarashi-senpai!" Mari burst out. "Apart from possibly being one the hottest guys in school, he's smart, he was the star of the baseball team, *and* apparently he's still single!"

"Is that so?" Hanako muttered with a nervous laugh, trying to look away from Mari's gaze which was growing ever more intense.

"Who's Kenta Igarashi?" Reina inquired, returning to Megumi's room with some snacks and some bottled tea.

"Don't tell me that *even you* don't know who Igarashi-senpai is?!" Mari cried out, focusing her gaze onto Reina.

"Well of course she doesn't silly, Reina doesn't go to our school!" Megumi said with a laugh. "Reina, he's the student council president of our school."

“And Hanako is the vice president, which means she gets to spend *super-special alone time* with him almost every day!” Mari added.

“Did I not mention the part where he was dismissive and condescending about our band and us playing music?” Hanako asked in vain.

“I can just imagine it,” Mari said, interlocking her fingers together, ignoring Hanako and lost in her own imagination. “Hanako-senpai and Igarashi-senpai get closer and closer every day through their student council work. They would nervously glance over at each other, trying not to look at each other in the eyes.”

“Their hands would brush together ever so slightly while reviewing student council documents, and they would both blush and pull their hands away in embarrassment,” Mari continued. “The more time they spend together, the more he learns about who the real Hanako-senpai is and they realise they like each other and Igarashi-senpai has to work up the courage to ask out the shy but smart beauty that is Hanako-senpai!”

“What is this, a *shoujo*¹⁵ manga?” Hanako remarked with an incredibly unimpressed look on her face.

“Wow, that does kind of sound like a *shoujo* manga plotline,” Reina mused. “I like it.”

15. 少女漫画, *shoujo manga*, are manga targeted at a certain demographic which is in this case teenage girls, with *shoujo* meaning girl. This is in contrast to 少年漫画, *shounen manga*, which is targeted towards teenage boys with *shounen* translating to boy or youth. *Shoujo* manga as a whole is very broad but tend to focus on romantic relationships from a female perspective. A common trope is a shy or unpopular main character who catches the attention of a much more popular boy who sees them for who they truly are which is what Mari is referencing, much to Hanako’s annoyance. Reina, being a fan of *shoujo* manga, likes the plotline set out by Mari.

“Don’t you encourage her, Reina!” Hanako protested in dismay.

Megumi and Reina laughed at Hanako’s expense who really did not enjoy becoming the centre of attention and ridicule. “Well...if *you* like the president that much why don’t you go after him and ask him out?” Hanako asked Mari, desperately trying to divert the focus away from herself.

“First off, I’m very happy just to admire Igarashi-senpai from afar,” Mari began, holding up a finger as she listed her points. “Secondly, the girls in his ‘fan club’ are kind of scary and thirdly, I’m already taken since I have Megumi-senpai!”

“Wait what, since when?” Reina exclaimed, genuinely surprised and possibly a little dismayed.

“She’s only joking,” Megumi replied with a nervous laugh. Reina was momentarily relieved until Mari moved to latch herself around Megumi’s arm. Mari was incredibly open and often hugged her senpais in the band, which caused no end of embarrassment to Hanako and especially Reina, who both felt that they were not quite emotionally ready to experience that much skin contact, even among friends. Reina did want to become more open in that regard but could never summon the courage to spontaneously hug Megumi.

Mari then switched her focus from Megumi over to Hanako and wrapped her arms around Hanako from behind. “Anyway Hanako-senpai, you better invite me to the wedding when you two tie the knot,” Mari said gleefully.

Hanako lost the will and energy to respond seriously and muttered, “I give up. I’ll let you have your *shoujo* manga fantasies.”

“Yeah, let Mari-chan have her fun,” Megumi added with a giggle. “Anyway, I get why you got upset with him and you were right to tell him off. But like, I also agree that he probably

just doesn't know a lot about music and being in a band, so give him a chance. Who knows, you might make a new friend!"

Hanako nodded meekly in agreement. She was more than happy enough with her current friends, but Megumi was right in that Hanako shouldn't spurn the opportunity to make a new one. Megumi was annoyingly good at speaking to new people and making friends, and Hanako had always felt a little bit of jealousy at this ability of Megumi's as she herself struggled with it.

She knew that her resentment, however small, was childish, but on the positive side that ability of Megumi's provided her two new friends in both Mari and Reina. She wondered how she would get on in her attempt to try and make a friend on her own.

* * * * *

Megumi hummed as she strolled through the corridors of her school. She currently had a free study period and was using the opportunity to wander around the school and avoid studying. Her journey took her near the student council room which piqued her attention. She peered inside, curious as to what the inside of it looked like.

"Uehara-san?"

Megumi turned and saw the student council president, looking rather sheepish in contrast to his usual, confident demeanour. "Ah, Igarashi-san...or rather *Kaichou*," Megumi said, correcting herself. "How can I help you?"

Kenta scratched the back of his head for a moment. He was smiling but Megumi could tell that there was a nervousness behind it. She had never spoken to Kenta before but from his reputation she thought that he was exceedingly confident and

sure of himself. To see him like this, on his first time ever speaking to her, surprised her. “So uh, Uehara-san, I heard that you’re friends with Todoroki-san,” Kenta began.

“Yeah, Hanako and I go way, way back! We live in the same neighbourhood and have been friends since before pre-school,” Megumi replied with a proud smile.

“So uh, it’s safe to say you know her well then, huh?” Kenta asked. “It’s just that, um, I kind of messed up when I last spoke to her.”

“Hanako did mention something about that,” Megumi said with a smug grin.

“Yeah...” Kenta sighed, scratching the back of his head again.

“Did you apologise to her?” Megumi inquired.

“I did, but I still feel bad about it,” Kenta answered. “I spoke without thinking and I said something that offended her. Thinking back on it, if somebody said something like that about baseball for instance, I think I would feel the same, so I think I understand how she feels.”

Kenta looked around nervously and took a deep breath before continuing. “So, I’ll be honest, the reason why I tried to talk to her was that the teachers asked me to try and speak to Hanako, to try and help her get out of her shell because she’s known for being quite shy.”

“But you learned that even though Hanako is shy, she is more than willing to speak out when she needs to,” Megumi said, finishing Kenta’s point.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “I just...I just don’t want to make the same mistake as before. I do honestly want to get to know her better and I thought that I could ask you to help me.”

“Hmm. Do you like her?” Megumi grinned coyly.

“Do I...like her?” Kenta asked, his face turning slightly red. He turned away for a moment and cleared his throat nervously before composing himself. “I mean, I don’t dislike her,” Kenta replied. “Let’s just say I’m curious about her.”

“Well, I’m more than happy to help you learn about her,” Megumi said, the smug look on her face remaining.

“Okay, let’s start with her playing bass guitar,” Kenta began. The two talked for a further ten minutes with Megumi feeling like she was trying to proudly convince a potential suitor to marry her daughter.

She explained Hanako’s role in the band, the type of music she played and how much she enjoyed playing music. She also talked about despite how naturally intelligent Hanako was she worked and studied incredibly hard and always tried to live up to the expectations placed on her.

Kenta gave his thanks to Megumi before disappearing down the corridor. Megumi felt a beaming sense of pride for her friend as she skipped back towards her classroom, humming as she did. When she arrived back at her classroom, Megumi paused for a moment before opening the door.

She glanced in through the window on the door and saw Hanako in her seat with her head down in her textbook. “Well Hanako, looks like your *shoujo* manga romance is about to begin,” Megumi said to herself quietly with a smile before making her way in.

5. Mari's New Day

Another school day ended for Mari Matsumoto. She said goodbye to her friends in class and began her journey home. Going home alone wasn't unusual for her as her home was fairly close to school and she was able to make the walk in about fifteen minutes. As well as this, many of her friends in her class had to take the train to get to school so going home with them wasn't an option anyway.

Mari took the sights and sounds of the local area in as she walked. A soft spring breeze blew against her skin, feeling pleasant to the touch. Mari hummed softly as she looked into shop windows as she passed. Stopping at a patisserie that she frequented, she gazed at some of the pastries and cakes in the window. Today, despite almost drooling at the prospect, she decided against buying something and continued on her way home.

She came across an old lady walking a Japanese Spitz and she politely asked if she could pet it. The old lady obliged and Mari happily played with the dog, running her hands over its soft, white coat. After having her fill of fluffy fur, Mari gave her thanks to the old lady and continued on her way.

She enjoyed her walks home; there were many distractions on the way that she could indulge in and she often varied what she stopped by to keep things interesting. On today's walk, Mari windowed-shopped outside a clothing store and stopped to take in the smell of a ramen restaurant winding down after the lunchtime rush and preparing for evening diners.

She soon arrived at the block of flats where she lived and greeted a neighbour of hers as she arrived back home at the

same time as her. Her neighbour was holding her young daughter's hand, having just picked her up from pre-school. "Mari *onee-chan!*¹⁶" the little girl, who couldn't have been older than five or six years old, exclaimed in excitement after seeing Mari.

"Hello there, Miyuki-chan!" Mari greeted, crouching down, and giving the little girl a double high five. "How was school?"

"It was lots of fun!" little Miyuki replied with a beaming smile.

"How are you doing Mari-chan?" Miyuki's mother asked as the three of them began walking up the stairs of the apartment complex.

"I'm very well, Kaho *oba-san!*¹⁷," Mari answered. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you," Kaho said as she and her daughter reached their door. "Say hello to your mother for me."

"I will do! Have a good day!"

Mari walked down two more doors and reached her own flat. She unlocked the door and entered with a skip. "I'm

16. お姉さん, *onee-san*, is the term for an older sister. It's common for younger siblings to refer to their older sisters simply as *onee-san*. A more affectionate version of this is お姉ちゃん, *onee-chan*. The male equivalents are お兄さん, *onii-san* and お兄ちゃん, *onii-chan*. The formal terms for brother and sister are 兄, *ani*, and 姉, *ane*. Although the little girl here isn't related to Mari in any way, younger children often refer to older children using the terms for brother and sister. *Onii-san* and *onee-san* are also used to refer to young men or women by people younger than them.

17. おばさん, *oba-san*, translates to aunt, while the term for uncle is おじさん, *oji-san*. In this context, Mari is using *oba-san* like ma'am, while *oji-san* can be used similarly like mister.

home¹⁸,” Mari called out. There was no reply. Mari’s smile dropped slightly at the sound of silence. She took her shoes off and walked into an empty flat.

The lights were off and the curtains were shut. Mari walked over to the curtains in the living room and swiftly opened them, letting the afternoon sunshine into the room. She took a deep breath, as if inhaling the sunlight itself, before letting out a satisfied, “Ah.”

Mari about faced and skipped through her living room, patting the sofa with the palm of her hand playfully as she passed. Anybody who knew Mari knew this was part of who she was. She was almost bubbly and energetic to a fault. Her exuberance lifted the spirits of anybody in her company and her friends often remarked on how she was always smiling.

She was even more enthusiastic when it came to guitar as she loved to play the instrument and talk about it to anyone who cared to listen. Being in a band with like-minded friends felt like the best thing possible for Mari as she could immerse herself in music and conversations about guitar.

Before she changed out of her school clothes, Mari had one thing that she made sure to include in her daily routine. In the short hallway between her and her mother’s bedrooms, there

18. In Japan, when returning home, it is customary to say *tadaima*, which roughly translates to ‘I’m home’, to which anybody present would respond with *おかえり*, *okaeri*, which has a meaning close to ‘welcome back’. Conversely, upon leaving you would say *いってきます*, *ittekimasu*, which roughly translates to ‘I’m going’ to which the reply would be *いってらっしゃい*, *itterashai*, which has a meaning close to ‘have a safe trip’.

was a small, wooden altar¹⁹, the centrepiece of which was a photograph of Mari's father.

She knelt down in front of the altar and held her hands together, palm to palm. "Hi dad, I'm home," Mari said softly, looking at the photograph. She lingered for a moment before slowly lifting herself to her feet, after which she headed to her room to get changed.

It had happened in the final semester in Mari's third year of middle school. A lot of her memories of that day remained vivid while many others were a blur. She had been summoned to the faculty office in the middle of a lesson, which led to murmurs amongst her classmates as if she had done something to get in trouble.

Mari herself was confused to why she was being called and received no explanation from the headmaster in the faculty office. All he said was that she was to return home immediately and would be excused from school for the rest of the day.

Worried, Mari called home to hear her mother clearly crying on the other end of the phone. It was at this point that she began to fear the worst but all her mother managed to say through her tears was that something had happened to her father and that Mari should return home so that they could speak in person.

The ten-minute walk home felt like an eternity to her. She kept on playing worst case scenarios over and over in her head and was wishing by some miracle that it wasn't true. Her expression the whole time was blank and lifeless. Despite feeling like an age, she couldn't even remember the details of most of her walk back by the time she arrived at home.

19. The Japanese term for this altar is 仏壇, *butsudan*, literally 'Buddhist altar'.

Inside was her mother sitting at their dining table and across from her was a middle-aged looking man dressed in a dark blue suit. He introduced himself as an inspector from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police. Mari's heart sank. The presence of a police officer in their home all but confirmed her suspicions.

She sat down at the table beside her mother who extended her hand out to Mari. She took it and felt her mother gripping tightly, as if Mari could be taken away at any moment. The officer explained, with a sullen expression on his face, that her father had been involved in a serious traffic accident while returning from a business trip up north.

Attempts to resuscitate him at the scene of the accident proved unsuccessful and he was pronounced dead upon arrival at hospital. "I know it isn't much coming from me but I'm so deeply sorry for your loss," the police officer concluded, bowing his head in deference.

Mari recalled how it felt like everything in her life was falling apart upon hearing the news. She felt like screaming but all she could manage at the time was to simply stare at the top of her family dining table, tears streaming down from her eyes.

She couldn't say or do anything except sit, cry, and hold her mother's hand tightly through it all. She remembered the warmth of her mother's hand and how much she needed it then. Without it, Mari felt like she would have become completely lost.

She took the next two weeks off school to grieve and to attend the funeral. She barely ate or slept during those two weeks despite her mother's insistence that she needed to. She wondered how her mother could smile at her like she had always done, despite feeling the same pain that Mari was going through.

Her mother would sit beside her, smile, and say that Mari should take as much time as she needed before going back to school. Mari wondered how she would even begin to go about returning. Everything around her in her flat and her local neighbourhood, they all contained memories of time spent with her father, memories that came back to her all too frequently.

For the majority of her time off from school, Mari spent it alone in her room. In the corner of her bedroom was her guitar. Every time she stole a glance at the instrument, it felt like it was looking back at her with a menacing, judging stare. It had been Mari's father who had encouraged her to start playing guitar. She remembered how he taught her basic guitar chords so that she could learn her favourite pop songs.

Once she got a taste of playing guitar, Mari couldn't be stopped. Her father would often look on proudly, happy that his daughter was picking up his own childhood hobby. In the time since the accident, Mari hadn't picked up her guitar once; she could barely stand to look at it.

Returning to school, her friends and classmates knew that she had changed. She had been full of energy and her laughter was infectious. Now she sat quietly at her desk, not speaking to anybody, and going off to be alone at every opportunity.

Her friends in middle school knew that they had to give her space but as middle schoolers themselves they could hardly know the best way to deal with somebody who had just so recently lost a loved one. As time passed, Mari slowly began to open herself up again and spend time with her middle school friends.

However, she had always been perceptive and realised that they were always walking on eggshells around her. She noticed how before she would walk into the classroom, her friends

would be whispering to each other, stealing glances towards Mari as they did. When she approached them, they acted as if nothing was wrong and always spoke to her in bright and cheery voices, as if Mari would crumble if the façade ever let up.

It was all too obvious that the connection to her friends had been eroded or that they were never really that close to her in the first place. It was no surprise then when Mari applied to go to a different high school to all of them.

It had been four months since her father's accident and Mari's first day of high school was upon her. She looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror as she readied herself. *I have to get back to my old self*, she thought to herself. She tried to practise smiling but the face looking back at her was all too telling.

It was very apparent that she was forcing herself. Mari knew that she couldn't be sullen forever but four months on she still had trouble adjusting to a daily routine that didn't include her father. She slapped her cheeks and exhaled deeply. "Come on Mari, you can do this," she said out loud to herself.

By the end of her first day, Mari felt exhausted. Everybody in her class was new to her and it was utterly draining keeping up appearances. She knew that until she made new friends, she would have to hide her lingering sorrow. She came home that day to an empty flat, as was often the case. Her mother had always been particularly busy with work, but it seemed after the death of Mari's father the days she came home late from work had increased.

Mari was mostly used to it by now but today she really felt like she needed somebody to talk to after her first day of high school. She looked through the contacts list on her phone and considered reaching out to her middle school friends, only to

decide against it as she had never spoken earnestly to any of them about her father's death and how it had affected her.

During her second day of high school, Mari's homeroom teacher recommended to the class that they go look into school clubs after school to see if there were any that they were interested in joining. The teacher handed out a list of currently active clubs and Mari saw one that stood out to her straight away.

Guitar club, huh? Mari thought to herself. She found it odd that there was a club dedicated to guitar, but it seemed worth looking into. Mari had begun to play guitar again in the months after her father's passing, but it felt difficult to really get back into it; a lot of the joy she felt when playing guitar seemed to have vanished. Still, she resolved herself to go and at least check the club out.

Clutching the sheet of paper that listed the school clubs, Mari gingerly made her way towards the music rooms. As she approached, she heard the sound of a guitar in the distance. It was indistinct and muddled, but slowly grew clearer as she edged closer. Before she knew it, she was stood right in front of the door of one of the music rooms, behind which was the source of the guitar playing.

The music she heard being played beyond the door in front of her was wholly unfamiliar to her. Maybe it was the novelty of hearing something new, but it excited her. Mari had mostly learned the chords to pop songs during her time playing guitar so being exposed to music other than what she knew was possible on guitar immediately piqued her interest.

Mari summoned the courage to knock on the door of the music room to no answer. She could still hear guitar from the other side so it was more than possible that they couldn't hear her knock. Opening the door slowly, Mari saw two girls sat

down in front of her. From the markings on their indoor shoes, she saw that they were in the year above her.

One was playing a purple guitar, adorned with a flamed maple top which Mari could only describe as beautiful. The other was listening intently, holding a soft case upright as she did. Neither of them had noticed Mari enter. Soon, the girl finished playing and said to the other, “And that’s the new *Anime as Leaders* song! It’s much proggy than their old stuff!”

Mari noticed the joy on the girl’s face and remembered how she would have the same look on her face after playing a song on guitar. It was just that the music Mari played was far simpler than what she just heard. The other girl, who began unzipping her case and exposing the bass guitar within replied, “I guess they call you Prog-chan for a reason, Megumi.”

“Aw come on Hanako, I’m still not used to that nickname!” the girl called Prog-chan retorted in protest.

Prog, Mari thought to herself. *I’ve never heard of that style of music, but I really want to learn to play it now.*

As she walked towards the two girls, Mari felt an excitement bubble up inside her that she had not felt for months. She remembered how amazing it felt to finally learn a song on guitar and the sense of accomplishment and joy that it brought with it. The prospect of playing guitar again in earnest still felt a little painful to Mari as it was something so closely tied to her father, but being able to discover and learn a whole new style of music gave her hope and a new challenge to rise to.

It was at that moment her sense of reason snapped. In her excitement, she rushed over to hug the girl with the guitar while she was still sat in her chair. Without thinking and all the while tightly clutching her, Mari blurted out, “Prog-chan-senpai! Please teach me how to play guitar like you!” It was in

that moment that Mari was determined to make friends with the pair, as well as discovering a new lease on life and music.

* * * * *

Mari heard the front door unlock while cooking dinner in the kitchen which signalled the return of her mother from work. However, she also heard other voices as her mother entered that brought a smile to her face. "Look who I bumped into on my way home," Mari's mother said as she came into view. From behind her mother, Megumi, Hanako, and Reina walked into the kitchen.

Every so often, Mari's mother encouraged her daughter to invite her friends over for dinner and tonight was one of those nights. Mari immediately went to hug all four of them, leaving her cooking temporarily unattended which led to a frantic rush back to the stove to stop a pot from boiling over. Mari was barely able to keep the lid on the pot and in the process, knocked over various cooking utensils onto the floor. The five of them laughed at the mishap before Mari's mother came to assist her with dinner.

As Mari and her mother set the table, she noted her friends by their family altar paying their own respects to her father. They had never met him, but Mari had done her best to be as open with them as possible after his passing and her coming to terms with it. She had reassured them that her bubbly and excitable personality was how she had always been and that she was genuinely excited about playing music with all of them.

There were lows with the highs however, and Mari would sometimes miss band get-togethers to have some alone time which the rest of the girls accommodated for happily. They knew that if Mari needed to talk, she would reach out to them

which more often than not she did. Unlike her middle school friends, her seniors in the band never seemed like they were walking on eggshells around her. Megumi, Hanako, and Reina felt like true friends to her.

As they ate dinner the five of them chatted about their day, bringing up anecdotes and funny stories. Mari's mother asked the girls about their plans after school and they all gave their various answers, including Megumi's uncertainty about what exactly she would do. Mari's mother reassured Megumi that she would figure it out and not to worry too much, to which Megumi replied to with a smile. "I'm just a little sad that all of you will be graduating high school while Mari is in her third year," Mari's mother noted as they finished eating.

"Don't worry, we'll make sure to constantly have band meet ups so that Mari will always have friends to play music with!" Megumi said with a smile.

"Don't you worry, Mari will always have us to rely on," Hanako added.

"There's no other person I'd want to have with us," confirmed Reina, looking over at Mari warmly.

Mari's mother looked over at all of Mari's friends as they all smiled back at her. Overcome with emotion, she began crying to the worry of the rest of the girls. "*Okaa-san*²⁰, what's wrong?" Mari asked, softly putting her hand on her mother's back.

Mari's mother wiped the tears from her eyes and replied, "Nothing's wrong, I'm...I'm just so happy."

"You're...happy?" Hanako inquired hesitantly.

20. お母さん, *okaa-san*, is the Japanese term for mum, while 母, *baba*, means mother and is used for more formal contexts.

Mari's mother took a moment to compose herself. Although she was crying, there was a smile beginning to show on her face. "My Mari wasn't the same after her father passed away," she began. "But after she met all of you, I saw her come home happy every day. I saw her become excited about music and playing guitar again. I know that losing her father is still hard on her, on both of us, but seeing her have something to look forward to could not make me happier."

Megumi, Hanako, and Reina all looked over to Mari with broad smiles, to which she responded by grabbing them all in a group hug. Her mother was right on all counts and Mari felt so fortunate to have these people in her life.

She felt a connection again to music, she was closer to her mother than she had ever been, and she felt like she could be herself again at home and at school. Mari had earned her reputation as a happy and bubbly person amongst her classmates not because she was trying to hide her pain, but because she was comfortable that she was still coming to terms with it. Despite everything that happened and despite it not always being easy, Mari was truly happy.

6. Reina: A Rival's Reprise

Reina Sugiyama had always been used to being alone. She remembered how she struggled all throughout her childhood to make friends, even from a young age. Primary school had been particularly difficult with Reina unable to form any lasting and meaningful friendships. She had no hobbies to speak of either and found herself with lots of spare time and nothing to do in all of it.

Her classmates seemed nice enough in person but every day when it came to lunchtime, without fail, friend groups and cliques would congregate together, leaving Reina by herself. People used to come up to her and asked if she wanted to eat with them at first but Reina in her shyness and awkwardness could never muster up the courage to say yes.

Things changed for Reina after she finished primary school. Her family moved from Kamakura, a city in the Kanagawa Prefecture, to a ward in northern Tokyo. She didn't particularly mind leaving her old school and the people in it behind; she didn't really have any friends to say goodbye to after all.

A few days before starting at a local middle school, Reina's father brought her along to a practise session for an upcoming show he was taking part in. He was a professional saxophonist by trade and moved his family back to Tokyo, where he had lived previously, to teach at a music school with the bonus of having more opportunities to do session gigs.

That was only part of the reason, however. Both Reina's parents noticed her difficulty in making friends and felt like a fresh start in a big city before middle school would do her some good. At the practise session, Reina's father saw how

entranced she was at the sight of the drummer in their jazz ensemble.

He had always wished for Reina to pick up a musical instrument and it seemed that she had made her choice. After their practise session, he took her hand and asked, “You like drums, huh?” Reina’s eyes lit up and she nodded her head furiously in response. Her father laughed.

“Well Reina, if you promise me that you’ll practise every day, I can get you a drum kit as a present for moving up to middle school and for being such a good girl during our move to Tokyo,” he said, patting his daughter on the head.

With that, Reina was given a basic electric drum kit for practise inside their Tokyo flat and like she promised her father she practised every day. What began as a promise had become a habit. In the weeks leading up to Reina starting middle school, a single day hadn’t gone by when she hadn’t played drums.

Reina’s first day of middle school felt like every day of primary school before it. She couldn’t muster the confidence to say a single word to her new classmates and before she knew it the day was over, and she was on her way home. The prospect of having to interact with all these new faces intimidated her.

Unlike in primary school however, Reina had something to look forward to when she got back home. As soon as she arrived back, Reina changed straight out of her school uniform and sat herself behind her electronic drum kit. It almost made all those lonely days at school in the past worth it.

On Reina’s second day of middle school, she noticed that there was a drum kit in the music room that hardly seemed touched. She wondered if she would be able to play it during her free time at school. Reina approached the music teacher in

the faculty office during lunch and after a moment of summoning the courage required, she asked, “Would it be, um, possible for me to use the music room to play the drum kit during lunch?”

The teacher looked up at Reina and saw just how nervous she was. He smiled and replied, “I see no issue with it since we have hardly anybody playing it.”

Reina’s eyes lit up in excitement and she answered softly, “Thank you, *sensei*.”

“Here’s the music room key. Just come ask for it and be sure to give it back at the end of lunchtime,” the teacher said, handing a small, silver key over to Reina.

“I...I will! Thank you again, *sensei*.”

Reina bowed and took her leave. The teacher smiled to himself, happy that a new student had taken an interest in music. By the end of the week the teacher had simply given Reina a copy of the key so that she could go to the music room as she pleased.

At the start of Reina’s second week of school, she started to bring her own drumsticks to school and they stuck out of her bag ever so slightly, drawing the attention of some of her classmates. “Sugiyama-san, what are those?” the girl sitting next to her inquired, her eyes fixed on the sticks.

Reina glanced over to her with an embarrassed look on her face. She adjusted her thick glasses and fiddled with one of her pigtails for a moment, trying to recollect herself so that she could answer. “They’re, um, drumsticks,” Reina replied meekly.

“Oh, you play the drums?” the girl asked back.

Another girl entered the conversation and queried, “Is that where you’ve been going off to every lunch, to go play drums?”

Reina nodded in response, struggling to maintain eye contact with the pair of girls. She wondered if it was worth asking them if they wanted to come and listen. However, doubt immediately filled her mind. She thought about whether first-year middle school girls would even care about drums, forgetting that she herself was also a first-year middle school girl.

She ran through scenarios in her head, ranging from them flat-out rejecting her offer, to them calling it weird. That doubt escalated into a mild panic with Reina unable to speak or even look up at the pair of girls beside her.

“Are you okay, Sugiyama-san?” the girl sitting next to her asked with a worried look on her face.

Reina quickly lifted up her head up and replied, “I’m fine, nothing’s wrong!”

“As long as you’re sure,” the girl said, still looking worried. “Say, you should invite us along to listen at lunch!”

“I...I will do,” Reina stammered softly, staring back down at her desk. At that point, their homeroom teacher walked in, ending all conversation in the classroom. Reina wondered how she would even begin to ask somebody else to come along and listen to her play.

Lunchtime rolled around and Reina set about eating her lunch as fast as possible. To her surprise, the girl sitting next to her moved her desk next to Reina’s and pulled her own lunch from out of her school bag. “Ah, Ueno-san,” greeted Reina in surprise.

“You can call me Sawako²¹!” her classmate exclaimed with a reassuring smile.

“Okay...Sawako-chan,” Reina said sheepishly. “I guess...you can call me Reina too then.”

“Yay, Reina-chan!” Sawako yelled, clapping her hands together in excitement.

Reina, out of habit, paid little attention to the others in her class but she remembered when Sawako introduced herself on their first day. She was shorter than Reina with a bob haircut and bangs that covered her forehead. It wasn't her appearance that made her stand out to Reina however, it was the way she introduced herself.

“My name is Sawako Ueno! I'm here with my childhood friend Kana-chan but I hope to make friends will all of you! Please treat me well!” she had said. Her smile and her enthusiasm were things Reina wished she had. However, she wasn't quite prepared to have somebody who was the polar opposite to her suddenly sit beside her and chat to her freely.

“Do you mind if my friend Kana-chan eats with us?”

“No, it's fine,” Reina replied softly.

“Yay! Kana-chan, come over!” Sawako said, extending a wave over to her friend. Kana smiled at Sawako before bringing her chair over to their desks. Kana had a soft aura about her like she could have been either of their older sisters, unlike the childish-looking Sawako.

Her hair came down just below her shoulder blades and she stood just a bit taller than Reina. She sat down with her lunch and introduced herself, “I'm Kana Kawai, Sawako's friend, if

21. It is considered polite to use the family names of people you have just met or aren't close to; to do otherwise would appear overly familiar or rude. Sawako here tells Reina to use her first name, which can be seen as a way to tell Reina that she wants to get to know her better, and to be friends.

you don't remember me from introductions last week. Please feel free to call me Kana." Kana was softly spoken and polite which contributed to her gentle air.

Reina nodded meekly and opened her own packed lunch. She struggled to think of anything to talk about so began with what she remembered from Sawako's introduction. "So...you two are childhood friends?" Reina inquired.

"Yup!" Sawako said proudly. "We've known each other since primary school!"

"Yes, that's right," Kana confirmed. "However, we ended up going to a different middle school to a lot of our friends and it's just us two in this class out of our friends who did come here."

"I see," Reina almost whispered, running out of ideas for things to say.

"What about you, Reina-chan?" Sawako asked.

"What about...what about me?" Reina responded with a confused look on her face, unsure about Sawako's line of questioning.

"You know, do you have friends from primary school here with you?" Sawako said.

Reina's heart sank momentarily. She knew she had a good excuse for being on her own here but it's not as if she had any close friends to speak of from primary school. She wondered if these two would be next in line of people who would give up trying to get close to Reina because of how awkward and shy she was.

Reina found it difficult to initiate conversation as well as finding it hard to keep up with other people; simply put, she found it hard to make friends. It's not as if Reina didn't want friendship but for her loneliness was something she got used

to. At least now she had something to keep her mind off of it in her drumming.

“I, uh, moved to Tokyo last month from Kamakura,” Reina replied softly. “So, everybody here is new to me.”

“Oh, is that so,” Sawako said matter-of-factly. “Well, I guess you can call us your first friends here in Tokyo!”

“Friends?” Reina blurted out, surprised. “I mean, um...are you sure?”

“Well, why not?” Kana asked with a smile. “We’ve all just started school here together, so why not be friends?”

“Just...just like that?” Reina questioned, still looking shocked.

“Just like that! Well, if you’re worried, let’s say we can just learn about each other on the fly!” Sawako said with a laugh. “Anyway, didn’t you say you were going to show us your drumming this lunchtime?”

“I’m pretty sure she didn’t say anything of the sort; you just said she should invite us some time,” Kana pointed out with a giggle.

“Huh, I guess she didn’t,” Sawako stated with a blank, confused expression.

Reina laughed. That kind of interaction must have been commonplace between friends who had known each other for years. Instead of feeling left out however, Reina could see the connection between the two first-hand and was included in their antics. “Don’t you laugh as well, Reina-chan!” Sawako cried out in protest.

“I’m sorry,” Reina said, containing the last of her laughter. “So um, would you two like to hear me play drums after we eat? I’m not very good, but it would be...it would be fun to have you two there.”

“For sure!” Sawako exclaimed with a beaming smile on her face.

“We would love to,” Kana agreed.

* * * * *

“Reina-chan, Reina-chan!” Sawako yelled, running up behind Reina, who had been walking down the hallway.

“Sawako-chan?” Reina said, seeing that her friend was out of breath.

“I think I found her!” Sawako continued as she gasped for air. “I found out what school Megumi Uehara goes to!”

Reina’s eyes lit up.

It hadn’t been long since the girls had started their second year of high school. Reina, Sawako, and Kana had become an inseparable trio through their time in middle school and they all entered the same high school together. There had been one outstanding matter from middle school that had been left unresolved for Reina, however.

In her first year of middle school, Reina was stood outside the music room one day, rummaging for the key in her skirt pocket. She was stood in front of the notice boards by the door which listed the various music clubs at the school.

Before she was able to produce the music room key, a girl had mysteriously appeared beside her. “Hey, interested in music clubs?” she asked. The way she had suddenly appeared next to Reina made her jump.

“I...um...I was...uh...going...” Reina stammered, trying to explain that she was just going into the music room to play drums.

“I get it, there are so many clubs to choose from!” the girl said with a laugh. “I’m Megumi Uehara by the way! What’s

your name? I see that you're a first year like me! Oh, also, I'm part of the guitar club if you're interested."

Reina was not used to anybody being this open and forward with her. As well as that, the pace at which Megumi talked and changed the flow of the conversation completely threw her for a loop.

She didn't know which question to answer first. Should she tell this Megumi Uehara her name? Should she explain that she just wanted to play drums and was not interested in any clubs? Reina responded by not saying anything and looking overwhelmed.

"Huh? Did I say too much? I think I said too much," Megumi apologised. "Sorry, I kind of like, have a bad habit of speaking without thinking."

"It's...okay," Reina replied softly. "I'm uh...my name is Reina Sugiyama."

"So, Sugiyama-san, interested in the guitar club?" Megumi asked with expectant eyes.

"I was...just uh, going to practise drums in the music room," Reina explained.

"Oh, that's a shame! Well, if you ever want to play guitar and make friends let me know, I'm in class 1-E!" Megumi said before running off down the corridor. After she disappeared out of sight, Reina leaned back against the music room door and exhaled deeply. She felt exhausted after her brief encounter with Megumi, such was the difference in their tolerance for human interaction.

At that point, a crucial misunderstanding began to grow within Reina's head. She, in her awkwardness and lack of communication skills, interpreted what Megumi had said that once Reina was able to play guitar, they could be friends. That misconception stayed with Reina until high school, where it

had somehow evolved into the idea that the only way she could become friends with Megumi was to become better than her at guitar.

“Anyway, it’s rare for you to want to speak to somebody you don’t know!” Sawako said with a laugh.

Reina snapped out of her recollection of the time she met Megumi, their brief exchange still fresh in her mind. Despite Megumi’s offer to become friends, Reina ended up never being able to approach her. Megumi’s demeanour was too daunting to Reina with her near constant talking and boundless enthusiasm and it was a hurdle the middle school iteration of Reina couldn’t overcome.

After starting high school however, Reina realised that Megumi had gone to a separate high school and her chance at friendship seem to have disappeared. It had become a regret of sorts that she was never able to speak to her again. She wanted to prove to herself that she had grown since her lonely days in primary school by seeking out and making a friend by herself.

Reina had tried herself to find out what high school Megumi had gone to with no luck. She had almost given up but however, by some coincidence, she found some songs on the internet that had been uploaded by an instrumental band supposedly made up of high school girls. After checking the band’s profile page, Reina immediately recognised Megumi as one of the members. That was the clue that she needed.

Enlisting the help of her friends Sawako and Kana, they looked into the uniform that was present in one of the band photos. Comparing the uniform against that of the schools in their local area, Sawako and Kana soon identified it as the uniform for a public high school in a neighbouring ward of Tokyo. Sawako had come to deliver the news to Reina.

“Anyway, Kana-chan is waiting at the school gates. If we’re fast, we can maybe find her!” Sawako said.

“Huh? We’re going now?” Reina asked in surprise. “We still have a period of school left.”

“It’s just a free study period so why not? Let’s go!” Sawako declared, taking Reina by the hand. The two swiftly made their way to the entrance of their school where a smiling Kana waved hello to them. They headed to the nearest metro station and rode the short journey to the area that Megumi’s school was in. Reina felt her trepidation grow as they walked towards the gates of Megumi’s school.

They heard the school bell chime off in the distance, signalling the end of the school day there and shortly following it, a torrent of students poured out of the gates. The boys were dressed in dark blue trousers with a similarly coloured blazer over a white shirt and red tie. The girls, like they saw in Megumi’s band photos, wore a dark blue sailor-style school uniform with a red sailor collar and a white sash.

The use of sailor uniforms had made the school Megumi went to easier to identify; most of the high schools in the area had the girls wearing a skirt and blazer. The trio waited just outside the school gates to see if Megumi would pass by, drawing the attention of some students walking home much to Reina’s embarrassment.

After a few minutes had passed, Reina spotted a girl she immediately recognised as Megumi from her recent social media posts. She was sporting a grey cardigan and had her hair in her characteristic style, with a red beaded hair-tie forming a small side ponytail on the left side of her hair. Megumi was walking with two other girls which Reina also recognised from their band photos.

“Okay Reina, go speak to her!” Sawako said with a smile.

“Huh? On my own?” Reina asked, her face bright red and her tone of voice flustered.

“That was the plan, wasn’t it?” Kana responded. “Off you go!”

The pair of Sawako and Kana pushed Reina forward into the path of Megumi in her friends, stopping them in their paths. Reina glanced over towards the three of them like a deer in headlights, her expression one of total and utter embarrassment. Reina, unable to think of anything coherent to say began to panic.

“Megumi Uehara! I have finally found you!” Reina exclaimed, adopting a persona of feigned importance. “I’ve come to challenge you to a guitar battle, to settle once and for all who is the better guitarist!”

Sawako and Kana both had utterly perplexed expressions on their faces. “What is she doing?!” Kana asked in a hushed, hurried tone.

“I have no idea,” Sawako replied, still stunned at Reina’s sudden change in personality.

“Shouldn’t we help her?” Kana exclaimed, getting increasingly worried.

“We said she should do it on her own,” Sawako pointed out. “Let’s just see what happens.”

Megumi and her friends stared blankly at Reina’s outburst. Reina herself realised what she had just said and began visibly going red and sweating. Her mind was in overdrive, thinking of things that she could possibly say to take back her panicked declaration.

“Um...who are you?” Megumi asked, her expression still blank. Reina’s heart sank. This was the last thing she wanted Megumi to say. It was understandable that Megumi didn’t remember who she was since they had only met once, but it

didn't make the current situation any better for her. Megumi's friends, a tall girl with long black hair and glasses, as well as a shorter girl with a beaming smile and her blonde hair in a twin-tail hairdo approached Reina, who's nerves only grew.

"Is it somebody you know, Hanako-senpai?" the shorter girl inquired.

The taller girl nodded and replied, "I think so Mari-chan," before looking toward Reina, asking, "You're Reina Sugiyama-san, right? You went to our middle school." Reina slowly nodded her head, still paralysed in her embarrassment. The taller girl, Hanako, turned to Megumi and said, "Do you not remember her, Megumi?"

"Sorry, I don't," Megumi responded with a nervous chuckle.

"I swear, your memory for people is terrible," Hanako muttered with a sigh. "I'm sorry about Megumi, it seems she doesn't remember who you are."

"I-i-i-i-it's of no concern to me!" Reina stammered, still trying to put on airs. "A-a-a-a-all that matters is that we have our guitar battle!"

"Guitar battle? Sounds neat. I'm in!" Megumi said, her ears perking up to the mention of guitar. To Reina's surprise, Megumi grabbed Reina by the hand and started running off to her home with both Hanako and Mari in hot pursuit. Sawako and Kana who had been watching off in the side-lines, set off after them as well.

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"Do you remember the look on her face when you asked her if she played drums?" Sawako laughed with a giddy smile.

“I’ve never seen anybody’s face light up so quickly!” Megumi replied with a laugh.

“C-c-c-can we please stop talking about my guitar battle with Megumi please?” Reina pleaded, burying her head in her hands from the embarrassment.

Megumi, Mari, Hanako, Reina, Sawako, and Kana were all sat together in a café, enjoying an afternoon together after school. It had been a year since Reina had challenged Megumi to a guitar battle and both Sawako and Kana had suggested that they all meet up to reminisce, much to Reina’s dismay.

They had all become fast friends after Reina joined Megumi’s band and made sure to spend time together despite going to different schools. Reina would have never suspected that her fumbling outburst of challenging Megumi to a guitar battle would lead to her joining a band as a drummer, as well as making new friends along the way.

“Okay, okay, we’ll stop,” Sawako said, trying to contain her laughter.

“You know,” Kana began, with a thoughtful smile on her face, “it really is funny how people end up meeting each other. Reina-chan had wanted to become friends with Megumi-chan since middle school and through a series of events that I won’t bring up again for Reina-chan’s sake, here we all are in a café enjoying drinks and sweets together.”

“I do wonder what would have happened if Megumi and Reina became friends in middle school,” Hanako pondered.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Megumi said. “She would have become our drummer and we would have been friends!”

Mari laughed and added, “It’s just like you Megumi-senpai, to think that things would have worked out the same.”

The group laughed at Megumi’s optimism. It was indeed just like her to think that things would have turned out the way

they were now, but Reina didn't really feel that way. She was happy the way things were now, even if it meant delaying her friendship with these girls for a few years.

"Um," Reina began after the laughter died down. The girls all turned to face her, curious as to what she had to say. "I just wanted to tell you all," Reina continued, "that whether or not I became friends with all of you back in middle school or not, it doesn't matter to me, because we're all friends now, and that's what matters."

The girls all looked at Reina, and then each other, smiling as they did. "I know that you know about my problems, how I, um, get really anxious around people, that I struggle to make friends," Reina said.

"I didn't really have any friends back in Kamakura. I thought that things would be the same in Tokyo, but at least I had a hobby that I loved. But then, Sawako-chan, Kana-chan, you both spoke to me when you didn't know me, and I got to share the hobby I loved with both of you."

"Megumi, you spoke to me back in middle school and I kind of got the wrong idea. But I'm glad that you and Hanako and Mari went along with my crazy scheme last year to have a guitar battle, because otherwise I wouldn't have found a band that I love that I get to play drums in. I wouldn't have become friends with you all either."

Reina felt an upswell of emotion beginning to overcome her. She had to get these last words out before her tears overcame her. "Thank you all...thank you, for being my friends."

Reina sniffled, the tears beginning to stream down her face. Despite crying, Reina smiled like she had never smiled before in her life.

Both Sawako and Kana began crying as well and hugged Reina tightly. Even Hanako and Mari couldn't help but get caught up in their emotions. "Reina," Megumi said through her tears and through her beaming smile. "We're all happy to call you our friend. Whatever you went through in the past, just know that we're all here for you."

"That's right," Hanako agreed. "And I'm sure what Megumi means is that she doesn't want to ever program drums again!"

All the girls laughed despite their tears, Reina included. She was sure that she had changed through her friendship with all these girls. Sawako and Kana, the pair that held their hand out to the girl sitting by herself in middle school. Megumi, Hanako, and Mari, the trio that opened up a new world to Reina where she could share her love of music and drumming with like-minded friends.

Despite what may happen in the future, she was sure that all these friends would always be a home she could come back to, where she would be greeted with a warm welcome. Knowing that, it made her goal of going to study music overseas just a little bit less bittersweet.

7. It's Time to Decide!

“Megumi-san, can you speak to me in the faculty office after school?” Kaori asked. Megumi looked up from her bag towards her teacher. Her end of day homeroom class had just finished and Megumi was in the process of packing her things away.

“Uh, sure,” Megumi replied, smiling nervously at the uncertainty of why she was called to the faculty office. “I have day duty, so it'll have to wait until after that, Kaori-chan.”

“First off, it's Izumi-sensei,” Kaori said with a look of defeated irritation on her face. “And secondly that's fine, I'll see you after you finish your day duties.”

Kaori picked up a pile of papers from her table and departed as Megumi fished out various cleaning implements from the locker at the back of the classroom. “Do you know what Kaori-sensei wants to speak to you about?” Hanako asked as she packed her school bag.

“Um, I guess it's probably because I haven't handed in my career survey,” Megumi answered sheepishly.

“You still haven't? The deadline for it was yesterday,” Hanako pointed out with a worried tone.

Megumi let out a deep sigh and muttered, “I know, but I still haven't made my mind up yet.”

“It's not like what you put down will lock you into anything,” Hanako pointed out. “It's just so the teachers can help you with whatever decision you make.”

“I know, I know,” Megumi said with a frustrated tone. “But my choices are a bit...let's just say there's not much in common between them.”

“Between going to university and a music school?” Hanako inquired.

Megumi nodded her head slowly and Hanako looked over her friend, curious at her newfound seriousness in considering her future. She was even now still taken aback at Megumi’s sudden shift in attitude.

Even in their band, where it often took a consensus of all four members to decide things, Megumi was often the last one to make her mind up unless it was something she instinctually decided. “I guess the teachers would want you to have a firmer idea between those two options,” Hanako noted. “Anyway, I have a student council meeting, so I have to go. Hope it goes well with Kaori-sensei.”

Hanako walked off, leaving Megumi alone with her day duties of cleaning the classroom with another boy in her class. While cleaning she happily chatted away with her classmate as she usually did, but her mind was awash with thoughts about her future. It boiled down to a choice between two options at the moment.

Megumi could opt to go to university and not have music at the forefront of her further education. She may or may not have time to work on her band’s music but that was a bridge she would have to cross once she came to it. There was also the possibility of taking music electives depending on the university but that would be the extent of it.

Her other option was to go to music school and take a music course related to guitar performance, composition, or audio production. The main downside to going to music school is that it was possible that her options would be limited if a career in music didn’t pan out.

Megumi wondered what she would do if that happened and what career alternatives might be available. She also considered

the other worst-case scenario, thinking back to that dream of her in the future, working an office job and never playing her guitar. That outcome was the one thing she wanted to avoid more than anything.

As Megumi swept around the classroom, she played out various scenarios in her head with no clear answer to any of them. It felt like there was no right answer and while Megumi would normally go with her gut decision, this was a case where that was no help to her at all.

After finishing her day duty, Megumi grabbed her bag and headed swiftly towards the faculty office. The office wasn't too far from her homeroom class and she made it there in just over two minutes. Shortly after knocking on the door a middle-aged male teacher opened it, asking, "Yes, do you need something?"

"Ah yes, I was asked to come to speak to Kaori...I mean, Izumi-sensei," Megumi replied, correcting the way she referred to Kaori.

"Okay, come on in," the teacher instructed before looking out to the corner of the office. "Izumi-sensei, or should I say, Kaori-chan, there is a student here to see you."

"Don't you call me Kaori-chan as well!" Kaori yelled in her defence from the other side of the room. The faculty office erupted into laughter at Kaori's expense.

Megumi laughed as well before heading over to Kaori's desk. "I guess even the other teachers tease you about being called Kaori-chan," Megumi said, glancing across the rest of the office.

"I guess I'm paying my dues for being a young teacher," Kaori sighed with her fingers on her brow. "Anyway, I think you know why I called you here?"

"I guess...it's about my career survey?" Megumi replied meekly.

“Yes, that’s right. The deadline was yesterday so normally I’d have to get all serious teacher with you, but I know your situation.” Kaori tapped her pen on her desk for a moment, making Megumi wonder what was going on.

“You know what, I have some work to do but I’ll do it at home tonight. My students take priority!” Kaori declared.

“Huh? What’s going on?” Megumi asked, confused at Kaori’s sudden outburst.

“Come, let’s get Hanako-san out of student council duty. I want to take you and your friends in that band of yours somewhere,” Kaori replied with a smile.

“Um, can you even like, do that?” Megumi inquired again, becoming even more perplexed.

“I may have only been a teacher for two-and-a-bit years, but I’m still a teacher! Think of this as an opportunity to give you and your friends some new perspective,” Kaori explained. “You should call the other two girls in your band and get them to meet us at the school gates.”

“But Reina goes to a different school,” Megumi pointed out.

“Oh well, I guess we’ll figure it out as we go along. For now, let’s just get Hanako-san.”

Kaori excused herself from the faculty office and left with Megumi. They made their way to the door of the student council room and were about to knock on the door, but Kaori noticed something from the window in the door. The student council president, Kenta Igarashi, was stood up next to Hanako who was sat down looking at a document.

Kenta leaned over to point at something on the page, his face moving closer towards Hanako’s. As Kenta moved his hand, it brushed ever so slightly against hers. Both Hanako and Kenta quickly moved their hands away and they seemed to

apologise to each other. Their blushing faces were clear for all to see, including the pair of peeping toms outside the room.

“It’s just like a scene from a *shoujo* manga,” Megumi said with a giggle.

“I know right? When did Hanako-san get that close with Igarashi-kun?” Kaori asked with a shocked expression.

“You know, you’re acting really differently today Kaori-chan,” Megumi pointed out.

“Well, I guess you just remind me of myself when I was your age,” Kaori replied with a smile. “I kind of reverted back to my old self. Anyway, let’s get Hanako-san. I’ll tell you more on our way out of school.”

To the student council’s surprise, Kaori entered the room and told everyone inside that Hanako was needed urgently. Since she was a teacher, nobody questioned her lie and Hanako left in the middle of her student council duties. “What is it you need Kaori-sensei?” Hanako inquired once she had left the room.

“Oh that? That was just a lie to get you out of student council duty,” Kaori responded with a laugh.

“Wait, what?” Hanako asked in surprise.

“Apparently Kaori-chan wants to show us all something,” Megumi said with a nervous laugh.

“That’s right! Who’s the other person in your band from this school?” Kaori queried.

“Mari Matsumoto. She’s a second year,” Hanako replied. “Mari-chan’s probably home by now since she walks home.”

“Oh, I know Mari-san. Can you call her and ask her to meet us?” Kaori inquired.

“Is this okay? Isn’t that a bit sudden?” Hanako interjected.

“Hello Mari-chan? Can you meet us by the school gates? Kaori-chan wants to show us something!” Megumi said,

suddenly on the phone. “You’ll be five minutes? Okay, see you there!”

“Mari-chan just agreed to it so suddenly?!” Hanako exclaimed in her shock.

“Okay, speak to the girl in your band from the other school. We’ll meet her at the nearest station,” Kaori requested, ignoring Hanako.

“Why do I suddenly feel like there are two Megumis?” Hanako muttered to herself.

The trio left the school building to meet up with Mari at the front gate, who appeared in five minutes after Megumi called her just like she said. “Hello Megumi-senpai, Hanako-senpai, Kaori-chan!” Mari greeted with a wave and her usual exuberant smile.

“Why do they get called *senpai*, but I get called *chan*?!” Kaori protested.

“Kaori-sensei is surprisingly childish when she is acting herself,” Hanako noted with a sigh.

“You’re a good girl, Hanako-san, you won’t betray me and call me Kaori-chan instead of Kaori-sensei, right?” Kaori ranted, placing her hands on Hanako’s shoulders and looking at her with puppy-dog eyes.

“I don’t see how it’s a betrayal to call you Kaori-chan,” Hanako replied, averting Kaori’s gaze.

“Oh wow, Kaori-chan is acting so different!” Mari said in a surprised tone.

“I know right?” Megumi chimed in.

They continued their way towards the station as Megumi was on the phone to Reina, telling her about their plans. Again to Hanako’s surprise, Reina agreed immediately to meet up with them, stating that she had nothing better to do anyway.

Hanako sighed, realising that this was just another time that everybody in the band was caught up in one of Megumi's impulsive schemes, although this time it was more down to Kaori. They arrived at the station near the school and waited about ten minutes for Reina to arrive. "Sorry, did you have to wait long?" Reina apologised as she appeared above ground from the subway stairs.

"Not at all, thanks for coming so suddenly," Kaori replied, bowing slightly.

"Ah, it's fine, I'm used to Megumi calling me suddenly. You must be their music teacher Izumi-sensei. Nice to meet you, I'm Reina Sugiyama," Reina said, bowing as well. "I've heard all about you from everyone in the band."

It seemed like tears started to well in Kaori's eyes before she suddenly embraced Reina in a hug, catching Reina by surprise. "H-h-h-huh? What's going on?!" Reina stammered in her embarrassment.

"I knew from the moment I saw you that you were a good girl Sugiyama-san!" Kaori exclaimed.

"M-M-M-Megumi! What's going on?!" Reina asked, her face still paralyzed by shock and embarrassment.

"She's just really happy you called her Izumi-sensei. All of us just call her Kaori-chan," Megumi replied with a smile.

"You call your music teacher Kaori-chan?!" Reina gasped, her expression somehow growing even more flabbergasted.

"I guess our school isn't as strict as yours Reina-senpai," Mari pointed out with a giggle.

After peeling Kaori away from embracing Reina, the girls and their teacher laughed as Reina brushed herself off. Hanako was still left with a burning question, however. "So Kaori-sensei, mind telling us why you've been acting so...differently today?" Hanako asked in a serious tone.

“You mean she doesn’t normally act like this?!” Reina exclaimed.

“Kaori-chan usually gives off the reliable, big sister kind of vibe,” Mari pointed out.

“I...I can’t see it,” Reina said blankly.

“How mean Sugiyama-san!” Kaori protested. “Well, um, let’s just say seeing Megumi today just reminded me of how I used to be.”

Kaori led the girls through the narrow streets of the Tokyo neighbourhood they were in. They looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary; it was just like any other residential area in Tokyo. “I remember this place well,” Kaori reminisced. “I used to walk through here all the time.” Kaori took her time, taking in her surroundings as she walked. The whole time she adorned a contented expression her face, as if enveloped by happy memories.

“I was in the same situation as you Megumi-san, in my last year of high school,” Kaori began. “I was late in handing my career survey in. I had no idea what I wanted to do but I knew that I wanted to do something related to music.”

Megumi edged closer to Kaori as she talked. “I was a lot like you when I was younger Megumi-san. I was impulsive, I trusted my instincts, and I would do things just because they seemed fun. I was always finding excuses to play piano. I ended up helping a lot of the girls in my class and lower years with their music homework and with learning pieces for their clubs because I enjoyed it,” Kaori continued.

“But not once during school did I think about becoming a teacher. After my homeroom teacher called me in to think seriously about my future, I just sort of remembered how much fun it was to help people study. So, I just said I’d study education on a whim.”

The smile on Kaori's face turned slightly sad as she continued, "Well, that's not exactly true. While it was a whim, deep down I was scared to fully commit to music and go to music school. There are no guarantees with anything in life but even less so if you consider the chances of getting a career working in music or the music industry. There was me, a person who impulsively did whatever she wanted to, looking at this mountain that my instincts couldn't tell me how to climb."

Kaori softly brushed her hands against a lamppost at the side of the street as she walked, her hand lingering for just a moment. She knew that they were close to their destination. "So, I thought becoming a music teacher would be a sort of compromise, but I also sort of felt like I was still abandoning music through my choice. The alternative was just too scary for me though, so I graduated high school, went to university, and then I found this place."

The five turned one final corner and came across a small opening within the densely packed neighbourhood. In front of them was a worn-down looking building, inside of which seemed to be a gathering of elderly people. "Here we are," Kaori said with a nostalgic smile.

"What is this place?" Megumi asked.

"This is an old community centre that's not too far from my university," Kaori replied. "After I started university, I joined a music club that often came here for open mic and jam nights."

Kaori moved up slowly towards to the community centre and placed one hand on the gate outside the building. The way she smiled while looking over the gate, the path to the front door, the stained outer walls, it was clear to the four high

school girls in tow that this place held a lot of dear memories for Kaori.

“I was a bit of a mess after I started university,” Kaori said. “I always felt regret at not being able to commit fully to music school and pursue a career in music. But this place...this place saved me.”

“It saved you?” Hanako asked.

“I didn’t know how I would express myself musically or find an outlet for it with all the university work I would inevitably have. But we came here twice, sometimes three times a week, and we just played and sang songs together. And the people that I played with...” Kaori replied, digging into her memories.

“There was Nagano-san, she was an economics student and a pianist like me. There was Saito-senpai, he was a chemistry student, and he played the drums. There was Suzuki-san, he was a Japanese Literature student who played trumpet. There was Kobayashi-senpai, he was a physics student that played the guitar. There was Hasegawa-san, she was a history student who played violin. There was Kate-san, she was a foreign exchange student from Canada who played clarinet. I feel like I’m forgetting so many people. There were many wonderful peers, *senpai*, and *koubai* that I met and played with in my time here.”

“What I’m basically trying to say,” Kaori continued, “is that I discovered that we were all very different people, with different interests, who studied different things. The only thing we had in common was that we liked to play music together. And those were some of the best times in my life.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Mari said, smiling at her music teacher.

“It really was. Sometimes we would laugh, sometimes we would argue, sometimes we would drink a little bit too much

and get scolded by the building manager,” Kaori added. “I still stay in touch with many people from the music club to this day. I even met my partner from that club, Hasegawa-san, who I mentioned earlier.”

“You never mentioned that you were dating someone!” Megumi exclaimed. “What’s Hasegawa-san like?”

“I mean, there’s no reason to talk about it at school, right? You lot would just start asking me too many questions or spread rumours, I just wanted to mention it in passing,” Kaori replied with a laugh being continuing.

“Her name is Chitose Hasegawa, she’s the exact opposite of me. She’s very grounded, serious, and has a very firm vision of what she wants to do. She’s currently a postdoctoral researcher yet is one of the best violin players I have ever heard play. Despite being so different, I think we make a good couple.”

“How long have you two been seeing each other?” Reina asked.

“We started dating in our third year of university, so what, like almost five years now?” Kaori replied. “Anyway, that’s enough about that, I trust you girls won’t go spreading this around to everybody in school.”

“Our lips are sealed!” Megumi declared with a broad grin.

“The point I was trying to make,” Kaori said, refocusing the conversation, “is that regardless of what you end up doing, as long as you have people who share your passion, a place to play music, or even just an outlet for your creativity, then it almost doesn’t matter what you study at university. I look at you four and I see that you all love music very much and from what Megumi-san has told me about your band, it’s exactly the environment that fosters passion and creativity. Even when

you all go and do different things, I'm confident that your love for music won't change."

"I'm pretty confident of that as well!" Mari declared with a raised fist and a smile.

"I know that Megumi-san hasn't decided what to do yet, but Hanako-san, you're looking to apply to the University of Tokyo?" Kaori inquired.

"That's right," Hanako replied.

"With Hanako-senpai's grades she should get in no problem!" Mari added.

"What about you Sugiyama-san?" Kaori asked, switching her attention to Reina.

"Well, um...my dad went to the Berklee College of Music in Boston, so I thought I would try and go there as well," Reina said. "I already have an audition lined up."

"That's incredible! Going overseas for music school has to be a challenge from what little I know, but I'm sure the experience will be amazing and that you'll grow so much as a person," Kaori encouraged with a smile. "What about you Mari-san, do you have any plans for when you graduate after your third year?"

"I'm probably going to a music school. That's about as much thought as I've put into it," Mari replied with a beaming smile.

"That's definitely more than what Megumi-san has planned," Kaori said with a laugh.

"Hey, no fair!" Megumi protested.

"It's your own fault for not making your mind up," Hanako noted dryly.

They laughed at Megumi's expense who could only muster a sheepish look in response. She looked over at the community centre and towards the rest of the girls in her band. Megumi

knew that even if they were all in different places, they would still be messaging each other about ideas they had for the band and their music and that they would meet up to play together.

She still had to make her mind up about her immediate future, but she felt reassured that even if she didn't go to music school it didn't mean that her passion for music would disappear. To the contrary, it seemed like Kaori's passion for music grew after going to university despite studying education. "Anyway, how about we get some dinner? My treat," Kaori offered with a smile. Megumi and her friends responded with an enthusiastic nod to the prospect of more time to speak to their teacher, as well as a free meal.

* * * * *

The five ended up at a small ramen restaurant near the community centre. Despite being in a suburb, it was relatively busy, and a twenty-minute wait was required before there was enough seating for their party. Kaori had excused herself to make a phone call during the wait and joined Megumi and her friends after they had already taken their seats. "Sorry for that," Kaori said. "Anyway, this restaurant was an old favourite of my club's. We'd often come here for food after our jam nights, so much so that the staff all knew us by name."

"This place seems nice," Megumi noted, looking around inside the restaurant. It seemed like a lot of family-run restaurants with a very homely feel to everything. One of the girls waiting tables must have been the daughter of the owners judging by her appearance. Helping her was a middle-aged lady who appeared to be the mother of the girl waiting tables. She approached the group at their table and said, "Ah, Kaori-chan!

Good to see you again, must have been a few months since you were last here.”

“Hello again Yae *oba-san*,” greeted Kaori with a slight bow of her head. “Are you and the family doing well?”

“Same as always,” she responded, placing cups of water at their table. “Rumiko’s been helping more around the shop, which has been a great help.”

“That’s great. Oh, could we get an extra glass?” Kaori requested.

“Absolutely. Just one moment,” Yae answered before taking her leave.

“We have another person coming?” Hanako questioned.

“Somebody I know wants to meet all of you,” Kaori replied with a smile. Just as she finished speaking, a young woman with short black hair dressed in a smart blouse and trousers entered the restaurant. She looked over to their group and said, “Ah, there you are Kaori.”

She walked over and took the seat next to Kaori. Megumi noticed a sharp, piercing look to her eyes and a stern expression on her face. Despite that, Kaori immediately gave her a hug. “Chitose!” Kaori cried gleefully through her embrace.

The woman she called Chitose swiftly gave Kaori a soft karate chop to the top of the head and chided, “Don’t get so clingy in public you idiot.”

Chitose then glanced over towards the schoolgirls and matter-of-factly asked, “Has Kaori...well, Izumi-san for you I guess, has she been drinking?”

“No,” Megumi replied with a nervous chuckle.

“Anyway, I guess I should introduce myself,” Chitose added. “I’m Chitose Hasegawa. Thank you for looking out for Izumi-san.”

“Ah, Kaori-chan, this is Hasegawa-san, your partner?” Mari queried.

“Oh wow, your students actually do call you Kaori-chan,” Chitose noted blankly. “No point in calling you Izumi-san in front of them then.”

“Not you as well Chitose!” Kaori cried in protest. “I try to be a respectable and dependable teacher at school, but I still get called Kaori-chan all the same.”

“Deep down they can see through your ruse,” Chitose said with a wry smile.

“I can see you two are very close,” Hanako noted with a smile of her own.

“You get used to her,” Chitose added dryly. “Anyway, my idiot girlfriend here forgot her purse at home so she couldn’t actually pay for the meal she had offered you. There’s no way any self-respecting teacher would let her students pay for a meal that she said she would cover.”

“You’re so mean!” Kaori protested with a pout.

“I also saw this as an opportunity to maybe give some of you some advice,” Chitose continued, ignoring Kaori. “I’m pretty sure Kaori has failed miserably in that regard.”

“Ah no, Kaori-chan has been very helpful to us,” Megumi said with a nervous laugh.

Chitose was very blunt to the point of being abrasive and after seeing Kaori’s true personality, it was almost inconceivable that they were a couple that had been dating for almost five years at first glance.

However, it was clear that they knew each other very well, both the good and the bad, and being comfortable in a relationship to the point that you can be your worst around each other was a sign that the bond they shared was very deep. “Anyway, which of you is Uehara-san?” Chitose asked.

“That would be me,” Megumi answered. “I’m Megumi Uehara, good to meet you! These are my friends Hanako Todoroki, Mari Matsumoto, and Reina Sugiyama.” The girls bowed their heads slightly as Megumi went through their names.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Chitose said. “So, you’re the one struggling with your future, Uehara-san?”

“Please call me Megumi! And yeah, I was late handing in my career survey because I haven’t made my mind up,” Megumi replied sheepishly.

“Okay Megumi-san. You know, I kind of felt the same,” Chitose noted. “I knew I wanted to study history but I had been playing violin since I was seven years old so there was a part of me that still wanted to study music further. But I made do with the university music club that Kaori and I were in, as well as playing in a local amateur orchestra with her.”

“Oh wow, I didn’t know you were in an orchestra together,” Mari said.

“Yup, we play in local orchestras for amateur theatre productions as well as performing orchestral and film pieces,” Kaori added proudly.

“So, you have your band with these girls?” Chitose asked. Megumi and her friends nodded.

“Kaori actually shared some of your recordings with me. Did you do those yourself?” Chitose continued, furthering her line of inquiry.

“Ah, Hanako and I did them at home together. We record all the guitars and bass with Mari, and we track the drums using Reina’s electronic drumkit,” Megumi replied.

“To be honest, Megumi is doing most of the recording and mixing work herself,” Hanako pointed out. “I’ve lost count of

the number of times you've forgotten to do your homework because you were up until 3AM mixing something."

"My bad," Megumi said with a nervous laugh.

"To be honest, that's kind of amazing," Chitose complimented.

The girls all looked at Chitose who looked very serious about what she had just said. "It's...it's not really that amazing," Megumi admitted hesitantly.

"No, it is. I don't have the faintest clue where to start with home recording and that kind of stuff and your music sounds very well recorded," Chitose explained matter-of-factly. "Have you considered studying to become a recording engineer?"

"A recording engineer?" Reina asked. "That sounds like something that would suit Megumi."

"Yes definitely, Megumi-senpai has a talent for it!" Mari agreed with a beaming smile.

"Well, I guess I have looked into it as a possibility," Megumi said. "But then again, it's always been something I've learned and done on my own and I feel confident I can continue learning it on my own. Actually, here are some other things I've looked into." She produced her phone and showed some courses that she had researched with the group around the table.

"You've put some thought into this, I see," Chitose noted.

"I thought that I might as well take this seriously. I have a list of possible university courses and music schools that I made," Megumi explained. "But I haven't been able to make my mind up."

"Well I thought that audio engineering seemed like it would suit you well but then again you have managed well enough learning by yourself," Chitose said, pondering out loud. "The other university courses you have picked out are good options

as well. If you're interested in science then studying one at university is a good option as they're good subjects to have a degree in, in general."

"I guess if I had to pick a university course that isn't music, I would rather study a science than study one of the humanities," Megumi explained.

"For whatever reason, you always get better exam results in physics, maths, biology, and chemistry than you got in Japanese, English, history, and social studies," Hanako added.

"I would have never thought of Megumi as the science type just from looking at her," Reina noted.

"Yeah, I didn't get that impression when I first saw you," Chitose agreed.

"As you can see, Chitose is very open and talks her mind freely," Kaori said with a nervous chuckle.

"Why do I feel like I'm being ganged up on by the adults," Megumi muttered.

"It's for your own good," Chitose pointed out. "But like I said, if you enjoy the sciences you can also study a science degree if you think you have the aptitude for it as they're useful degrees to have."

Megumi pondered that thought for a moment. While she had considered options like studying music and audio engineering, she did notice that all the university courses she had picked out were for science degrees. She had always been more interested in science subjects than she was in arts and humanities subjects, but her interest had always seemed inconsequential when compared to her interest in music.

However, when considering what to study at university her perspective seemed to shift. "I think I have to put a little more thought into it but I have a better idea of what I want to do,"

Megumi said with a smile. “Thank you both Kaori-chan and Hasegawa-san too!”

“Don’t take too long; you have until the end of the week to hand in your career survey,” Kaori pointed out, her smile becoming a little more devilish.

“Hey, don’t get all teacher with me all of a sudden!” Megumi protested.

The group laughed before the proprietor’s daughter came to take their order. They chatted over their ramen, about how Hanako planned to go to the University of Tokyo, how Reina planned to study music overseas, and how Mari planned to go to music school after she graduated.

The high school girls noted how Chitose was quick to scold Kaori for her childish outbursts but that it also seemed like it was a normal thing in their relationship. Megumi was surprised to see how Kaori really was when she acted naturally but it wasn’t a bad thing. It made sense how helpful and supportive Kaori had been towards Megumi given that Kaori saw a lot of herself in her student.

This situation itself was amazing for the girls with a teacher that was comfortable enough with her students to have dinner with them and to even introduce them to her partner. It may have shown naivety on Kaori’s part to social norms with regards to interacting with students but then again, they were in the final year of their high school and Megumi genuinely believed that Kaori had her best interests at heart, otherwise she would not have gone out of her way to do this.

Having a teacher like Kaori, someone who went the extra mile for her students, and someone who really cared, made Megumi feel privileged to have her as a homeroom teacher for her time in high school. And who knows, maybe Megumi would stay in touch after high school and call Kaori her friend.

“Thank you Kaori-chan, thank you Hasegawa-san, for the meal!” Megumi said, bowing her head slightly with the other three girls.

“The pleasure was ours, or should I say mine, since I was the one who paid,” Chitose responded, shooting a look towards Kaori. “But really, it was nice to meet you all. It’s not often that I get to meet some of Kaori’s students.”

“It was nice to meet you too,” Hanako replied. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to us and give us your advice.”

“We were in your position not too long ago, so I feel that we’re best suited to help you out,” Kaori added. “And also Megumi-san, let me remind you again to hand in your career form by the end of the week!”

Megumi let out a sigh and the rest of the party laughed at her expense. Despite her feigning reluctance, this evening had really helped to set her mind straight and realise that it might not even matter what she chose to do, be it go to university or music school, because she and her friends would want to stay connected to music regardless of where they ended up.

That very night, Megumi completed her career form, knowing that what she chose may not be the most direct path to staying connected to music but in the end it may not matter too much in the long run.

8. Winter and Entrance Exams

“Shall we go Megumi?” Hanako asked, glancing over at her friend. Megumi nodded. She exhaled slowly, watching her breath condense in the cold, January air. Her breath faded away slowly as if dissipating into the dark, overcast sky above her. Megumi bounced away from the entrance of the apartment complex she lived in to join Hanako, who was here as usual to meet her in the morning.

The pair of them, however, were not going to school that day. This was the first day of the National Centre Test²² that they would be taking that weekend as the first part of their university admission exams. The pair smiled at each other as they set off.

It had been nine months since Megumi’s tumultuous first few weeks of her third year of high school. Starting the school semester in April, she had been filled with apprehension and uncertainty over what she would do in her future and how to stay connected to music as she moved forward.

22. The National Centre Test for University Admissions (大学入試センター試験) was a standardised, national test that many students took as part of the admission process for public and some private universities in Japan. The Centre Test only occurs once over one weekend annually, and it can be the difference between gaining admission to university or missing out for an entire year. As a result, it usually receives a lot of media attention and is often featured in Japanese popular media. 2020 is the last year the Centre Test will be used and will be replaced by a new format in 2021. We’re assuming that this story takes place before 2020 with the setting being a sort of real-world analogue. If we want definite dates, given that the first *Senpai EP* was released in 2015 and we call that the year the story takes place, then that would place the events of *Senpai III* during the 2016-2017 academic year.

However, thanks to the help of her friends and her teacher Kaori, she had made her mind up. The school year seemed to fly by after that with her final summer break, school cultural festival, and many a mock exam behind her. She had also made many more precious memories with her friends in the band during the year as well but as the date for the Centre Test drew near, the time she had to dedicate to music slowly decreased.

Instead of band practises however, often the band would meet together to have group study sessions. The efficacy of their sessions did vary but despite the fact that they were studying for year-defining entrance exams, their get togethers were often a lot of fun. Megumi had however studied in the months leading up to the Centre Test harder than she ever had in her life.

Despite her average grades, there had been times when she actually put effort into her schoolwork and she scored fairly high in her exams when she did. This mostly came during midterms and final exams, but it often surprised her teachers who would bemoan her usual lack of effort throughout the year.

She wasn't placing in the top five in school like Hanako regularly did but she could perform academically when she put her mind to it. This weekend's exams would be the culmination of all that work and would be the first step in deciding whether Megumi would get into university or not.

"You know, it's kind of funny," Hanako said with a smile.

"What is?" Megumi asked.

"The fact that we're going to the Centre Test together; I always imagined that I would be going on my own," Hanako replied.

"You had that little faith in me?!" Megumi exclaimed, her expression one of feigned surprise.

“You know what I mean by that,” Hanako said with a laugh.

“Yeah, I know.”

Hanako had always assumed that Megumi would be going off to do her own thing that had nothing to do with attempting to get into university. It seemed like whenever there was something serious to do, Megumi would go off on a tangent and pursue something that made more sense in her own mind. Hanako usually followed in her wake, caught up in whatever storm Megumi would cause.

She didn't mind it however as it was almost always fun and spending time with your oldest friend was never a bad thing. However, things changed with their final year of school. Hanako had decided that she wanted to go to the University of Tokyo and it was a decision that Hanako had taken by herself despite knowing it would mean that she and Megumi would be apart from each other after they graduated high school.

At first the decision really tormented Hanako. She went through a gambit of emotions from confusion, to fear, to even guilt, over the prospect of choosing something that would separate the normally inseparable pair. Despite how she felt, she knew deep down that when she told Megumi that she was planning on applying to the University of Tokyo, Megumi would smile at her, encourage her, and tell her that it was a good choice.

It was the first time that Hanako would be taking the initiative on something important to her that got in the way of their friendship and she couldn't help but feel guilty about it at the time. None of that seemed to matter anymore though, as the pair of them walked side-by-side through the narrow

streets of their Tokyo suburb, heading towards the nearest subway station to go to their examination centre.

Hanako smiled and began, “Astrophysics huh? I still can’t believe that’s what you’re applying for.”

“Well, I did always like stars and space and stuff,” Megumi pointed out. “And I got decent grades in physics and maths, so I thought ‘why not’? And I’ll build a home recording studio when I’m not doing university work!”

“I mean, I thought you were applying to study astrophysics because you’re always spacing out,” Hanako said with a giggle.

“What I can’t believe is that you’re not walking to the exam centre with mister boyfriend,” Megumi shot back, a broad, smug smile appearing on her face.

“M-m-m-mister boyfriend? Why would you put it in such a weird way?!” Hanako exclaimed in her embarrassment.

Before the summer break, Hanako had been unexpectedly asked out by Kenta Igarashi, the student council president. Hanako was so shocked that the only response she could muster was, “...Are you sure you have the right person?” Kenta himself was so surprised by Hanako’s answer that he could only start laughing.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be laughing when I’m asking you out, but your reply just killed me,” he said, still getting over the last of his chuckles. “Anyway no, I’m fairly sure I don’t have the wrong person. I’ll ask you again just so that it’s clear, will you go out with me, Hanako-san?”

Hanako tried to recall if there was anything that would have made Kenta ask her out. They only really ever spent time together doing student council work and even then, it was mostly business. However, as she thought about it more, she remembered how Kenta would occasionally look at her, thinking that Hanako wouldn’t notice.

She remembered how he would often ask her questions about the things she liked, what she did in her spare time, and what it was like being in a band. It wasn't only that, Hanako herself did the very same, talking to Kenta about his passion for baseball, how he dealt with his popularity, and what his plans were after school. She had grown close to him without even realising it. "Okay, sure," Hanako said at the time, averting his gaze. "I'll go out with you."

"That's how it went, right?" Megumi recalled, teasing Hanako as they walked.

"Please stop it; I can only take so much," Hanako muttered with a sigh. "To answer your earlier question, we're going to celebrate the Centre Test being over after the exams tomorrow but we said to try and not see each other during the exams, especially since we'll have more to do if we pass the Centre Test."

"Too much of a distraction?" Megumi asked smugly.

"Something like that," Hanako replied, trying to hide her embarrassment. "Speak for yourself though, at least I have a boyfriend."

Those words hit Megumi like a punch to the gut. "You got me there," Megumi muttered feebly. The pair laughed it off and continued on their walk. Megumi smiled as she remembered when Hanako told the girls in their band that she got asked out by Kenta. Mari had been particularly excited by the news a few months back.

"You're going out with *the* Igarashi-senpai?!" Mari had exclaimed with her hands clasped together. "I can't believe it! Hanako-senpai's *shoujo* romance has come to fruition!"

"I'm happy for you, Hanako!" Reina chimed in with a smile.

"You know, it's funny, I'm not sure whether what I feel towards Igarashi-kun is yet, whether I really like him that way

or not,” Hanako explained. “But I enjoy my time speaking with him. I thought that going out with him wouldn’t be such a bad thing.”

“You should start with that and take things one step at a time,” Reina said, before becoming embarrassed. “N-n-n-not that I have much experience with that sort of thing.”

The pair laughed as they reminisced about Reina’s embarrassment during that moment. It seemed like whenever Reina spoke to them, she would sincerely speak her mind before realising what she had just said and becoming immediately embarrassed at her own words. “Speaking of Reina, it’s crazy to think that she’ll be studying in America,” Hanako remarked.

“I’m still so happy she got accepted,” Megumi added.

“I’m genuinely amazed with how much initiative she’s taken,” Hanako noted. “Even at the beginning of the school year, she was already talking about getting a part-time job in Boston to help pay for tuition, looking for accommodation, and sorting out her student visa.”

“Reina’s incredible,” Megumi agreed. “She’s so shy and even struggled to make friends with us back then, but before you knew it, she’s charging directly at her goal, something that she chose for herself.”

As if by clockwork, both their phones went off as Reina had sent them both a message of good luck for their coming exams in their group Line chat. “Speak of the devil,” Hanako said with a smile.

“Why did she say, ‘good luck’ to you and ‘you better not fail’ to me?” Megumi asked, her face twisting into a pout.

“You’re her rival, after all,” Hanako replied with a grin.

“Hey, we got over all that ‘rival’ business years ago,” Megumi shot back.

Another message came through in their group chat, this time from Mari. She, being in the year below them at school, would be the only member of their band that would be left behind at school.

Mari had come to terms with that fact fairly early on, realising that barely two years after forming the band with them, they would be graduating with her still having her third year of high school to complete. She couldn't help but feel a little sad at that prospect, but none of that showed in the message she sent.

"Megumi-senpai, Hanako-senpai, kick the Centre Test in the butt!" Megumi read aloud with a smile.

"Trust Mari-chan to send a message like that," Hanako said.

"I know she says she's okay still being stuck in school after we graduate but I can't help but feel a little sad about it," Megumi noted with a sigh.

"Mari's much stronger than she lets on," Hanako pointed out. "With everything she's been through, this will be nothing for her."

"I guess you're right," Megumi conceded. "I'm still planning on dragging her out of classes so that we can do band stuff together."

"Maybe focus on your own classes?" Hanako quipped dryly while Megumi laughed.

As the pair walked on, they made it out of the small side streets of their neighbourhood and onto the main road. It was still only seven forty-five on a Saturday morning but even now the street was bustling with people getting ready to start their workdays. There were a mix of various people, some of them commuters starting their long journeys into the city, or people running the local businesses setting up shop for the day.

What stood out though was the number of young people in school uniforms. Almost every student aspiring to go to university would be taking the Centre Test this weekend and many high school students were out in force making their way to their assigned examination sites. Megumi and Hanako soon joined the sea of students and commuters, hoping to get the all-important pass on the exam that they needed to either get accepted into the university of their choice or to move onto institution specific exams.

They walked through the subway station, past the ticket barriers, and towards the platform in silence. The next train arrived shortly afterwards and the noise and bustle of the platform with people coming off as well as boarding the train filled the air. The train was tightly packed with no seats available, leaving standing as the only option for the pair. Megumi tried her best to stay close to Hanako in amongst the squeeze of passengers as the train lightly shook and rocked. Their journey was a short one of only two stops but despite all the noise on the train, the silence between Megumi and Hanako seemed almost deafening in of itself.

They navigated their way through their destination station and back up to street level. It seemed to have gotten brighter and ever so slightly warmer in the short duration of their transit. Megumi couldn't really tell if she was nervous or not. It didn't really feel like she could think much of anything at the moment. She fixed her eyes forward and walked with Hanako the short distance towards their testing centre.

There were many other students from the various schools in the area. They saw many of their own classmates, as well as people in Reina's school uniform. Two of them they recognised, who Megumi called out to. "Sawako-chan! Kana-chan!"

Sawako and Kana turned to see Megumi and Hanako waving at them and walked over. “Good to see you two!” greeted Sawako enthusiastically.

“Good morning Megumi-chan, Hanako-chan,” Kana added.

“You two look like you’re ready for the exam!” Megumi exclaimed.

“Oh, you don’t even know just how nervous I am!” Sawako blurted through gritted teeth. “Kana-chan’s been trying to keep me calm all morning but I can’t stop moving about.”

“I know the feeling,” Hanako agreed. “I’ve had butterflies in my stomach all morning.”

“Which is weird how you always do so well in exams,” Megumi noted.

“Very few of the exams we’ve done mean as much as this one though,” Kana pointed out. “I think it’s okay to be nervous though. I know I am.”

“You all will be fine, I know how hard all of you studied,” reassured Hanako with a smile.

“Let’s hope so!” agreed Megumi, exhaling onto her hands to warm them up.

The four huddled together outside, chatting as they did. Trying to avoid talking about their impending examination, they spoke about their New Year’s celebrations and what they had gotten up to over the winter break. It had been expectedly quiet for the quartet during that time given that the Centre Test was right around the corner, but it still felt nice for them to catch up regardless. Before long, they noticed movement as students began making their way towards the building in which the examinations would be taking place.

Megumi gave each of her friends one last look of encouragement before they set off together towards the test

centre. Not a word was exchanged between the four as they entered, flanked on all sides by dozens of other examinees. The mood varied across all the students inside; some were joking and laughing, some were chatting quietly, others remained silent in their nervousness, and a fair number were looking over their notes or flash cards for a final time.

The four girls fell into the silent nervousness category, as they stood waiting for the minutes to count down until they would be let into the hall for their first exam of the day. Megumi had one last moment of doubt in her mind, wondering if she had made the right choice, but reminded herself quickly that she had reached a point of no turning back. Before she knew it, the doors to the examination hall had opened and students were being ushered in by the exam facilitators.

Hanako looked over towards Megumi and saw the slight uneasiness in her face. She reached out a hand and tapped Megumi lightly on the shoulder. “Huh?” Megumi asked, snapping out of her daze and turning quickly to face her childhood friend.

Hanako offered no words in response, just an outstretched fist. Megumi saw what Hanako was trying to do and smiled. She reciprocated Hanako’s fist-bump, feeling a lot calmer all of a sudden. “Let’s do this,” Hanako said, smiling warmly at her friend. Megumi nodded in response, determined to give this weekend of exams her all.

* * * * *

Megumi found herself in yet another crowd. This time however she was on her own. The sounds of all the people around Megumi were mostly blocked out by her noise-

cancelling headphones. It felt like she was stuck inside her own head despite being outside in a large gathering of people had it not been for Hanako's voice who she was on a phone call with.

"I'm so nervous," Hanako muttered, herself navigating through a crowd in another area of Tokyo.

"You'll be fine," Megumi said, trying to reassure her friend. "I'm not far, how about you?"

"I think I'm close," Hanako replied. "But the closer I get, the more nervous I get!"

Both the girls were walking towards a set of large wooden boards, each of them with a list of examinee identifying numbers on them. Whether or not their specific identifiers were on the board would tell them whether they had passed their respective university entrance exams. Having both passed the Centre Test, the next stage was to take institution specific entrance exams for their universities of choice.

Hanako had been especially nervous about her exam, given the reputation of the University of Tokyo and how much of a big deal it would be to be accepted. Megumi herself felt strangely calm about her own entrance exam, much calmer than she had felt about the Centre Test. There was a part of her that had accepted that if she failed, she would just move on to her plan B, and her plan C if necessary.

It was a different story for Hanako however as she very much wanted to get into the University of Tokyo, being her main aim for after school. Megumi wished more for Hanako to get into her university of choice than for her own success, as she knew it meant so much more for Hanako.

Megumi continued to make small talk with Hanako over the phone as she started to approach a group of people crowded around what looked like the boards with the successful candidate numbers on it. She couldn't hear them

because of her headphones but could see several individuals throwing their hands up in celebration and others being consoled by their friends. Seeing that suddenly made Megumi nervous, as if the reality of the situation was only dawning on her now.

“I can see the boards,” Hanako said, as if she and Megumi were perfectly in sync with how far away they were from learning their fate.

“Me too,” Megumi concurred, exhaling deeply to calm herself down. “I guess it’s time to find out.”

Megumi waited patiently for the crowds of students to inch forward, edging her closer and closer knowing whether she had passed or not. While she was nervous now, she kept thinking about how Hanako was feeling. “Can you see the numbers yet?” Megumi asked.

“Not yet, it feels like this queue is moving so slowly,” Hanako replied. “I just want this to be over, ideally with us both getting into our first-choice universities.”

“You said it,” Megumi agreed. “Not long now, though.”

It was only another five minutes before Megumi found herself in front of the results boards. Now was the moment of truth for her. She nervously scanned the numbers, going along and getting closer to the ballpark of her own examinee identifier.

And suddenly, there it was; Megumi’s examinee number. The moment she noticed it felt so surreal for her, as if her entire being was focused on whether or not the number she was looking at was real or not. She stared at it for a full fifteen seconds before snapping out of her trancelike state. “Megumi, Megumi!” she heard Hanako saying in her headphones.

“Oh sorry, I was out of it for a second. Did you make it to the result boards?” Megumi asked.

“Megumi ...I-I-I...I got in!” Hanako stammered loudly, barely able to contain the happiness in her voice. “I passed! I got accepted into *Toudai*!”

“You got in?! Congratulations, I’m so happy for you!” Megumi exclaimed.

“What about you?” Hanako asked in a hurried voice.

“What about me?” Megumi countered.

“Did you get in?”

Megumi had almost forgotten her own result in her excitement over Hanako making it into the University of Tokyo. It felt like it was secondary to Hanako’s achievement, but this was a moment for Megumi to be ecstatic as well. “Oh yeah,” Megumi replied. “I guess, yeah, I got in too!”

“I’m so happy for you!” Hanako cried, the joy very apparent in her voice. “Sorry, it’s hard to speak, people are cheering all around me. We have to meet up as soon as possible to celebrate.”

“Sure thing,” Megumi agreed softly.

“I’ll message Reina and Mari-chan as well to see if they’re able to meet us, and also Sawako-chan and Kana-chan,” Hanako said, her voice almost cracking from the excitement.

“Yes, please do!” Megumi agreed.

“Great. Okay, I’m going to hang up because I have to try and get out of this crowd. I’ll Line you when I find somewhere where we can meet.”

“Got you. Speak to you soon, Hanako.”

Megumi pulled her phone out of her pocket and hung up the call, letting out a sigh of relief. She turned away from the results boards and made her way through the crowds and towards the exit of the university premises. As she put some distance between herself and the results boards, Megumi felt a spring growing in her step. As if out of her control, she

spontaneously leapt up and punched the air, letting out a cheer as she did.

It was as if she needed to get away from all those people to finally release how she truly felt, or if it just took that long for her achievement to dawn on her. The happiness of making it into her first-choice university was swelling up within her, and she almost felt overcome with joy.

Megumi collected herself after her outburst and continued on her way to meet Hanako, although she couldn't help but hum happily as she walked, her face adorned with a broad smile. She had done it. Megumi was going to become a university student.

This was only the first step, however. She thought about her commute to university from her home, about how she would manage her time in order to practise guitar, as well as record music. She imagined messaging Hanako in between her studies at *Toudai* about writing bass parts, asking Mari to come over to track guitars, and to have a delayed response from Reina who would be over a dozen hours behind due to time zones.

Despite the fact that all four girls would be separated in one way or another, Megumi couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect. Before it felt like a harsh but inevitable truth that she simply had to accept but now it felt like a challenge that she was going to face head on in order to overcome. Megumi walked on with a bounce to her step, thrilled at her current victory and excited about what would come next.

9. Graduation

Megumi and Hanako's classroom was awash with noise and chatter in what would be their final ever homeroom of high school. A small group of students were stood at the blackboard, adding to a large chalk mural that had been drawn over the course of the morning. Another girl, who had been serving as the class representative that year, happily handed out floral-themed graduation ribbons to everybody in class.

Hanako found it a bit odd that it wasn't her with that responsibility as she almost always had been class rep until that year, where it was a sort of unspoken rule that a student shouldn't be both class rep as well as serving on the student council. She had retired from her role on the student council after the cultural festival, having served her one-year term, and all she really did afterwards was study.

After passing her entrance exams²³, Hanako had found herself with a brief amount of free time, something she felt like she hadn't had in months. Following the celebration dinner with her friends and boyfriend the day they found out about their exam results, Hanako took the next day off just to relax, catching up on manga she had put off reading, playing bass, and lazing around watching random YouTube videos.

Megumi had also taken that next day off as well. However, she spent her time tweaking the mix to a song they had recorded just before they went into full studying mode. She

23. The timing on when students find out their entrance exam results and their graduation ceremonies may actually be the other way around here but for the purposes of narrative flow I'm just going to make it so that the entrance exam results come before the graduation ceremony.

listened to parts over and over again, mostly adjusting her equalisers and compressors and seeing whether the changes sounded better than what she already had. Megumi then agonised for over an hour whether the adjustments she had made to the snare sound worked or not. It was all in a day's work making small adjustments to a mix.

While other years were still going to school up until this point, the third years had the exam period off from school until today, which was the day of their graduation ceremony. Today would be the last time they ever wore their uniforms in earnest, the last time they would step in and out of the school gates as students, and their final day in this place where they had spent most of their last three years at.

Kaori soon entered the classroom and was met with excited greetings and cheers from many in her class. She blushed slightly, given her unfamiliarity with this situation. This was her first ever homeroom class and as such, would be the first graduating class she would see off in her career as a teacher.

“Okay, okay, settle down please,” Kaori said. “I do actually have to take attendance before the ceremony starts.”

There were some yells of playful, feigned protest from several members of the class as well as a few ‘boos’ here and there which caused most of the class to laugh. Kaori sighed and wondered if she would make it through today, both because of how rowdy her class was now and because of how emotional she suspected she would become at the end of the day.

Kaori finished what felt like the hardest attendance she had taken in the three years she had these students as her homeroom class because of how loud and unruly they were being. It was understandable as they were eager to begin their lives after high school, with many lined up to go to university,

others going to vocational school, and with a few going straight into work, often into a family business. The air in the classroom was full of excitement and nervous anticipation.

The majority of the formal events for the day would take place in the school assembly hall. While the third-year students attended their final homeroom class, the first and second years along with the families and friends of the third-year students, began to fill up the hall. Kaori checked her watch to see how close they were to the appointed time to get her class to start moving. In the meantime, she thought it would be fine to take it easy and let her class chat amongst themselves.

Kaori smiled, looking over all of these young men and women that she had grown to know over these last three years. She remembered the first time she introduced herself to them, and how nervous she was then. “If calling me Izumi-sensei seems too formal, feel free to call me Kaori-sensei!” Kaori had said anxiously on that day, leading to her eventual nickname of Kaori-chan. Recalling those words always managed to make her wince since now almost all students in the school called her Kaori-chan, not just this first ever homeroom class of hers.

As her watch ticked towards half-past nine, Kaori stood up from behind her desk and walked up in front of the class. “Okay,” she began, “time to-”

“Wait a second, Kaori-chan!” Megumi interjected.

“Can it wait? We have to go to the assembly hall now or else we’ll be late,” Kaori pointed out, wondering which one of Megumi’s schemes she would have to deal with now.

“Hold on, before we leave, all of us have something we wanted to give to you,” Megumi said, rushing out of her seat towards the locker at the back of the classroom which contained the class’s cleaning equipment. She hurriedly opened the door and pulled something out which Kaori couldn’t see

as it was obscured by Megumi's back. It seemed like an instant in which Megumi navigated her way through the desks, seats, and other students in the class before being right in front of Kaori. In Megumi's hands was a large bouquet of flowers and a box of very fancy looking chocolates.

"I know this isn't much," Megumi began, "but we all loved having you as our homeroom teacher for the past three years. You've been so good to us with how honest and helpful you've been, to all of us. I can definitely say for myself how much of an impact you've had with how much you have given to me personally."

Megumi extended the gifts, which the class had picked out weeks earlier and had hidden in advance that morning, towards her teacher who had an expression of absolute shock on her face. "We all love you, Kaori-sensei! Thank you for being our homeroom teacher!"

The class erupted into applause and cheers as Megumi handed over the flowers and the box of chocolates with Kaori taking them delicately into her arms. Kaori was thinking about what she should say or do but nothing came to mind. She was frozen on the spot in front of her classroom with a dumbstruck expression as they continued to clap and cheer.

Kaori, unable to hold in her emotions anymore, began to break down into tears. Megumi quickly moved around to her teacher's side, consoling her by wrapping an arm around Kaori's shoulder as some of the girls in the class began to cry as well. A boy who sat at the front-left of the class stood up and moved forward towards the lectern behind which Kaori was standing, prompting the rest of the class to stand up and do the same. All the while they continued to let out cheers and applause for their teacher.

“T-t-thank you, thank you all so much,” Kaori said, sniffing as she did with tears still streaming down her face. She tried her best to wipe her tears with tissues that Megumi had given her, but it was all too much for her to take in. Her students smiled and waited patiently for Kaori to recollect herself. Some of the girls linked arms and hugged each other as they cried, while many of the boys smiled as they tried to hold in their own tears.

“I...I wasn’t expecting this at all,” Kaori admitted, still suffering from the last of her crying induced sniffles. “You all were my first ever homeroom class, and...and since you would be my first graduating class too, I knew I would...I knew I would get all emotional, but I didn’t think it would get to me this much.”

Megumi continued to hold her arm around Kaori’s shoulder tightly, herself barely able to contain her own tears. “Okay, okay, that’s enough, we’re going to be late,” Kaori said, finally regaining her composure. “Speak to me after the assembly, I want photos with all of you and your families! That’s my last request to you as a teacher.”

The class let out one last cheer before they began to congregate towards the exits in order to make their way towards the assembly hall. “No running in the corridors and remember the routine for the ceremony!” yelled Kaori, giving a smile to Megumi as she made her way towards the exit as well. As the last of her students left the class, a final tear rolled down her cheek and Kaori softly said, “And thank you all for the last three years, I wish you all the best in your futures.”

* * * * *

“Please, give your warmest applause to our graduating third years students.”

Those words from the principal were the cue for the third years to make their way into the hall. The doors at the rear of the assembly hall opened with the third-year students entering in two columns, divided by gender. The first-year and second-year students as well as the families of the third-year students in attendance erupted into loud applause. Megumi and Hanako’s class number was 3-4 so theirs was the fourth to enter the hall, with only one following after.

Megumi edged forward as her class began to make its way inside. She tried her best to steal a look inside but the dozens of other students in front of her mostly obscured her view. Resolving to remain patient, it wasn’t long until Megumi was in the assembly hall. She looked around, trying to spot her family who were sat to her right. They waved as soon as they spotted her with her younger sister looking particularly excited. Megumi waved back, thrilled to see them here for her final moments in high school.

As her class walked forward, Megumi passed the first years sat on either side of the advancing graduates, before reaching where all the second years were sat. Mari had already had her head turned, waiting to see when she would see both Megumi and Hanako. As soon as she had spotted them, she waved eagerly with both arms held high. Megumi and Hanako smiled and waved back before looking to each other.

“Here we go, first and last steps before we go on our way after high school,” Megumi said to her friend.

“Let’s make the most of today,” Hanako responded, smiling broadly.

After the third years took their seats, the principal of the school took to the stage to provide an opening speech to the

third years, congratulating them on their efforts that year as well as wishing them the best for the future. It was a brief address as the principal had spoken to the first and second years as well as the parents of the graduating students already.

The rest of the assembly continued with the singing of several songs, as was traditional during Japanese graduation ceremonies, before an address to the third years from the top academically achieving second year student. This very much felt like a passing of the torch with the main themes of their talk being about how the third years acted as role models and guides to the younger students over the past two years. A lot was also made of the achievements of the student council, the sports clubs, and the cultural clubs as well.

After the speeches, the time came to hand out each of the graduating students' diplomas. Each class's homeroom teacher would have the pleasure of engaging with each of their students in a formal capacity for one last time. When it came to Megumi's class, it was clear for all to see that Kaori was still very emotional when handing out Class 3-4's diplomas, immediately endearing herself to the students and families in the crowd.

After Hanako had received her diploma, it was Megumi's turn. She walked briskly from the edge of the stage to the centre where Kaori stood with a beaming smile. "Thank you for the gifts, I'm pretty sure it was all your idea," Kaori said warmly, handing over the diploma to Megumi who accepted it with a bow.

"I can't take all the credit," admitted Megumi, who then took Kaori's hand in a handshake and posed towards the crowd where her parents eagerly took several photos.

"Well, regardless of all that," Kaori continued, "Megumi Uehara, the last three years have been a joy and a pleasure.

Congratulations on graduating and I sincerely wish you all the best for your future.”

Megumi acted spontaneously after hearing those words, leaping forward and embracing Kaori in a hug, drawing some surprised ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ from the crowd. Megumi gripped Kaori tightly for a few seconds before detaching herself almost as quickly as she had hugged her teacher. Megumi bowed once more and walked off to the other side of the stage as she was supposed to have done straight after shaking Kaori’s hand.

Once she reached the other end of the stage, Hanako said, “One last surprise and heart attack for Kaori-chan at the end, huh?”

“I couldn’t help myself,” Megumi admitted sheepishly. “I just felt like I had to hug her.”

“You could have maybe waited until you weren’t in front of the entire school,” Hanako pointed out with a laugh.

Megumi smiled and glanced back towards Kaori who was giving another classmate their diploma. She truly felt that if it wasn’t for Kaori’s help and advice, her dilemma with choosing a path forward would have been much, much harder. It was too soon to say but Megumi earnestly hoped that she would be able to become friends with Kaori after school as she felt far too important a figure in her life to leave behind.

* * * * *

Students of all years were dispersed throughout the assembly hall as well as the front courtyard of the school. Various juniors from sports and cultural clubs were giving flowers and other gifts to their graduating seniors, parents and students were posing for pictures with various teachers, and

there were possibly even a few confessions of love occurring from heartbroken students to their graduating seniors.

Megumi and Hanako were in the courtyard after Mari had hunted the pair down. “Come on, we have to take like, at least fifteen selfies!” Mari declared, hugging the pair while manoeuvring her phone into position to get all three of them into frame.

“You could just ask one of my parents to take the picture; they’re right there,” Megumi pointed out, with her cheek being squished under Mari’s arm.

“That’s no fun, it’s got to be a selfie!” Mari retorted, snapping more pictures on her phone.

After the selfie ordeal was done, Megumi and Hanako chatted away with Mari before a familiar figure moved towards the trio. Megumi turned to face her approaching homeroom teacher with a broad smile. “Kaori-chan!” she cried jubilantly.

“Megumi!” her mother chided, “don’t be so disrespectful!”

“It’s fine, I’m more than used to it,” Kaori replied. “Thank you for coming today.”

Kaori bowed respectfully towards Megumi’s parents who did the same back to her. She then turned to face the trio of girls with a stern look on her face. “I distinctly recall telling you to find me after the ceremony so that we could have a photo taken together,” Kaori pointed out. “I had almost everybody else in the class do that while you pair were stood here the whole time.”

“In my defence,” Megumi said, “Mari-chan really, really wanted to take some selfies.”

“At least fifteen if I remember correctly,” Hanako added.

“Well, to make up for that surprise attack in the classroom before the graduation ceremony, I think we need to take at least sixteen together then,” Kaori declared. Megumi asked her

parents to take a picture of the four together, which her father happily obliged. After the group photo, Megumi briefly pulled Kaori aside to take a selfie of just the two of them.

“Your little stunt almost gave me a heart attack on stage,” Kaori muttered after Megumi was done taking her pictures.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help it,” Megumi apologised. “I kind of forgot that we were in front of the whole school.”

“Well, it’s not like you haven’t seen me act childish either,” Kaori admitted. “But like I said on stage, congratulations on graduating. You must be excited to be moving onto university.”

“Thank you again,” Megumi said, bowing slightly. “I’m happy to have a little bit of time off before starting university, but there’s one thing I want to do before today ends.”

Megumi pressed a few buttons on her phone before facing Kaori. “Can I get your contact details?” Megumi asked. “I would love to be able to keep in touch with you after I graduate.”

“Oh, okay,” Kaori replied, getting her own phone from her skirt pocket. “Here you go, hopefully Line is fine.”

The pair moved their phones together to transfer contact details via NFC. “I guess if you get in touch with me after today, we’ll no longer be student and teacher.”

“Well, the next time we speak, and I hope this isn’t too presumptuous or anything, but I hope that we can speak as friends and not just as a former teacher and student,” Megumi said.

Kaori looked at Megumi’s determined expression after she said that, looking shocked at first before her own expression warmed into a smile. “You know, I didn’t really know what to expect after becoming a teacher,” Kaori began. “I certainly didn’t expect to grow close enough to former students to call

them friends. But I guess here I am. I would be happy for us to be friends from here on out.”

Megumi smiled back at Kaori and gave her another hug. Kaori by now was used to Megumi’s impromptu embraces and returned the gesture. “Just so you know,” Kaori said, “even if you want us to be friends, I’m still your former teacher. I expect you to give your university work and your music your absolute all, and I also expect you to stay out of trouble.”

“Yes, yes, I understand, Kaori-*sensei*,” Megumi replied, putting sarcastic emphasis on the *sensei*.

“Just so long as you understand,” Kaori noted with a chuckle. “Anyway, go and speak to your friends. I heard that the class has an after-party planned so make the most of the rest of your day.”

Megumi gave Kaori a playful salute and ran off to re-join her friends. Mari, as well as Megumi and Hanako’s parents, all gave their goodbyes to Megumi and Hanako for the day while the pair set off to find their classmates. Like Kaori had said, they had a meal planned at a nearby family restaurant and some time booked at a karaoke parlour for after.

“So, I probably should have mentioned this to the rest of the class before we decided on karaoke but like, I really, really cannot sing,” confessed Megumi.

Hanako laughed at Megumi’s sudden admission. They met up with their classmates near the school gate and chatted while they waited for the final stragglers to join up. There were smiles all around, some more bittersweet than others.

For many of these young men and women, there was excitement at what lay ahead of them in their respective futures. There was also a fair share of apprehension and uncertainty as they would be taking their first steps towards becoming adults.

After Class 3-4 was fully assembled, they set off. Megumi and Hanako looked at each other with a smile, knowing that since primary school the pair had managed to spend almost their entire school lives together as the best of friends.

Megumi extended a fist which Hanako reciprocated. As the pair bumped fists, they left the front gate of their school for the last time as high school students.

* * * * *

Megumi awoke to the sun shining on her face. She wrestled herself out of her duvet in order to temporarily block out the sunlight but ended up just waking herself up more in the process. Defeated, Megumi got up out of bed and checked her phone. It was the morning after their graduation ceremony and Megumi's throat still felt a little hoarse after all the karaoke singing she had done the night before.

She left her bedroom and went about washing her face and brushing her teeth. Megumi still felt half asleep, as she did almost every other morning, but unlike most of the previous weekdays of the past three years she did not have to go to high school. Megumi went down to her kitchen and found her house empty.

Both her parents were at work and her sister still had school for another week so until Megumi started university, she would have a lot of spare time. A fair bit of it would be spent in her preparations for starting classes, but Megumi also wanted to use the period of free time to write more music and work on her mixes.

Megumi made herself a quick breakfast sandwich and a cup of coffee before heading back to her room to aimlessly browse the internet on her laptop. While she did want to work on

music before starting university, for today Megumi felt like she could get away with lazing about.

After catching up with some anime and TV shows, Megumi collapsed backwards onto her bed. Checking her phone, she saw that it had just gone half-past two. Having gotten up at half-past ten that morning, it simultaneously felt like the day had flown by as well as feeling like no time had passed at all for her. She wondered what she would do for the rest of the day before looking over at her guitars and wondering if maybe she would work on some music today after all.

Suddenly Megumi's phone rang, causing her to almost drop it. After briefly fumbling about with her phone before bringing it to a standstill in her hands, Megumi checked to see who the caller was. She saw that it was the Line group chat for her friends in the band. Answering her phone, she saw that both Hanako and Reina were partaking in a video call.

"Hello you two," Megumi greeted with a smile after turning her forward-facing camera on.

"Afternoon Megumi," Hanako replied. "Reina and I were wondering whether you'd be awake or not."

"Very funny," Megumi muttered.

"If it's any consolation, I guessed that you were awake," Reina said cheerily. "Although I wasn't sure whether you'd be doing music stuff or watching random videos on the internet."

"Guilty of the latter," Megumi admitted, eliciting a laugh from the other two at her expense.

As they were about to continue their conversation, a fourth participant joined their video call. "Sorry about not being able to join at first," Mari apologised as her face showed up on their screens. "I had to find an excuse to sneak out of class."

"We would have just told you about our plans after you finished school anyway," Hanako pointed out.

“What plans?” Megumi asked, confused.

“Oh, did you not tell her?” Reina inquired.

Hanako furrowed her brow for a moment, before sheepishly replying, “Oh, I um, was going to tell her before we went home from karaoke but I forgot because I went to meet Kenta-kun for a walk.”

Hanako’s expression quickly became miffed when she saw very smug grins on the faces of Megumi and Mari. Reina, in her innocence, just looked confused. “And before you ask,” Hanako interjected, the irritation very apparent in her voice, “yes, all we did was just meet up to go for a walk before I went home.”

“We believe you,” Megumi said with a giggle. “Anyway, yes, what plans did you guys have?”

“We were going to come over to your place and write a new song,” Reina answered, her eyes lighting up at the prospect. “I have a few ideas I want to share and get your feedback on.”

“Oh, me too, same!” Mari agreed excitedly, before realising she had to keep her voice down.

“And I have nothing better to do so I’m all for it,” Hanako agreed.

Megumi studied the faces of her friends, all looking at her expectantly. It seemed her plans to laze about that day had been so quickly dashed and that she would not be able to get away from having to work on music with her friends any time soon.

“I mean, you know what I was going to say from the start,” Megumi said, a broad smile adorning her face. “Come on over you three, let’s make some music together.”

Epilogue

The airport concourse was filled with the sounds of arriving passengers meeting their friends and family, as well as various announcements over the intercom. Megumi checked her phone for what seemed like the tenth time over the course of the past five minutes and compared what she read on her phone screen to the large electronic boards listing upcoming international arrivals. She shuffled about anxiously, seeing that the flight she was waiting for had already landed, meaning it was just a case of waiting until the person they were expecting to clear immigration.

“Pacing about won’t make her come any faster,” Hanako pointed out, glancing over at her impatient friend.

“I know, I just hate waiting,” Megumi replied with a sigh.

“It’ll be over soon,” Mari said in a reassuring tone. “Before you know it, you’ll see her coming down those escalators and we will be on our way!”

Megumi nodded in acknowledgement but still looked uneasily up at the arrivals board. Standing still and waiting was never really her strong suit and seeing her friends seemingly able to be so patient just made her more restless. She looked once more at her watch before turning again to stalk the escalators that led down from immigration.

Megumi then checked her phone again before she noticed Mari jumping and waving out of the corner of her eye. Turning to face the same direction in which Mari was looking, Megumi noticed a familiar figure riding down the escalator who was returning Mari’s wave with one of her own. Megumi smiled

and raised her hands in a frenetic greeting while Hanako's wave was far more measured and composed.

Reina had barely taken a dozen steps before both Megumi and Mari had embraced her in a collective hug which Hanako followed up on reluctantly. Reina's face was bright red with embarrassment, even though she had been through all of this the previous year as well. Reina exhaled, slowly regaining her composure and wrapped her arms around Megumi, Mari, and Hanako to join in on the group hug.

"It's like I haven't seen you in a whole year!" Megumi said playfully.

"That's because you haven't!" Reina replied. "Now please let me go, my suitcase is rolling away!"

Megumi, Hanako, and Mari all laughed as Reina reached out to stop her suitcase from getting lost in the arrivals area. Reina was returning to Japan for her summer holiday after her second year at the Berklee College of Music. She had also done so the previous year which was when Megumi had first made a big deal of meeting Reina at the airport. Having done it for two years running, Megumi was hoping that it would become a tradition of sorts for the duration of Reina's time studying in the US.

The girls walked through the concourse, chatting away about Reina's almost fourteen-hour flight. After leaving the arrivals area, Reina noticed something different about where they were headed. "Aren't the trains the other direction?" Reina asked.

"Well, about that," Megumi replied, "I told you I passed my driving test just after you went back to America? I'm borrowing mum's car today."

“Oh wow,” Reina said before turning to Hanako and Mari and asking, “Before I get in a car with Megumi, how was the drive here?”

“Hey, I heard that!” Megumi exclaimed in protest.

“Surprisingly, not that bad,” Hanako replied.

“If I had to rate her driving out of ten, I would give her a six, maybe seven,” Mari agreed.

“I don’t even want to know what you expect from me to get an eight or a nine,” Megumi muttered with a sigh. “But don’t worry Reina, I’ll drive carefully.”

“I just hope your driving isn’t like your guitar playing; fast and out of control,” Reina remarked.

Hanako and Mari stared blankly at Reina for a moment before the pair burst out laughing at Megumi’s expense. Megumi was speechless, completely caught off guard by Reina’s quip. She had to just stand there, having taken a verbal bullet, and endure the laughter from her friends.

“You know, I could just drive away and leave all of you here,” Megumi said with a pout.

“Don’t be like that,” Hanako chuckled, wiping away a lone, laugh-induced tear. “Let Reina have her moment.”

“I wanted to make at least one joke like that,” Reina declared, making a fist proudly.

Hanako, Mari, and Reina continued to laugh at Megumi’s expense while they made their way through the parking garage to the car. Once inside, Megumi started the engine and cautiously navigated her way out of the airport premises, eventually driving onto the highway for the one-hour journey back to Tokyo from Narita Airport.

“Oh yeah, put on the new *Anime as Leaders* album,” Megumi said to Hanako, who was sat in the front passenger seat beside her.

“Yes please, I haven’t heard it!” Reina said excitedly.

“Are you sure you want to listen to this album again even if we’re seeing them tonight?” Hanako asked.

“Yes!” was the reply in chorus from Megumi, Mari, and Reina.

Hanako sighed and reached for her phone, putting on the requested music. If by some coincidence, the day that Reina returned from the US was also the day that *Anime as Leaders* would be playing Tokyo on their Asia tour. Reina was determined to see them play in spite of all her jet lag and travel weariness and made extra sure that her friends had gotten her a ticket.

As the music started, Megumi tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and bobbed her head along to the first track. “I like this a lot,” Reina noted, “Send me a link to it after you drop me off.”

“Sure thing,” Megumi confirmed.

“I’ll send you a link now,” Mari said, who had been tapping away on her phone.

“Thanks Mari-chan,” Reina replied with a smile. “How has music school been?”

“It’s been good! A lot harder than I imagined with more emphasis on theory over performance at the moment but I’ve been enjoying it a lot,” Mari answered with a beaming smile.

“Awesome!” said Reina. “If it’s anything like the classes I’ve been having, I think you’ll have a lot of fun.”

“I think Megumi wants you more for English translations than drumming these days, Reina,” Hanako remarked with a chuckle.

“Really?” Reina asked, feigning a pouty, hurt voice.

“No Reina, I still mostly want you for drumming,” Megumi replied. “Drumming, English translations, and friendship, in that order.”

“Hey!” Reina cried in protest. “Joke’s on you though, my English is still terrible.”

The four laughed as they began to approach Tokyo. The plan was to drop Reina off at her home to let her unpack and get some rest before the four would meet up for dinner and drinks before the *Anime as Leaders* show. It wasn’t often that their favourite bands toured in Japan so any opportunity like this was one that they all snapped up.

The rest of their drive was fairly uneventful as they spent their time catching up briefly and listening to music. Megumi dropped her friends off one by one before making her own way home in time for lunch. Had it not been for Reina’s arrival, it would have been like any other day during Megumi’s summer break. However, since she would already be heading out later on that day, she decided to make the most of it.

After she ate lunch with her family, Megumi excused herself and made her way into town. She checked her messages to confirm where and when she would be meeting her friend. There was a coffee shop that Megumi frequented on her way to and from university that would serve as her meeting point. Megumi donned her headphones and took in the fresh, summer breeze as she set off.

She arrived at the coffee shop after a brief, fifteen-minute walk. Arriving earlier than her arranged meeting time, Megumi ordered a latte and took a seat. Producing a laptop from her backpack, Megumi linked her headphones to her PC in order to do some last-minute tweaks to a mix.

While she was kept busy by her university work, Megumi always tried to find a few minutes spare here and there to work

on music that she and her friends had been writing over the past two years. Despite their physical separation most of the time and how their get togethers had become infrequent, Megumi was always being sent ideas and parts that could be integrated into new or existing songs.

While it wasn't exactly the life of living and breathing music that Megumi would have initially envisioned for herself, she still found herself very often either writing, recording, or producing music. Often the stereotype of musicians would be of spending weeks or months in a recording studio, writing together and dedicating all their time towards creating a magnum opus. However, the reality Megumi found herself in was more common that she would have initially realised with her time on forums and social media groups revealing how many other aspiring musicians were in a situation similar to hers.

It was less about living an idealised, glamorous lifestyle, constantly in the studio or on tour, but more about trying to fit in time to work on music wherever and whenever she could. Her friends had the same attitude as well, dedicating what time they could spare in amongst what were fairly intensive course schedules. Making music this way was slow and often tricky to coordinate, but finding creativity through adversity was something Megumi was learning to enjoy.

"Hey you," said a voice behind Megumi, barely audible through her headphones. She didn't respond, prompting the person behind her to tap Megumi on the shoulder.

"Awah!" Megumi exclaimed, jolting in her seat. She snatched her headphones off and saw a smiling Kaori waving at her. "You scared the life out of me," Megumi gasped, exhaling deeply.

“Nice to see you, Megumi-san,” Kaori greeted, taking the seat opposite Megumi and placing her coffee down on the table. “Sorry I’m a bit late.”

Megumi collected herself and replied, “It’s okay, I got here early. Nice to see you too.”

“Did you pick up Sugiyama-san at the airport without any issues?”

“No issues, although she did make a joke about my driving,” Megumi noted with a sigh.

Kaori chuckled as she glanced over at her former student who was in the process of shutting down her laptop. They had been meeting every month or so for the last two years and even if it was only for a brief catch-up, Megumi would always try to ensure their meetings happened. The scariest thing for Kaori now is that since Megumi had turned twenty that year, they would most likely go drinking together at some point²⁴.

“Sorry about that,” Megumi apologised after having put away her laptop.

“It’s all right,” Kaori said. “Working on new music?”

“As always,” Megumi replied. “It always feels like there is something to tweak.”

“As long as it keeps you busy,” Kaori noted with a smile.

“How are things at school? Has your new first-year homeroom class started to call you Kaori-chan yet?” Megumi asked.

Kaori dropped her head into her hands and sighed. “They have!” she muttered.

Megumi laughed at Kaori’s expense, the latter of whom felt like she would never be able to escape that accursed nickname. “I’m turning twenty-eight this year and a bunch of fifteen-year-

24. The legal age for drinking in Japan is twenty.

olds are referring to me as Kaori-chan!” Megumi held out a conciliatory hand and patted Kaori lightly on the shoulder.

“I feel like I need a drink,” Kaori moaned.

“Like I said, you should come to the *Anime as Leaders* gig with us tonight!” Megumi urged.

“It’s really not my style of music,” Kaori replied. “Plus, I have plans with Chitose.”

“How are things with Hasegawa-san?” Megumi asked.

“Same as always. When you’re with someone for so long, you just get used to being with each other, but in a good way.”

“That’s good to hear,” Megumi noted. “Anyway, I know you’re dreading it, but we will go out together for drinks at some point!”

“I’ve accepted that it will happen eventually,” Kaori conceded. “Anyway, now that the whole band is back together for the summer, what are your plans?”

Megumi fidgeted with her hands for a moment, collecting her thoughts. “There isn’t much of a plan,” she began, “but I really want to get the final tracks on this album recorded and mixed so we can release it finally.”

“I recall you have been working on it for a while,” Kaori noted.

“Yeah, we have. It’s just that as we’ve gotten older, we’ve gotten better at our instruments, at song-writing, and at production, so I really, really want this album to be the best that we can make right now,” Megumi explained. “I’m going to push the idea to the rest of the girls to get the album done this summer.”

Kaori smiled, noticing the look of determination on Megumi’s face. “Is being a musician everything you wanted it to be?” she asked.

“Nope, nothing how I imagined,” Megumi responded with a laugh. “But like, this is fun in its own way. I didn’t think we could just write and make music by ourselves this way, using whatever we have to hand. It’s hard sometimes, but it’s super rewarding.”

Kaori felt uplifted by Megumi’s answer. She wasn’t overly familiar with home recording or anything that went into it, but it seemed like Megumi was figuring out ways to work on music while balancing her other priorities, like university studies and her social life.

The pair continued to chat and Kaori was starting to realise just how much those conversations that she had with her former student meant. Kaori smiled, hoping to continue to watch this young woman grow and mature into the musician she had the potential to be.

* * * * *

The dinner that Megumi, Hanako, Mari, and Reina were partaking in could best be described as ‘lively’. Conversation and laughter echoed throughout the *Izakaya*²⁵ that the four were sat in, with their own private booth being no exception. The four had about an hour and a half before doors opened for the *Anime as Leaders* concert and they had already been making the most of it.

Well, all of them apart from Mari. “Why do I have to deal with you three drinking?” she muttered.

25. An *Izakaya*, 居酒屋, is a type of informal bar, serving alcoholic drinks and snacks. They are a common spot for casual after-work drinks and get togethers. Their layouts can vary, with open plan seating, booth seating, or standing areas common variations.

“Aww, little baby Mari can’t drink yet!” Megumi said, taking a swig of her high ball.

“You can give me a break as well,” Reina added. “I go from being able to drink in Japan to not being able to drink in America!”

Hanako was the most apologetic of the three, sheepishly holding onto her own drink and giving Mari a soft response, “Sorry about those two.”

Megumi and, to everybody’s surprise, Reina, were very excitable drinkers, with Reina becoming more combative and Megumi getting very clingy to her friends. Hanako was much more reserved although she did become more talkative, as well as her full love of karaoke singing becoming unleashed when she did drink.

“Anyway, don’t we have to go soon?” Mari pointed out, feeling embarrassed to be holding a non-alcoholic beverage.

“Oh yikes, we do,” Megumi agreed, quickly finishing the rest of her drink.

“Is Megumi-senpai going to be okay?” Mari asked with a worried look on her face.

“Well, I guess we’ll find out later,” Hanako noted, seeing away the rest of her own drink.

The four exited the *Izakaya* and made the short, fifteen-minute walk to the venue through the vibrant and bustling *Shibuya* ward of Tokyo. It was almost half-past seven in the evening, meaning there was a large amount of foot traffic in the area, heading out to either go shopping, eat, or drink.

As they got closer to the venue, they started to see the queue of fans outside the venue for the show. Despite the fact that doors didn’t open for another fifteen minutes, there were still about three hundred people in line already. The four joined

the end of the queue, eagerly awaiting their entry into the venue.

The time struck for doors to open and Megumi was interrupted from her stream of selfie taking with her friends, having to make her way inside. The lights inside the venue were dim and some electronic music was playing over the PA. Megumi took the sights in, having not been to a gig in several months. The show was sold out that night with the venue having a capacity of one thousand.

“Do you want a drink?” Hanako asked, gesturing towards the bar.

“Yes please!” Megumi and Reina said in unison while Mari just sighed.

“I’ll get you something non-alcoholic, Mari-chan,” Hanako laughed.

The girls chatted amongst themselves for the half an hour before the opening band came on. They hadn’t heard of them but listened intently with the rest of the attending crowd. Megumi found herself really enjoying the mix of jazzy, atmospheric vibes that defined the band’s music. It seemed like their forty-five-minute set flew by and before she knew it Megumi was back at the bar with her friends.

“They were cool!” Megumi said, raising her voice to be heard above the dozens of people around her. Hanako, Reina, and Mari nodded in agreement, trying their best to not be separated in amongst the crowd. The four, drinks in hand, made their way back onto the main floor of the venue, trying to claim a good spot before the headline set began.

Positioning themselves about halfway between the stage and the back of the hall and off to the left of the stage slightly, they awaited the beginning of the *Anime as Leaders* set. Before long, the music over the PA stopped and the lights dimmed.

Anticipation began to rise as a low, rumbling tone began to rise in volume. Various people in the crowd let out excited cheers, as various glitched samples played, and frenetic lighting effects dotted the stage.

Suddenly the entire venue went silent and dark before bright lights fully illuminated the stage and the opening riff of one of Megumi's favourite songs by the band thundered through the hall. The audience cheered and threw their hands up in the air as the energy and noise levels grew in tandem. Megumi and her friends were swept up in the elation of the performance and began to lose themselves in the music.

Anime as Leaders' set continued for an hour and a half, playing mostly songs from their latest album but also delighting the crowd with many favourites from their previous three releases. They even treated the captivated audience to a brand new, yet unreleased song that utterly enthralled all in attendance.

Megumi and her friends thoroughly enjoyed every minute of the show and perused over the available merchandise before taking their leave of the venue. Megumi was humming the melodies from many of the songs as she walked, often swaying from the many drinks she had partaken of that night. Megumi then attempted to turn to face her friends but slipped and fell onto her backside.

She burst out into laughter, joined by Hanako, Reina, and the sober Mari, who couldn't help but join in. "Come on, let's get you up, silly," Hanako said, extending a hand.

"No, no, let me just...let me just, sit for a bit," Megumi waved her off, trying her best to contain her laughter.

They continued to laugh with Megumi on the floor and the other three girls stood around her. As the last of the drunken

giggles subsided, Megumi leaned back and looked towards the sky. “What a show,” she noted.

“Yeah, I’m glad I stayed up for it,” Reina agreed, letting out a loud, jet-lag induced yawn.

“I hope that’s us four soon on stage together,” Megumi added quietly.

“Come on, you can’t sit there forever,” Hanako pointed out, seemingly unaware of what Megumi had just said. “Let’s get you up.”

Mari and Hanako helped Megumi to her feet, who brushed off the back of her shorts. Megumi then looked over to her three friends, smiled, and said, “Hey you guys. Did I tell you my plan for this summer?”

“No, what plan?” Mari asked.

“Listen, we’ve been working on it for a while but,” Megumi began, “what if, for real, this summer we finish our album and finally release it.”

Megumi looked to each of her friends, of whom Hanako and Mari gave a nod in confirmation. Reina looked particularly nervous at the prospect but gulped deeply before vigorously nodding her head in agreement. Hanako and Mari looked at each other and smiled. Reina, still looking anxious, was quickly embraced by Megumi in a hug. She gestured towards Hanako and Mari to join in a group embrace.

“Okay,” Megumi said, looking each of her friends in the eye one by one. Despite her tipsy state, a steely determination began to rise in her eyes. The first step in their journey as musicians, which the last five years had been leading up to, was to finally complete and release a record. While it seemed like an odd thing to declare when three out of four of them were struggling to walk straight, the sentiment had been building amongst the girls for a long time now.

Megumi recalled her apprehensions at the start of her third year of high school. She remembered how unsure she was of how to keep music a relevant part of her life through higher education and work in the future. However, with the help of her friends and her teacher she now found herself at this point, quite a bit drunk, but also determined and optimistic.

This moment may have seemed rather insignificant to anybody looking from the outside in but this declaration may have been the thing that truly set these girls on the path of becoming the musicians that they aspired to be, like the artists that they looked up to and admired. Megumi almost slipped again but was held upright by her friends, drawing a laugh out of all of them.

After Megumi had finished laughing, she exhaled deeply before looking towards each and one of her friends and said, “Let’s do this. Let’s finish this album.”