

# S Tide Evol.

Von Tukuyomi

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## Kapitel 1: One-of-a-kind

It was one of these days. Again. One of these days that seemed almost sickeningly perfect on the outside, but all in all were just like every other day, or even worse, at the core. And this one was already the third in an increasingly annoying row of "those days". And it had everything to do with this damned island.

Now, she had come here of her own free will, and she had come even though she had known that everything that was waiting for her here would be another two-week vacation. She wasn't as dumb as to fall for the same ruse twice, and she doubted that anyone else had. And yet everyone was here, just like the last time.

Except that it wasn't like the last time. But the weather was still wonderful, the sand still warm, and the whole island was simply gorgeous no matter how one looked at it.

Stretching her limbs on the fine sand where she had been lying for the past half hour, Leifang wondered why she was even complaining. Normally, a vacation couldn't get much better than this.

Really. Just because she wouldn't get to play with Hitomi didn't mean she couldn't enjoy her vacation. She was fine alone, too. It didn't bother her. Just because they had spent the last vacation together didn't mean they would have to, again. Hitomi should just play with whomever she wanted, it was no big deal.

There was really no obligation for the girl to stick with her again just because they'd had such a blast the last time. Honestly.

And the fact that Leifang had been left alone most certainly didn't make her want to leave the island right away. Totally not. Everything was just fine. Peachy.

The sun absolutely wasn't unbearably hot so early in the day, and she definitely wasn't bored out of her skull. Not. At. All.

...it hadn't been the cabbage, had it? No, impossible. If that would be it, she would be kicking herself silly right now. Nope, not a chance. There was just no way.

God, how she hated thi-

"Leifang?" The voice which interrupted her thoughts with ease was impossible to mistake for another, and Leifang groaned inwardly at the sound of it. Just perfect.

Opening her eyes, she rolled her head to the side and came face to face with a pair of feet not far away from her.

"Hey there, Hitomi. Fancy seeing you here.", she said in a neutral tone, forcing the sudden giddiness that threatened to leak out down her throat. She still kept her gaze solely on the other girl's feet until Hitomi squatted down, looking right into her eyes.

Leifang was a little taken aback when she realized that Hitomi wasn't even smiling. But just as that realization hit, a weak smile formed on the German's lips. "Didn't know you were here, too, Lei. Haven't seen you around."

The use of her nickname, which Hitomi had started using during their last vacation, sent a small ripple through Leifang, though she didn't let it show.

For some reason she had expected a more energetic greeting coming from the other girl, but didn't comment on it as she herself didn't exactly sound thrilled.

"Everyone's here, right?", she asked, shrugging. "Including me."

She didn't really know what to say. Part of her wanted to be angry and yell 'Of course I'm here! But of course you were too busy to notice playing with Christie!' but she knew that wouldn't be fair. After spotting Hitomi with the white-haired woman on the first day, she had done a good job at hiding herself from the view of the others. She didn't want to see anyone, even though part of her had hoped that Hitomi would have come looking for her. Which was foolish, of course, since the girl didn't even know she was here to begin with.

She didn't know why she had made everything so complicated. But if she couldn't spend the vacation with the one person she wanted, she just didn't know what to do.

"You could have told me, you know.", Hitomi said, her smile strengthening slightly. "Unless you've been avoiding me on purpose."

Leifang wanted to laugh at that remark, but settled for a smirk instead. "I would never do that, would I?" Never mind that she had actually done just that.

"I wouldn't know." Hitomi scratched the back of her head sheepishly as she looked behind her. Finding the beach still completely empty, she sat down beside her friend. "At the very least, the others seem to be pretty sick of me."

"What do you mean? I thought you were playing with Ch-", Leifang said, but that cursed woman's name stuck in her throat long enough for Hitomi to interrupt her.

"With Christie? Nah. To be honest, I asked her to play with me on the first day because she looked really tough...but she didn't wanna." The way Hitomi gave one of her cute embarrassed smiles as she said this made it impossible for Leifang to be mad at her.

"Then Kokoro offered to play with me, but...after two games, she was sick of me already and said that she'd rather not play volleyball at all instead of playing with me. At least that's what she said yesterday...and she didn't show up today, so I guess that's over with." Hitomi managed a small chuckle as her fingers drew circles in the sand. She half expected Leifang to laugh at her for her own stupidity, but she heard nothing of the sort. Instead, the German was surprised when she found her friend staring at her.

"She didn't really say that, did she?", Leifang asked incredulously, trying to keep her hands from clenching into fists. Was that irony? She felt like hitting someone.

"She did." Hitomi said with a sigh, but then laughed it off. "But I was really such a klutz, I was no good at all." She flopped down to lie beside Leifang, smiling as their eyes met. She was glad that her friend was here after all. There wasn't really anyone else she could talk to like that.

"Still, that was a pretty harsh thing to say. Someone should teach her a lesson." Leifang tried to sound indifferent, but some of her anger still leaked through. So what if that remark had been justified? So what if she had undoubtedly said something similar had it been anyone except Hitomi? It still pissed her off.

"Don't worry about it, it doesn't bother me." Hitomi shrugged and stretched comfortably in the sun. "Maybe I was just too disappointed that there would be no fifth tournament to play seriously. Or maybe..."

Leifang had been about to say something to cheer the other girl up, but after hearing her words, she couldn't help but burst into laughter. Having Hitomi look at her with a confused expression only fueled the laughter, and the Chinese girl clutched her sides as she turned her back to her friend.

"What's so funny?", the brunette demanded to know, genuinely curious. With raised eyebrows she looked at her friend, wondering whether she should be surprised or offended.

"You didn't really fall for that, did you?", Leifang asked as she turned to look behind her, but couldn't suppress her laughter.

Hitomi wasn't sure what to say to that. It hadn't taken long for her to realize that everyone except of her had known that there would, of course, be no fifth tournament. Maybe she was just too trusting. And gullible. And naïve.

"That's no reason to laugh at me.", Hitomi said defensively, "After all, he could have been serious, this time."

"Riiight.", Leifang mocked the other girl, still chuckling. "Still, that's just so like you. It's cute." It really was like her. For a martial artist, she thought Hitomi was unusually open and naïve, to the point of seeming downright childish. But that was what made her so likable as well.

"Cut it out. I feel dumb enough as it is.", Hitomi protested weakly and punched Leifang's shoulder half-heartedly. However, in spite of her words, she had to chuckle, as well. After receiving the invitation, she had had her doubts, but soon she had gotten herself so worked up over the upcoming tournament that the possibility of it being a fake had escaped her completely.

"So... aren't you going to ask me?", Leifang asked after having calmed down. She looked to the side and, meeting Hitomi's puzzled face, grinned knowingly.

"Huh?" Hitomi looked directly into her friend's eyes for the few moments it took for her to understand what she had meant. When she did, she smiled gratefully. "Nah, wouldn't want to bother you, too."

Leifang grimaced at that and reached out her right hand to flick her finger against Hitomi's forehead, causing the other girl to wince. 'You have no idea.', she thought to herself, but didn't say it.

"We were pretty good the last time we played.", she chose to say instead, resulting in a giggle from Hitomi.

"That was me flailing to pass some balls to you, and you smashing them over the net one after another.", the German commented with a sigh.

However, instead of correcting her friend, Leifang grinned at that description. "True." She tried to look serious as these words left her mouth, but seeing Hitomi's shocked expression cracked her up immediately and she broke into giggles.

"Hey, you're not supposed to say that!", Hitomi whined and poked Leifang's side, causing her to cringe and laugh even harder.

"You're always like this! Take that!" It didn't take long before Hitomi started an all-out tickle assault on her friend, whom she crawled on top of and mercilessly attacked until Leifang was left gasping for air. The Chinese refused to give up, though.

"So wha-", Leifang panted as she struggled against Hitomi's hands on her, "what should I've said instead?"

As soon as she asked this, Hitomi stopped abruptly and smiled down at the other girl. "That we were the perfect match, of course."

Leifang was taken aback for a moment, but quickly fought the blush that was creeping onto her cheeks and used Hitomi's short break against her. She quickly gripped her friend's underarms and reversed their roles as she rolled over and swiftly ended up on top of Hitomi.

"So you were out for pity all along?", she asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Well...just a little.", Hitomi admitted with a cute smile, hoping for mercy from her captor.

"Why, you little-", Leifang said, not relenting to the cute look she was receiving in the least and getting her instant revenge on Hitomi, who squirmed and laughed soundly beneath her.

"So why...don't you tell me...what's bothering you...so we're even?", Hitomi managed to gasp between her erratic laughs. Finally Leifang let up and looked at her. Her face was slightly red, but Hitomi couldn't say whether it was from her being embarrassed

or not.

"There's nothing to tell.", Leifang replied shortly, but avoided Hitomi's questioning look. And in spite of having let up on tickling the girl beneath her, she didn't seem to be about to release her anytime soon, remaining exactly where she was. "There's just not that much to do here when you're alone...", she added after some deliberation, "and you...were taken."

She half-expected the other girl to make fun of her, but there was no laughter. When Leifang eventually turned back to look at Hitomi, she found her friend looking slightly angry.

"You should have told me. I'd leave anyone for you. Any day." As soon as she said this, however, her serious look vanished and made way for a teasing grin. "So no need to get jealous."

Leifang's face flushed bright red before she could help it, and it was the best she could do to maintain her trademark arrogant look. "You're so full of yourself, you know that?"

"Learned that from you.", came the immediate retort. Leifang clicked her tongue, but smiled nonetheless before she climbed off Hitomi and lay down onto the sand again.

It was hot. She didn't worry too much about her skin since she had used sun blocker, and she always took care to drink enough, but today it seemed particularly unbearable.

Hitomi to her side didn't seem to mind the heat in the least, quietly humming a song as the sand ran through her fingers and left a meticulous trail across her stomach as she moved her hand over it. Leifang stared for a few moments in unconscious fascination, but upon noticing quickly shook herself out of it and regarded the sky instead.

Damn, but it was hot.

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The soft breeze in the shadows was as comforting as the utter silence between them was.

Allowing only their backs to touch, Helena and Christie sat on the bough of a tree that ran almost parallel to the ground.

The blond woman was reading a book, and the only sound she made was the turning of pages. Her expression was completely neutral, betraying none of the emotions she might or might not feel as she advanced deeper into the tale in front of her.

Christie didn't share the passive activity, having simply closed her eyes in thought as she listened. Every sound that reached her ears was immediately discernible and put

her at ease.

It wasn't visible for anyone, but she was tense and on high alert, despite knowing that the only threat on this island came solely from herself.

Christie's mind was set on the mission she was currently trying to carry out. She was still far from success, but there were still ten days left. She would wait for the right moment to strike. It wasn't that she couldn't do it right away, but something still held her back. Her targets were usually scared or blissfully ignorant, but this one was none of these, and she wasn't entirely sure how to deal with it.

A faint thud behind her indicated that Helena had closed her book, and she opened her eyes, waiting for the Frenchwoman to talk to her.

"I'll leave.", the blonde stated, neither awaiting a response nor inviting Christie to follow her. She knew the silver-haired woman would follow her either way.

Christie prepared herself to leave when Helena climbed down the tree, reaching the ground with more ease and elegance than one would expect, taking the height of the bough into consideration.

By the time both of them heard the drumming sound of rapid footsteps approaching them, they could already see Hitomi and Leifang on the beach, running toward them at a pace that made it seem as though their lives depended on it.

Christie instinctively stood in front of Helena as the two girls didn't seem to slow down in the least even as the distance between them shrunk to a mere couple of meters.

"Gotcha.", Hitomi called and grabbed Christie's hand even before the Briton had the chance to draw back.

A mere second afterward, Leifang jumped at Helena and did the same.

"I'm first! You're paying today, Lei!", Hitomi shouted excitedly, pulling Christie's hand up with hers like a trophy. Laughing in between gasps for air, she used her other hand to form the victory sign for Leifang. When the taller woman met her with an icy glare, however, she quickly let go with an apologetic look.

"Darn it.", Leifang said in defeat, but still giggled at Hitomi's behavior. Seeing how both Helena and Christie obviously demanded an explanation, she turned to Helena with a disarming smile. "Sorry. We were just having a little race to see who got to you first."

While Helena seemed thoroughly unimpressed, Christie looked rather skeptical. "What do you want?"

"Well..." Leifang lifted her hands defensively, then ran over to the nearby volleyball net and picked up the volleyball that lay close to it. "What do you think?" She

demonstratively let the ball spin on her index finger, giving a smile as she did so.

However, still presented with unreadable faces, Hitomi cut in. "You're a team, right? We challenge you!" She tried to look threatening saying this, but when Leifang quickly covered her mouth to keep herself from laughing out loud, she knew she had failed.

While Helena looked rather bothered by this proposal, Christie's demeanor softened ever so slightly.

"We accept.", she said, missing the hint of smile on the blonde's lips beside her.

Hitomi and Leifang cheered and clapped their hands together.

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"This is it. Don't mess it up." She flashed a grin.

The response came instantly. "Same goes for you."

"Like I would." With one last glance at their opponent's position, Leifang leaped high into the air and served the first ball. It whizzed over the net by just a few centimeters and crashed to the ground on the other side with almost unstoppable speed.

"Awesome!", Hitomi cheered, pumping her fist into the air just as though it had been her own achievement.

Strangely enough, their opponents didn't seem the slightest bit perturbed by the quick score and passed the ball to Leifang for another serve without so much as a frown.

While this oddity completely went over Hitomi's head, Leifang noticed and wondered whether Helena and Christie were taking things slowly to assess their abilities.

Boy, was she wrong.

It had seemed like the logical explanation, but in fact Christie and Helena wasted no time in lulling them into thinking that they had even the slightest chance of winning. Once they scored a point and in turn received the right to serve the ball, the game was pretty much over.

While Leifang noticed their clear inferiority through being always a step behind, Hitomi learned it the hard way when one of Christie's smashes grazed her cheek as it passed her without her being able to react at all.

It didn't leave a mark, but the streak felt hot to the touch as Hitomi clutched her cheek while staring at the ball incredulously.

"Hey, watch it!", Leifang snapped angrily before the German could say anything,

pointing right at Christie, who simply shrugged in a manner that didn't depict any apology. "It's just a game, not a freaking death match...", she continued to mutter as she passed the ball over the net, more to herself than anyone else. However, Christie caught most of it and smiled, annoying Leifang even more.

Still, the smashes that followed were considerably less life-threatening, and Leifang found that she had little time to ponder too deeply on such matters while trying her damndest to block at least a couple of attacks, much less start an attack of her own.

It proved to be a futile endeavor. On top of a highly unpleasant amount of sand in places where it didn't belong, the seven point mark was reached all too soon by their opponents and the game ended with a score that needed no comment.

"A crushing defeat...", Leifang pointed out anyway, an annoyed undertone in her voice.

"Yeah..." Hitomi debated whether to launch into a string of apologies for her countless mistakes or settle with a brutally truthful "told you so", but forgot all about it when she saw that Helena and Christie were leaving the field without another word or any hint of acknowledgment that they were the winners.

Being disregarded like this was actually worse than being laughed at. "Wait!", Hitomi called as she chased after the duo, leaving a puzzled Leifang behind, who, for lack of anything better to do, flopped down and sprawled out on the ground. At least she was in the shades.

Helena was the first to respond to Hitomi's call by turning around again, looking at the German with enough genuine surprise to give her the impression that she had been better off not stopping her.

"What is it?", Christie voiced Helena's silent query, though with a distinct amount of accusation.

Hitomi felt a little uneasy. "Thanks for the match.", she said as she bowed slightly. "You're really good."

In response, both women gave noncommittal shrugs.

Hitomi wondered just what had happened. She knew Helena to be a fairly passionate fighter, and even Christie seemed duller than what Hitomi remembered of her when she had seen her in the early stages of the last tournament. For both of them to be so aggravatingly distant seemed off, even to herself, who usually lacked the sixth sense when it came to relationships.

Before Hitomi had any time to analyze the two of them more, Helena turned to leave, not even bothering with a small smile for the genuine compliment. The white-haired Briton stayed, however, sensing that there was still something Hitomi wanted to say and preferring to get it over with rather sooner than later.

"Hey...", Hitomi started hesitantly, her eyes still following Helena, "take good care of her, alright?"

The look that Christie gave her in response was more surprised than she had ever imagined to see on her, forcing Hitomi to elaborate.

"W-Well...see if you can make her smile...or something. You're closest to her, aren't you?", she asked, watching with worry as Christie's brows creased even more. Glancing once more to Helena, who by now was waiting rather impatiently for Christie, Hitomi decided that she had taken up her time long enough.

"I'm sure you'll figure something out. Bye!", she gave a smile and waved as she left Christie to return to her partner.

Returning to the field revealed a sprawled out Leifang on the ground of the volleyball field, showing her pitiable side she just did when with Hitomi.

"That didn't go too well.", Hitomi said and nodded toward the net, indicating that she was talking about the game.

Leifang grimaced at that understatement. "If you keep on playing like that, I'm really gonna leave you." As she said this her voice was serious, but when Hitomi turned to look at her anxiously, she smiled warmly. "Klutz."

"I'll make it up to you, promise.", Hitomi said as she leaned over Leifang.

"How so? My ego is really hurt now, y'know. That can't be fixed so easily.", the Chinese mocked her friend's attempts.

"I don't know how, but I promise I'll get your self-esteem all back into shape in no time, miss genius."

It was meant honestly, but Leifang grimaced at the last word, turning her face away from Hitomi. "Don't call me that."

"Why not?" Hitomi looked at her friend with a frown. Negating that title surely didn't coincide with her usual behavior.

"Everyone calls me that at home. It's annoying." Leifang's face said more clearly than her words that she didn't want to stay on this topic.

However, exactly that made Hitomi all the more interested. Leifang usually didn't talk much about herself. "Well, if everyone says it, it must be true." Sitting down beside her friend, she looked at the back that was still turned to her.

A little annoyed that Hitomi just wouldn't let up, Leifang turned to the side to look at her.

"Even if that's the case, it still gets on my nerves. I guess I'm just diligent in everything

I do, nothing special.", she said and shrugged, but was surprised to hear Hitomi giggle.

So she didn't like to be praised. That was unexpected.

"And what are you doing now?", Hitomi teased, raising her eyebrows at her friend. Seeing how they were lazing around at the moment, she was curious for the answer. And in the first place, hadn't Leifang said she had known that there would be no tournament?

But instead of the blush or look of embarrassment the brunette had secretly hoped for, Leifang smiled saucily as she sat up and moved close to Hitomi, their faces only inches apart. "Wouldn't you like to know?", she whispered suggestively and watched with satisfaction as Hitomi's face colored several shades of red. She inwardly thanked her impeccable talent for role-reversals.

"Gotcha.", she then laughed and pushed Hitomi backward so that she flailed her arms and landed on her back.

Why was being honest always easiest when pretending you're joking?

"That was mean.", Hitomi whined, wondering whether her blush was wearing off already.

"Well, what goes around, comes around.", Leifang said self-righteously and laughed, Hitomi joining in.

"So...", the Chinese said after a while, nodding into the direction Helena and Christie had left earlier, "what did you talk to them about? You haven't told me." Before Hitomi had the chance to respond, she gave her brunette friend a dangerous look. "I hope you weren't asking for a return match."

Hitomi couldn't help but laugh at Leifang's worries. "I'm not that stupid, you know. I was just kind of worried about Helena. Did you notice how she's so distant and all? She used to be so passionate about everything. I just told Christie to...look out for her, or something."

"Well...", Leifang's face darkened, "I heard she lost both her father and her mother, and then the whole mess with DOATEC...I guess things like that do that to a person. But...don't you think you're getting a little too involved, though?" She didn't say that the two of them seemed strangely inapproachable, but the thought that it might be better to leave those two on their own did cross her mind.

"Maybe. I just found it odd that they make such a great pair and neither of them seems to notice, or care." Hitomi thought about how Helena and Christie didn't ever seem to talk, and yet understood each other perfectly. And in spite of their impassive features, they seemed to be oddly comfortable around each other. But still, they didn't look happy.

"It's probably not that easy for them. But I'm sure they'll work it out somehow."

They're no kids.", Leifang said, but wasn't sure whether "working it out" was even the real problem between those two.

Hitomi simply nodded, but then cleared her head of these serious thoughts, and put on a grin. "Say, Lei."

"Hm?" Leifang looked to the side, a little wary whenever her friend looked at her like that.

"Wanna take a dip in the pool? I've got sand in my clothes, and it itches like hell." Unfortunately, their fun at the pool became an unexpectedly short affair due to the small war that was taking place there between American and Japanese parties.

"What's your problem? Get lost!"

"We were here first!"

"So?"

Hitomi knew she didn't want any part in this as soon as she heard the yells all across the poolside. However, she was the first to raise the obvious question. "What's...going on here?"

She warily watched the fierce argument between Ayane and Tina, who by now were very nearly tearing at each other's throats, for reasons Hitomi wasn't sure she wanted to know.

To Tina's and Ayane's sides were Lisa and Kasumi, both trying to hold their respective partners back, with little to no success so far.

"I don't wanna know. Let's go.", Leifang said, one hand already on Hitomi's shoulder.

"Wanna settle this here, then?", both of them heard Tina shout, which was then followed by a splash of water.

"You don't want me to drown you here and now.", they heard Ayane hiss, and her ever dangerous voice sent shivers down their spines.

"And I thought I was harsh.", Leifang breathed with a gulp, her eyes darting between Tina in the water and Ayane at the edge of the pool, looking almost ready to kick Tina in the face as soon as she tried to get out.

Wait. She would never do that, would she?

"Shouldn't we do something?", Hitomi asked worriedly, though she didn't like the thought of volunteering to go against Ayane. She was confident in her skills, but there was just something about Ayane and she'd rather not mess with her.

Leifang hesitated for a few moments, now even more than before just wishing to

leave the poolside. But she could already imagine Hitomi to fret about those two for the remainder of the day, so instead of worrying about what happened to them, she could as well take it into her own hands.

"You're right. For crying out loud, those two..." Gathering that little bit of courage that she lacked to go against the feisty ninja, she was about to go between the two when a voice made her stop in her tracks.

"You shouldn't interfere." The voice came from behind her, and turning around revealed Kokoro, lying on a sun bed not far from them. Leifang hadn't noticed her before, but that was no surprise, with the ruckus on the other side of the pool demanding everyone's attention. The Japanese girl had probably watched everything from the start.

Noticing the stares she was receiving, she sat up and took off her sunglasses. "It's something personal. Don't worry, they won't kill each other."

"Well, sorry for having tried to interrupt your entertainment programme.", Leifang said sarcastically, glaring at Kokoro.

"Hi, Kokoro.", Hitomi stepped in, trying for a more friendly, although slightly awkward approach. "I didn't know you were still here." In truth, Hitomi had expected the other girl to have left the island altogether after the way she had acted earlier.

"Why shouldn't I?" Kokoro stared at Leifang for a moment too long before she said this, a fact that didn't go unnoticed by the Chinese woman.

"So what's with those two?", she asked without looking at Kokoro, returning to the previous topic and saving the three of them from the awkward silence that had been about to come between them. And though she couldn't say that she particularly liked Tina, the way Ayane currently had the upper hand over her, she felt a little pity. "They're not actually fighting about who owns the pool, are they?"

That would be low, if not quite beneath them, for all she knew.

"No, that's just what it evolved into. In truth, Ayane's just angry because she hates it when people get close to her.", Kokoro explained matter-of-factly, trying to look at neither of the other women.

"Who'd want to get close-", Leifang asked with a questioning look, but stopped herself when she turned around and looked at Ayane once again. Kasumi stood right behind her, but every time the ginger-haired girl tried to withhold Ayane or get past her to get in between her and Tina, she was pushed back by her half-sister. "Oh.", Leifang simply finished the sentence, unable to think of anything else.

There really was no need to worry, then. It wasn't like Tina would actually be after her. No, probably not.

"Let's go, Hitomi.", she said as she averted her eyes from the other end of the pool,

looking back at her friend.

"Eh? But where?", Hitomi asked, but instead of answering, Leifang grabbed her friend's hand and dragged her with her.

Once gotten into safe distance from the pool and out of earshot, Leifang took a deep breath and turned around. Putting on a smile, she leaned forward as she faced her friend. "What do you think about going...to the casino?"

"S-sure...", Hitomi said a little hesitantly, taken aback by the sudden closeness. "But...now?" Looking down at herself, she saw that her feet were still covered in sand and her bikini still felt uncomfortable because of the same.

"Well, not like that.", Leifang smirked. "I really need a shower, and something to eat too...what about we meet again in the evening?"

"Sure.", Hitomi agreed, happy about the invitation.

"Great. I'll come over later, then." Leifang was about to return to her hotel, but then realized that she didn't even know where Hitomi was staying at. "Which hotel did you choose?"

"Seabreeze Cottage.", Hitomi answered with a nod to the east, the rough direction in which said hotel was located. It was a very simple and rustic, but it had a lot of charm. "What about you?"

At that question, Leifang flashed a broad smile. "Gemstone Suite!" Her answer was accompanied by a bold victory sign.

"No surprise there. Our princess goes for the superlative as usual." Hitomi stuck her tongue out as she said this, but had to laugh out loud when Leifang actually blushed at her comment.

It was just so like her to choose that particular hotel, Hitomi thought. Not that it really mattered, though. They didn't have to pay for anything at all while being here, so they could just pick whatever hotel they wanted.

"Well then, the princess will be returning to her chambers." Looking at Hitomi with the most arrogant look she could muster while raising her eyebrows, she eventually smiled at her friend. "We still have some time to spare, I'll pick you up later, okay?"

Hitomi, although nodding in agreement, smirked impishly. "That's not very princess-like, though.", she said, knowing full well that the casino was right beside the Gemstone Suite, and that it would be more than a small detour for Leifang to come and get her first.

"When there's no prince around...it's not like you're going to play the part, or are you?", Leifang countered laughingly.

"No, thanks." Hitomi giggled before stepping backward with an apologetic gesture. "If you'll excuse me, my lady. I'll have to retire for now. My clothes are killing me."

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If she had had doubts before, Leifang had known by the time she stepped into the large and luxurious shower: The Gemstone Suite had been the best choice by far. Definitely.

The shower was large enough to fit at least three people into it, and if that wasn't already enough to give anyone strange ideas, the rest of the bathroom was equally large and well-suited for more than one person. In fact, it did seem almost dreary to be the only one in it, though that thought hadn't occurred to her before today.

Leaving the bathroom after well over thirty minutes clad only in a large towel, the Chinese woman wasn't surprised to see the table already set with her previously ordered dinner. Within the last few days, she'd made it a habit to order everything to her room instead of going down to the hotel's own restaurant, and the service had yet to let her down on that.

She usually took her time eating, but shooting a sideways glance at the clock, she decided to hurry up a bit. She didn't want to let Hitomi wait too long. While eating, she walked across the room to her wardrobe and opened it to reveal the entirety of clothes she had brought with her or bought on this island.

The variety was large enough for her to spend over ten minutes to decide which one to wear, but when she finally picked a blue Chinese dress with golden embroidery, she smiled to herself and went to the bathroom to dress up. She knew it was cliché, but she couldn't help liking these things.

Another half an hour later, she was on her way to Seebreeze Cottage, which she hadn't so much as seen from a distance so far. Thus she was all the more surprised when she got close enough to see that the cottages were actually built on wooden posts over the ocean instead of firm ground. The array of wooden houses over the ocean looked positively great in the evening sun.

It wasn't hard to find Hitomi's, since it was the only one that was occupied. As Leifang walked over to the thin wooden door and knocked three times, she wondered whether it wasn't a little lonely to be so far out and all alone, too. But then, the large terrace from where one could practically leap right into the ocean sure was an argument in itself.

When no answer came forth, she knocked again, wondering if Hitomi was even there. "Anybody home?"

Never having considered herself as a very patient person, she waited ten more seconds before letting go of the door. Just as she did that, though, the door opened and revealed Hitomi's flushed face.

"Hey, what took y-" Leifang started, but opening the door all the way showed Hitomi with nothing but a towel on, and Leifang shut her mouth again.

"Sorry. I'll be ready soon, okay? Just wait here a moment." Leading Leifang inside, Hitomi quickly disappeared in the bathroom from where she had probably come just moments ago.

"Sorry I came so early. Take your time.", Leifang called loud enough for Hitomi to hear through the closed bathroom door as she walked across the room and sat down on the couch. Sitting there, she was situated right in front of a large glass pane on the floor, which allowed her to look right into the ocean. But as it was getting dark outside, she couldn't make out much. It probably looked gorgeous in broad daylight, though.

"I'm really envious of your room, you know.", she said after a while, not averting her eyes from the glass pane. "It's so...unique." In comparison, her room looked just like an ordinary hotel room would. A gorgeous and luxurious hotel, but ordinary all the same.

"You think so too?", Hitomi asked as she leaned over Leifang's shoulder from behind, startling the other woman.

"Yeah, it's-", Leifang said, turning around to face Hitomi. Realizing that the other woman was just in her underwear, the words almost got stuck in her throat. "...great."

Hitomi was holding up two hangers with clothes in her right and left hand, silently asking Leifang which one to choose. But Leifang's gaze was locked in the middle, and her face flushed against her will.

Sure, she'd seen Hitomi in bikinis all the time, but underwear was still different. Especially this thin, laced-

"I-I'm sorry, um..." Shaking her head, the Chinese forced her eyes to both articles of clothing. One was a pair of sleek, dark trousers accompanied by a black-and-white tank top, and the other one was a skirt with a cute sleeveless top.

"I know it's a bit casual, but I didn't really bring anything...", Hitomi commented Leifang's temporary silence, blissfully ignorant of its cause.

"N-not at all. Both are fine, really." Masking her embarrassment with a smile, Leifang hoped to have gotten out of trouble until she noticed the glare Hitomi was giving her. "What...what is it?"

'Did she notice?'

"Both are fine'? Really now, you sound like a guy, you know that?", the German scolded her friend with a doubtful expression. "You know women hate to hear things like that. It sounds as though both don't look good enough." Eying her clothes, she shrugged, more to herself than to Leifang.

'This isn't good. Think, Leifang!'

"Really, I didn't...mean it like that. They both look good on you. I..." Looking back and forth between the two choices, she eventually nodded toward the trousers. "I like that one a bit more, though. But that might just be me..." The blush she had tried so hard to fight off threatened to return and Leifang cursed herself inwardly for really acting like a guy in front of Hitomi.

"Silly.", Hitomi laughed and tapped Leifang's forehead. "I ask because it's you." Turning around, she hung the unneeded hanger with the skirt back into the closet and disappeared with the other set in the bathroom to make up, humming happily all the while.

"Because it's me...huh...", Leifang muttered to herself, then rolled her eyes as she flopped back on the couch.

'You're in trouble, Leifang.'

---

As expected, the casino in the center of Zack Island outdid every other attraction on the isle in terms of size and overbearing pomp by far.

"It's...huge.", Hitomi breathed as she first set foot in the expensive-looking establishment, arm in arm with Leifang who seemed equally astonished.

The Chinese had simply suggested the casino on a whim, despite not having been here before. She hadn't been too keen on losing her money from the first day onwards, but now it really did look more fun than she had previously expected.

"Yeah. What do you want to check out first?", Leifang asked as she looked around, spotting the Roulette table and slot machines close by.

"That's a tough quest- ack!", Hitomi was cut short in mid-sentence as two arms grabbed her from behind and ripped her from Leifang's grasp.

"Hi-to-mi!", a voice cooed behind her, and the smell of alcohol reached her nose. With her arms flailing, she was drawn into a fierce hug from behind that left her gasping for air. She didn't identify her attacker right away, but knew once she saw strands of blonde hair twirling in front of her face.

"T-Tina...", she said with a half-smile, still surprised to be tackled like that. She was familiar enough with the woman to know how open she usually was, though, so she took it for normal.

Meanwhile, Leifang watched helplessly as Tina drew her friend close to herself and nuzzled her neck with a giddy smile. Her mind told her to act immediately, but failed to come up with a plan that wouldn't make her appear ridiculous.

'They're only hugging, right?' She couldn't find a sensible reason to freak out because of this, but nevertheless did exactly that.

"Wha-what brings you here, Tina?", Hitomi asked between muffled giggles, trying to restrain Tina's tickling hands.

"The fun, o' course!", Tina replied with a slight slur. "And right now, it's righ' in front a' me..." The blonde moved her hands upward on the younger woman's body, until she cupped her cheeks.

It was then that she felt a sharp pain in her hand as her whole arm was torn to the side.

"Take your hands off her!" Her own voice sounded strange to her, the words as much as the tone. But she couldn't help clenching her fingers around the blonde's hand, putting so much force into it that even her own hand hurt.

Tina groaned and tried to twist her hand out of Leifang's grip. "Let...go!"

Leifang didn't need to be told a second time, but still retained an icy glare on the American.

"Tina!", another voice called, and all three turned to see Lisa. "What...", she started, looking at each of them and noticing Leifang's clear distaste. "What did you do?" She didn't sound angry as much as simply annoyed, but Leifang nevertheless thought she was the one being spoken to until Lisa slapped her forehead in exasperation.

She took Tina's hand in hers and pulled her closer to herself as she looked at Hitomi and Leifang with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, guys. Did she do something terribly stupid again?"

Hitomi quickly shook her head. "Not at all, don't worry. I didn't mind."

While Hitomi didn't notice how Leifang's expression fell apart as she said this, Lisa did, and her indignant look to the side was all the answer she needed to put two and two together.

"Really Tina, that's the second time today. Would you stop getting us in trouble?", Lisa scolded her partner, but the blonde didn't see the problem at all, even though her thoughts had cleared a little.

"Not my fault she gets all jealous n' violent n'-"

"Tina!" Lisa said her name louder than intended, and while it did a good job of stopping her partner from getting them into more trouble, the offended look she received made her feel guilty.

"Sorry.", she tried to amend, touching Tina's shoulder gently. "Look...could you get

me something to drink? Water." The last bit brought a grin to the blonde's lips, and she nodded before walking off.

Once Tina was out of earshot, Lisa gave a deep sigh, and once again looked at the other two women before bowing forward in apology. "I'm really sorry. She doesn't know when to stop sometimes."

"Don't apologize." Hitomi waved her hands conciliatorily. "She didn't really trouble us. Right, Lei?" The German looked at her friend, but found Leifang avoiding her eyes.

"Sure, no big deal.", she replied with a shrug, only daring to look at Lisa. Her mind yelled at her, but she fought it off.

"Thanks a lot!" Lisa smiled broadly, obviously relieved. "I would've hated to make even more enemies. But honestly, that girl...she almost got us killed this afternoon." Thinking back to the fight they had gotten into with Ayane, she grimaced.

"Still, is there any way we can make it up to you?" She scratched the back of her head as she said this, feeling a little foolish.

Leifang frowned at the dark-skinned woman. Being honest with herself, she was surprised to find her such an affable person in spite of being close to that blonde.

"Well..." Hitomi looked around, trying to think of something. When her eyes fell on the poker table, she clapped her hands together. "Let's play poker!"

"Sure!", Lisa agreed gladly.

"That's hardly a punishment, though.", Leifang muttered, but managed a half-smile to not spoil the mood any more.

"Sounds like fun!", Tina cheerfully cut in as she came back, handing Lisa the requested glass of water. "Let's start!"

The four of them went over to the poker table, and, to at least make 'teamwork' a little more difficult, split up so that partners wouldn't sit next to each other.

After agreeing on the rules they would play by, everyone drew five cards each.

"So, is there anythin' in it for the 'winner'?", Tina asked with a grin after regarding her cards.

"...what do you want?" Leifang pushed a set amount of chips to the middle of the table.

"No alcohol!", Lisa said quickly before Tina could even open her mouth.

"That's no fun then, is it?", Tina complained meekly, but let it go. She was more than a little sick already, and any more would surely do her in. Though there was always the

tiny nagging thought that at least the incoming headache would be postponed if she simply continued drinking.

"Raise.", Hitomi said and pushed almost half of her chips to the middle with a grin that reached from ear to ear.

"Are you for real? You haven't even exchanged cards yet.", Lisa wondered aloud, but went along, as did the others.

"It's a good thing if my cards are in order and have the same suit, right?", Hitomi asked when it was her turn to change cards, which she didn't, keeping her hand and going along with the call.

"To hell with it, I'm out. I'm gonna get you for that one.", Tina lamented, but folded.

"I'll shuffle the cards next round.", Lisa voiced her not-so-subtle accusation with a sharp glance at Leifang, who simply shrugged.

"You're not supposed to tell others about your hand, Hitomi.", the Chinese said with a sigh, and dropped out of the game also.

"Sorry." Hitomi gave a cute smile, and regarded the pile of chips in the middle of the table. "It's all mine now, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah.", Lisa said, actually annoyed that she had just lost about the same amount of money which she had just won in a jet ski race that day. "So show us your straight flush. I'll be damned if you get so lucky again next round."

"You know...", Hitomi said quietly as she laid out her cards on the table, revealing a two, a three, a seven, a king and an ace, all of different suits. "...you really shouldn't be fooled so easily."

The whole table was silent for several moments, and Leifang was the first one to laugh out loud, while Tina cursed and Lisa flushed in embarrassment.

"That's not nice of you, you know. Robbing me of my money like that when I already have to pay for the drinks today.", Leifang said with feigned annoyance, but still had to laugh at her own gullibility. She should have known better than that.

"It's not over yet, and I doubt that trick works twice." With a sheepish laugh, Hitomi handed the deck of cards to Lisa. "You wanted to shuffle, right?"

Had it been anyone other than Hitomi, Lisa would have been offended, but the way the German girl said it completely without an edge in a merely cute manner, she couldn't really be angry. Now she understood how Leifang had cooled down so quickly in her presence. With her, no one could stay mad for long. And Lisa knew someone just like that.

"I guess I'll have to be really careful from now on.", Hitomi mumbled as she carefully

stacked her chips in front of her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone pass the table, and looking up revealed Kasumi and Ayane. Kasumi wore an elegant and immensely expensive-looking dress, while Ayane had gone with a far simpler, but nonetheless fitting outfit. The ginger-haired ninja looked up and caught Hitomi's eyes with a smile.

'Hiya.', Hitomi mouthed to her and waved, but instantly froze when Ayane's angry gaze locked on her. With an awkward smile, her eyes wandered back to the table in front of her.

"Scary, huh?", Tina asked and nudged Hitomi playfully with her elbow.

Hitomi giggled, winking at her partner playfully. "She's more intimidating than you, Lei."

"I suppose that's saying something.", Lisa cut in, but lifted her hands in a pacifying manner as she looked at the Chinese woman.

"Still..." Lisa's eyes followed the Japanese women, her brows creased in thought. "It's a little strange, isn't it?" The ever-gentle and cheerful Kasumi, and the arrogant and downright-contemptuous Ayane...even though they were half-sisters, they were nothing alike. Even so, they seemed to be off in their own little world, not bothering with anybody else unless someone tried to invade upon that world.

"True...I thought they hated each other?", Leifang wondered aloud as she took the five cards she had been dealt, trying her damndest not to frown upon looking at them.

"Well...", Tina said as she leaned forward in a confidential manner, lowering her voice. "I heard Ayane just puts up with her to prove that she's better than her, be it volleyball or anythin' else. She's really obsessed with being superior."

"Seems not everyone's playing just for fun.", Leifang muttered, sighing when Hitomi raised the stakes again. Deciding to drop out before losing any more money this round, she folded.

"Kasumi doesn't seem to mind though." Hitomi smiled contently after exchanging three of her cards, causing the other two to groan. "She looks happy."

"I don't get it. Ayane's always moody and mean, who'd want to put up with her willingly?" Leifang wasn't the type to gossip or badmouth people, but that purple-haired woman just gave her the creeps.

"Maybe it's that feeling.", Lisa said mysteriously, casting a loving glance at Tina, who in turn responded with a puzzled look, causing the dark-skinned woman to laugh. "Oh, forget it. You're hopeless tonight."

"Don't make fun of me!", the blonde whined, pushing a whole stack of chips to the middle of the table. "Rather, watch how I win this game!" Laughing hoarsely as she

said this, she didn't hear Lisa's sigh, which was followed by her averting her eyes from the table.

Leifang chuckled. "You know what they say about blondes.", she teased, deeply grateful that she was out of this game now that things got risky. Looking over to Hitomi, she saw an expression similar to Tina's on her face, showing that she didn't quite get it, either. "Oh, count her in.", the Chinese said and rolled her eyes.

Aside from her, Lisa was the only one laughing about this, and as their eyes met, they shared a short, understanding gaze.

"Hey, I'm not blond!", Hitomi protested, and then urged Tina and Lisa to show her cards. And surprisingly, Tina's hand had really been better than Hitomi, causing the German to lose the biggest amount of the money she had just previously won. "Bummer!"

The four of them spent the biggest part of the evening playing poker, not even getting around to try roulette or blackjack. But nobody seemed to mind, and at the end everyone felt as though they might get along better from now on.

"It's gotten late." Lisa was the first to suggest splitting up for the evening, yawning as she did so. "How about a volleyball match tomorrow or something?"

"Sure.", Leifang instantly agreed, a smirk forming on her face. "If you're up to it." She cast a meaningful glance at Tina as she said this, who by now while not entirely drunk, was obviously the most worn out one of the group.

"She'll have to be. She's actually really good. When she's sober." Lisa poked the blonde playfully, though Tina didn't seem to register it much, concentrating on keeping her eyes open instead.

"Well then, see ya!", Hitomi said, linking arms with Leifang as they turned to leave. "Good night."

"Yeah, good night."

"That was fun, wasn't it? Thanks for taking me here.", Hitomi said once they set foot outside the casino, slightly shivering as she came into contact with the cool night air.

"I wasn't really...I mean..." Leifang stumbled over her words, wondering whether that last cocktail had been a little too much, after all. Hitomi on the other side seemed pretty normal considering that she downed three of them straight. "Yeah, it was fun. Let's go again."

"Really?" Looking up from where her head had lazily rested on Leifang's shoulder, her eyes shone expectantly. "Promise?" Maybe she'd had a little too much, after all.

"Silly, why shouldn't we? You're acting like a kid.", Leifang said with a laugh, but stopped abruptly by the time they left the hotel grounds. Hitomi looked at her

curiously but when Leifang faced her, she wore an almost lecherous smile.

"So, your place or mine?", she asked, her finger moving to alternatively point in direction of the Gemstone Suite Hotel and Hitomi's Seabreeze Cottage.

"Eh?" Perplexed, Hitomi's eyes followed the movement of Leifang's hand. She hadn't quite expected this question and wasn't sure how Leifang meant it in the first place. She didn't know how to respond, but found that she didn't need to when Leifang's giggling cut her thoughts short.

"Just kidding.", the Chinese woman said and poked her friend's nose. "Good night." She wavered for a moment, unsure about what to do, but then she nodded and turned to leave.

Now profusely dumbfounded, Hitomi watched the other woman leave while trying to process what had happened. Turning around for a short moment, her eyes searched for her cottage. But it was dark and no lights were on since no one else had a room there, so Hitomi couldn't even see the gross outlines from this distance. She didn't really want to go there.

"So is that it?", she found herself shouting after Leifang, who stopped immediately. As she turned to meet her eyes, Hitomi found that Leifang needed a few seconds to replace the usual confident look on her face. Longer than usual.

The dark-haired woman didn't say anything, simply staring at Hitomi, prompting her to say something.

"I mean, you took me out tonight and now you're not even taking me back to my room? What's up with that?", she asked, her voice sounding serious enough.

"I..." Walking back to Hitomi, Leifang's countenance faltered. "Sorry. What was I thinking?" She managed a small laugh as she rubbed the back of her head. "Of course I'll take you ba-" Leifang was promptly silenced when Hitomi put her finger over her mouth.

"Juuust kidding.", she said and stuck her tongue out at the other woman. Leifang was acting funny today, and Hitomi felt that she had to take advantage of it, if just a little. "I'd love to see your place, though. If you don't mind?"

"N-not at all.", Leifang stuttered after Hitomi released her finger from her mouth.

"Great." Upon receiving the response she had wanted to hear, the German woman smiled sweetly with her eyes closed and her head tilted to the side. "I would've hated to walk all that way back to the cottage."

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"Ayane-chan, please open the door." Despite having knocked countless times already,

Kasumi tried again, rapping on the door three times. She was sure she had knocked loud enough, but there was still no response.

Usually, she would be worried about waking up the other residents of the hotel, but since she knew that Ayane and herself were the sole residents in "Moonlight Reef", it wasn't a problem. That, and she knew that Ayane was surely not sleeping already.

"Why don't you open up?", she tried again, leaning close to the door so she wouldn't have to raise her voice. "Please, I lost the key to my room, and I don't want to wake the porter this late. It'll be just this night."

She didn't get a direct response, but as she put her ear to the door, she heard shuffling inside and guessed that Ayane was standing right on the other side. It brought a small smile to her lips.

"Please Ayane-chan...let me in, okay?", she said, her voice quivering ever so slightly. "I promise I won't bother you..."

There was a minute of silence, and Kasumi was almost about to give up when the door in front of her opened slowly.

"Ayane-chan!", Kasumi exclaimed with a broad smile, regarding her purple-haired half sister, who grimaced at the greeting.

"Don't call me that.", she said angrily, but looked away before stepping to the side to allow Kasumi to step in. The other girl accepted the offer right away.

"Thanks...Ayane-chan."

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"Do you care for something to drink?" Pouring herself a glass of iced tea in spite of the late hour, Helena looked at Christie questioningly.

"No, thanks.", the white-haired woman answered simply, turning her head to look out of the large window.

The British assassin on her windowsill had been the first thing Helena's eyes had come across of upon entering her apartment. The lock to the apartment had been intact, and while the French woman didn't know how Christie had gotten inside, she didn't care to know, either.

"What brings you here?", she asked, not entirely unfriendly.

The question succeeded in tearing Christie's eyes away from the window. "There was a time when you wanted me around. As your bodyguard. Would you rather I'd leave?" The last part was spoken with a slight smile, indicating that leaving wasn't an option in the first place.

"Not at all. I feel quite safe with you around." Even though it was spoken with a thin-lipped smile to spite the other woman, Helena found that it wasn't quite a lie. She wasn't afraid of Christie, despite knowing quite well of the woman's intentions.

She had beat the woman in the last tournament when they had crossed paths, and her reasoning was that if she were to die by her hands, then she was just not worthy of living. Even so, she hated killing, and wasn't about to do any harm to the other woman if it wasn't necessary.

The way the both of them shared their time in this room in almost amiable silence reminded Helena of a time long past, back when their relationship had been different, at least on her side. She wondered whether Christie had really been acting, all this time when she had been her bodyguard, protecting her from anything and anyone without fail. It was hard to believe.

"I'm tired, so I'll go to sleep.", she stated without looking at Christie, but knew that the other woman wasn't even looking at her. "But you're free to stay the night if you want."

Walking over to the bed with her back turned to her former bodyguard, Helena slowly began to undress. She didn't know whether Christie was watching her or not, and it meant little to her. She knew that even an assassin like her was well above killing their exposed target from behind when she had all the possibilities in the world to do otherwise.

Having removed all of her clothes except of her panties, she got into her bed.

That was when she first looked at the windowsill again. But now it was empty, and Christie wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"So you're the coward."

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"Wow! How many people can you fit on here? Five?" Without the slightest notion of restraint, Hitomi leaped onto Leifang's large hotel bed right after entering the apartment, rolling from side to side. "You could roll around in your sleep and still never touch each other! It's so big!"

Leifang didn't know whether Hitomi had said it like that on purpose, but it sure brought a grin to her face. "Wait, that's a good thing?"

At that remark, Hitomi blushed slightly, and Leifang relished her achievement. It had become kind of game between them, to see who would blush first if certain remarks were made. But today, Leifang was clearly on the losing end in that 'game'. And she had the sinking feeling that she knew too well what it meant.

This vacation was so different from the last one, even though it was so similar on the outside. But the way she had snapped at Tina earlier...she wondered how Hitomi thought about that, or if she thought about it at all. But she was too scared to ask. Figured.

"Don't stand around like that. Come here." Hitomi motioned the other woman over to the bed and Leifang lay down on her stomach beside her.

"Ah, I'm beat.", Leifang said as she stretched her arms, closing her eyes. Under normal circumstances, she would probably fall asleep in an instant.

"Heeeey, you can't sleep now.", Hitomi rolled over and nudged her friend.

"I can't?", came the lazy question back. "I'd really like to, though."

"Nuh-uh!" Crawling on all fours, Hitomi hopped onto Leifang's back, causing the other woman to squeak in surprise, though she didn't struggle. "What are we going to do tomorrow?"

Despite her sleepiness, Leifang had to giggle at Hitomi's childish behavior. So she really had had a drink too much. "What are we going to do, you ask? Well, go and kick Helena's and Christie's butt, of course."

"So you're not mad?", Hitomi asked, leaning forward so that her head was resting between Leifang's shoulder blades.

"Mad about what?"

"About losing the volleyball game."

"It was just a game, no big deal."

"But you hate losing."

"So? It was still just a game."

"...and we lost really badly..."

"A stroke of bad luck. It was only one game, though."

"It was kind of embarrassing, wasn't it? I bet they're laughing about us right now."

"Okay...so I'm a little mad."

"At me?"

"Of course not. Did you see me playing any better?"

"Not really."

"Alright, you're pissing me off. Get off me.", Leifang said, but Hitomi could hear her muffled laughter as the Chinese woman pressed her face into the pillow in front of her.

"Gotcha. You're awake now, aren't you?" Hitomi laughed merrily as she sat up and begun drawing invisible lines on Leifang's back. She could feel the warmth of her skin underneath her clothes as she traced her fingers across them.

Leifang tensed at the sensitive touches at first, but relaxed slowly the longer it lasted. "Massage me."

"Hm?", Hitomi asked, slightly shaking her head to clear her thoughts. "Sorry, spaced out a little."

"I told you to give me a massage. If you're not getting off, that's the least you can do.", Leifang ordered in a tone that most would misunderstand if they didn't know her well enough.

"As you wish, princess.", Hitomi answered teasingly.

'I could get used to this...', Leifang thought as she completely relaxed under the brunette's touch. It felt good, warm. Closing her eyes again, she relished the treatment. After a few minutes, she was about to drift off to sleep when the sound of her zipper brought her back to her senses. "W-what are you doing?"

"Taking your clothes off?", Hitomi asked, thinking it was obvious.

"I know, I mean...why?" This was going a little fast, even for her.

"It's hard to massage your shoulders well with all this fabric in the way." Hitomi pulled the zipper all the way down as she said this, revealing Leifang's bare back.

"...massage.", Leifang mumbled almost inaudibly, hiding her beet red face in the pillow, cursing herself thoroughly for the strange thoughts she had obviously been getting before almost falling asleep.

She let Hitomi undress her, not once daring to look at her friend.

"Just relax, okay? I'm really good at this."

And she was. Hitomi's hands worked like magic, but with her heart thumping so loudly in her chest, there was no way that Leifang was going to drift off to sleep again. "It's true...you're...perfect."

"Why, thanks." The unexpected praise caused the brunette to giggle, and she continued with her massage for a few minutes more, Leifang occasionally moaning ever so slightly.

"I think my hands are going to fall off.", she said eventually after more than fifteen minutes of skillful massaging. Like before, she simply leaned forward to lie on top of Leifang. Turning her head to the side, she pressed her ear on Leifang's back, listening.

"Your heartbeat's pretty fast. Are you nervous?", she chuckled to herself as she asked this, not really expecting an answer.

Even though the beat was fast, it was rhythmic and steady and Hitomi enjoyed listening to it.

"Thanks, that felt good.", Leifang said after a few moments of silence, unsure of what else to say.

"No problem. It's your turn tomorrow.", Hitomi replied quietly.

"Alright."

## Kapitel 2: The Olympic games? Are you serious?

When she awoke, it was unusually quiet. There was no sound of waves rolling against wooden posts, no sound of seagulls out for their breakfast. And as Hitomi reached out for the alarm clock beside her bed, she didn't find it either.

Opening her eyes fully, she was greeted by an unfamiliar ceiling above her and needed a few moments to gain her bearings.

Right, she wasn't in the cottage. This was Leifang's room.

The thought of the other woman brought a content smile to her lips and she turned her head to the side to look at her. As she did, though, she found the spot beside her empty.

Her eyes continued to wander across the room until they came to halt at the window, in front of which a familiar figure stood. The sun had just risen, but she was fully dressed and with her hair divided into two braids, she stood with her back to the bed.

Hitomi was about to open her mouth to speak to her when the Chinese woman extended her arms to both sides, moving them slowly in a way the German wasn't familiar with.

She then moved her legs in the same rhythm as well, alternately standing on her right or her left leg, sometimes both.

'Tai Chi Quan exercises.', Hitomi thought to herself as she watched the other woman moving soundlessly and with perfectly even breathing, keeping quiet to not disturb her friend. Instead, she lay back again and rested her eyes on the Chinese's body.

Hitomi could see now why everyone called her a genius. Careful not to make any noise, she rolled over to the side to get a better view of her friend, who was oblivious to Hitomi's watching.

It looked beautiful. The way the other woman moved so gracefully yet powerfully, in one moment resembling a blade of grass in the wind, but standing firm as a wall in the next.

Even the quickest movements were performed in complete silence, and not a single sound came across her lips. All the while the morning sun cast a long shadow of the Chinese woman that reached all the way to the German's fingertips.

Hitomi found that it didn't resemble her own exercises in the least, their styles being as different as day and night. Her own was simple, bold and strong, whereas Leifang's was calm and elegant, with a surprising force behind the complex movements.

Up until now, Hitomi had never had the chance to watch Leifang like that. The only

times she had seen her style from up close had been on the few occasions where they had competed against each other. Though in those cases, Hitomi hadn't seen the style as much as she had experienced it. And it was good.

Watching her friend going through her various moves with utmost precision, she completely lost herself in the sight.

Leifang was special that way. If it had been herself, Hitomi would have woken up her friend first thing after awaking herself. And she wouldn't have dreamt of doing her exercises, either.

But she was like that and Hitomi realized that the arrogant and self-centered front the other woman continuously put up was just a barrier to shield her from straying from her routines. The only way to be this perfect was diligence, and she could only be diligent through her arrogance.

It was amazing, in a way. She did it for no one but herself, heedless of whatever other people thought or said. She wasn't trying to impress anyone, or live up to anyone's standards. She did it solely for her own peace of mind.

Her mind completely lost in thought and her eyes not straying from Leifang's body even once, Hitomi didn't even realize when the exercises stopped and her friend turned around to look at her.

"See something you like?", Leifang asked with a mysterious smile that shook Hitomi out of her daydream.

Slowly, a serene smile crept upon the brunette's lips. "For a while.", she answered quietly, still looking directly at Leifang before adding: "It's beautiful to watch."

Leifang bowed slightly in appreciation of the praise, chuckling softly. "You should've told me you were awake."

"Wouldn't you have stopped, then?", Hitomi asked, even though she knew the answer already. For some reason, Leifang's intense gaze on her sent ripples through her body, and she didn't dare to look away first.

"Would that have been so terrible?"

"Yes. Very." Hitomi let her head sink back into the pillow underneath, a smirk dancing on her lips. But then Leifang looked away and the special moment broke.

She walked over to the table and the chair that stood at its side, taking the small towel she had previously placed there to wipe the sheen of sweat from her forehead.

The few seconds of silence that came between them were enough to make Hitomi uneasy and she decided to stand up and get dressed, as well. There was no point in staying in bed if Leifang was already up and about.

However, Leifang was quick to stop her, gently pushing Hitomi's shoulders back when she tried to get up.

"You just wait here in bed, okay? I'll be right back.", she said with a wink, heedless of her friend's puzzled expression.

When Hitomi nodded, Leifang allowed herself to flash a giddy smile and dash for the door. "Promise?", she asked just before leaving the apartment, making absolutely sure.

"Sure, promise.", the brunette replied with a relaxed smile and demonstratively dropped back on the bed with her arms stretched out.

"Good. I'll be right back." With one last wave, the Chinese woman disappeared through the door, leaving Hitomi alone with her jumbled thoughts.

'She's cute.' The thought passed through her mind as she recalled the excitement she had seen in the other woman's eyes just now.

'It's good to be here.' She was glad that she had been naïve enough to come here thinking there would be a tournament. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have met Leifang again and wouldn't have so much fun right now. It was good to be away from home for a while, away from the worries of the dojo.

But everything would be alright. As long as she always did her best in everything she did, it would be alright. She would find a way, eventually.

Her thoughts were about to drift off to the beautiful Chinese again when she heard steps in front of the door, and she inclined her head to face it, waiting for Leifang to enter. As she did, Hitomi's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of her friend, and her lips formed a broad smile.

Entering the room, Leifang carried a large tray on her hands, trying to balance the glasses, carafes and other things that stood on it. Her look of concentration gave way for one of disheartenment when she saw Hitomi's eagerly awaiting expression.

"It's really no good that you awoke on your own. I wanted to surprise you.", she sighed and set the tray on top of the bed right next to Hitomi, who still lay on her back.

"You sure did." Stretching comfortably, Hitomi regarded the contents of the tray with almost child-like glee. There were two plates, each with two toasts, as well as various spreads. "That's a nice room service. Does it cost me extra, I wonder?", she asked, licking her lips at the sight.

"Well, special guests are free of charge, I guess.", Leifang shrugged but smiled before picking up a toast from the table and dipping its corner into a jar of honey. "Say 'aah!'", she teased, hovering the toast right in front of Hitomi's mouth.

Propping herself up on her elbows, the brunette's head leaned forward as she opened

her mouth. "Aah."

"Good girl.", Leifang chuckled and let Hitomi take a bite. She continued to feed Hitomi the whole toast like that, alternately dipping it in honey before giving it to Hitomi, who giggled the entire time.

"So, how do I deserve this?", Hitomi asked after she finished chewing, looking at Leifang with an expectant smile. "Did I win the lottery?"

"How rude.", the Chinese huffed with a fake pout. "Aren't I always good to you?"

"Yeah...too good. If you keep on spoiling me like that, I won't be able to survive without you." Licking her lips, Hitomi could still taste the sweet flavor of honey on them. She could get used to this.

"Well, that's good.", Leifang grinned as she took another toast, which she coated with strawberry marmalade this time. "'Cause that's the point."

Hitomi's expression at that remark was priceless, reminding Leifang once again why she loved to tease Hitomi so much. It was just irresistibly cute. She was cute. And the Chinese wouldn't give this up for the world.

Continuing to feed the toast to Hitomi, but laughing hard as she did so, she accidentally smeared some of the marmalade onto Hitomi's cheek, who had been equally inattentive.

"Ah, sorry.", Leifang said quickly as she noticed the red spot on the other girl's cheek.

"Never mind.", Hitomi replied and lifted her hand to wipe it off. Leifang's hand was faster however, stopping Hitomi's in midair. And when the German looked up into the other woman's eyes, she froze, completely forgetting about the marmalade on her cheek.

Leifang did the same, though only momentarily. She only hesitated for the shortest of moments before her head dipped forward.

She wasn't like that, and she didn't do those things. But right now, her head moved forward faster than she could think, her lips meeting Hitomi's cheek more strongly than intended.

She could have used her own hand, but hadn't. She could have let Hitomi do it, but wouldn't let this go just like that.

Only when she felt the heat of Hitomi's skin as her tongue flicked across it did she draw away, immediately regretting her action. Her mind immediately tried to come up with some sort of excuse, but failed.

"There, all gone.", Leifang ended up whispering and gave a smile, which faded rather quickly due to her embarrassment that all too clearly showed on her cheeks. Hitomi's

puzzled expression told her that she had gone a little too far.

"...thanks.", Hitomi breathed and couldn't help but look away in a vain attempt to hide her surprise.

It was awkward. Berating herself inwardly, Leifang cast a quick glance at the brunette. Part of her had hoped that Hitomi would tease her with it, flat-out asking her to do what had just done. At least then she would have had an excuse for what she had done, which she hadn't now.

But it had just been a peck on the cheek, right? No big deal, nothing to worry, much less get embarrassed, about. Still, she wanted to change the topic as quickly as possible.

"Um, so...", Leifang started as she quickly prepared another toast, for herself this time. "Any plans for today? You were all pumped up yesterday." Trying to make light of the situation, she made a childish face as she said this, succeeding in bringing a smile to Hitomi's face.

"Actually, I do. I kind of forgot about it there for a minute, but...", scratching her head, Hitomi eventually grinned broadly. "I really do."

"Really? So what's the plan?" Trying to defend her toast from Hitomi's swirling hands, Leifang quickly shoved it all into her mouth, trying very hard not to laugh.

"I thought...", Hitomi started, halting for a second to sort her thoughts, "the volleyball game was really fun yesterday, even though we lost. And after the casino, we got along so well with Tina and Lisa...wouldn't it be great if we were on good terms with everyone like that?"

Leifang found herself nodding as she chewed her toast, but then halted abruptly. "Wait, I'm not enough?"

"That's not it.", Hitomi corrected quickly, but smiled. "Silly. I just think it'd be cool if we all played together, not just one-on-one."

"That sounded dirty and you know it.", Leifang smirked but nodded in understanding. "So you think we should hold a beach volleyball tournament instead of each pair challenging another separately?"

"No, not just volleyball. There's Jet Ski too, and Beach Flags. There's also the Water Slide and all the pool games." Hitomi smiled contently as she envisioned her plan. "Wouldn't it be fun to compete in every one of them in a tournament, to see who the best is?"

"So...", setting aside the breakfast tablet, Leifang lay down next to Hitomi. "...you mean like the Olympic Games?"

"Nah." Waving her hand dismissively, the brunette chuckled at her friend's guess. "Not

like that." With a curious glint in her eyes, she leaned close to Leifang. She smiled widely. "We'll do it in pairs."

The Chinese's heart skipped a beat as she quickly drew in her breath. "Pairs?"

"Yep. There's us, Tina and Lisa, Ayane and Kasumi and Helena and Christie.", Hitomi explained. "Of course most games are for two players only, but in that case the pair will simply choose one who will compete. And in the end we'll just have to tally up the points."

The fact that Hitomi had forgotten to mention Kokoro didn't go by Leifang, but she didn't feel like bringing the other girl up now, either. "Sounds good."

"Right? That way, everyone will have a good time!" Hitomi positively beamed and Leifang couldn't help but do the same.

"Goody-two-shoes.", she teased her friend with a playful nudge, who didn't seem to mind in the least. "You should get up soon if you want to start today, though. Gotta tell the others about it."

"...about that..." Her smile falling slightly, Hitomi looked at her friend with pleading eyes. "...say Lei...you'll help me, right?"

Leifang was about to answer smilingly when the implications of Hitomi's expression hit her. "No way. Not them. You're on your own."

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Another morning, another day. For a workaholic like Lisa, this was always a good thing. She rarely slept in late or had trouble to get out of bed. As a person who thought that twenty-four hours were still not enough for a day, she always got up early to get as many things done as possible.

Not here, though. And most certainly not today, either. Because Lisa's mornings on this island so far had been usually not only drawn-out, but also noisy, or uncomfortable. Or both. Because no matter in which position she fell asleep, there were no traces of it left by the time she awoke.

Which was with an arm draped across her face this morning, as opposed to the leg of the previous day. Which didn't make anything better, just different. She really should be used to this, but she wasn't.

"Tina...", she mumbled, still half asleep, brushing the arm off. Aside from a slightly disrupted snore however, the blonde didn't respond. She unconsciously turned away from her, only to sprawl out again when Lisa finally gave up and stood up to leave the bed and prepare a cup of coffee.

Only wearing her over-sized shirt, she trod across the large room of the Gemstone

Suite. Looking at herself in the large mirror as she passed it, she noticed her ruffled hair but didn't bother to set it straight just yet.

After a night in bed with Tina, this was to be expected. Though she honestly wished that Tina wouldn't dream of wrestling every night.

The dark-skinned woman was about to wake her friend when she heard a knock at the door. Setting the steaming cup of coffee back onto the table, she went to answer it.

"Who is it?", she asked, but opened the door the very same second. She had expected one of the many servants, or the cleaning personnel that had the annoying habit of not-so-subtly chasing them out of the room when the clock hit eleven and they were still half asleep. It was neither of the two, though.

"Morning...", Leifang greeted her, her voice faltering slightly as she took in the sight in front of her. She wondered if she was too early, but she had figured that by half past ten, most people would be awake.

"Morning.", Lisa returned the greeting, smiling in spite of her surprise. "Come in."

Accepting the offer Leifang stepped inside, but blushed instantly when she set her eyes on the large bed, which was occupied by Tina. The blonde wore a long white shirt that actually revealed more than it hid.

"Um...I'm not interrupting something, am I?", she asked with a look at Lisa, her expression showing that she was afraid that she was indeed interrupting.

Touching her forehead with a sigh, Lisa shook her head. "Not really. She's been like that ever since last night."

"Well...", Leifang said with a smirk, "She did have a little much last night."

"No.", Lisa corrected her as she sat down at the table, motioning for Leifang to do the same. "She has a little much every night. Talk about alcoholic...geez."

"Well then, lucky her for having someone to watch out for her regardless." Leifang winked at the other woman as she said this, causing Lisa to stare at her hands in embarrassment.

"So...", she eventually said, trying to change the topic which Leifang was surprisingly privy on. "What brings you here?" With a glance at her clock, she grinned. "So early in the morning?"

"Oh, um...you see...", Leifang cast another glance at Tina's sleeping form as she rested her head on her hands, "...first of all, I wanted to apologize to that dork over there...I guess I wasn't...all that nice to her."

The Chinese woman's expression showed clearly how much she hated to apologize, causing Lisa to chuckle. "Don't worry about it. She probably had it comin'. And it's not

like she'll remember much, anyway."

"Still, tell her I'm sorry when she wakes up.", Leifang insisted, but then shrugged and moved on to another topic. "But the real reason I'm here is to invite you two."

"That sounds exciting." Lisa smiled mysteriously, leaning a little forward.

"Don't get your hopes up, I mean a tournament.", Leifang replied without missing a beat, but grinned from ear to ear as she did so. "I'll tell you the rest later, we'll all meet up at Niki Beach at noon."

"All? So everyone's coming?", Lisa asked with raised eyebrows.

"Well, yeah...probably. It's a tournament, after all...kinda."

"You're being a little vague." The American looked doubtful, but her expression softened when Leifang looked at her apologetically.

"Trust me, it'll be fun.", Leifang begged, pressing her hands together in front of her. When Lisa nodded, she stood up from the table, about to leave.

"Alright then, we'll make sure to come.", Lisa replied to the offer, standing up as well to lead the other woman outside. "By the way...you're staying here too?"

"Yeah, and it seems Helena and Christie do, too." Reaching the door, she bowed to leave. However, before she stepped out of the door, she smiled encouragingly at the other woman.

"The beds are great, aren't they?" With a laugh Leifang left the room, leaving a puzzled Lisa behind, who ended up shaking her head with a small smile.

Closing the door again, she turned to look at Tina. It was really time to wake up. Taking the cup of coffee into her hands, she went over to the bed and placed it soundlessly on the nightstand.

"Wake up, sleepy head.", Lisa said quietly, touching Tina's shoulder to shake it lightly.

The blonde stirred in her sleep, but it took another gentle shake to fully wake her up. When she did, her first instinct upon seeing the other woman was to smile. "Mornin'!", she said a little hoarsely, her face twisting slightly at the cotton-like feel of her tongue.

She just looked into Lisa's eyes for a few moments, but then sat up in the bed, clutching her head as she did so. "Ugh, it hurts.", she muttered and sank back against the wall, grimacing as the headache didn't seem to lessen. "This is the worst. I'll never drink again."

"You say that every time, don't you?", Lisa said, but smiled warmly as she handed the other woman the still steaming cup of coffee.

Taking it into her hands, Tina sipped at it, but immediately recoiled at the strong taste. "Y-you like that, don't you?", she asked in between coughs, but continued to drink.

"You just think it's bad because of your hangover. Drink it, it'll help.", Lisa said, ruffling the blonde's hair as she stood up to get herself a cup.

Eying the content of the cup sceptically, the blonde downed the rest in one go, causing her head to hurt even more. Yes, she would definitely never drink another time. "Hit me if I ever touch alcohol again."

"Can't do that.", Lisa laughed as she came back to sit on the edge of the bed. "Your dad would kill me."

Tina had to laugh when Lisa grimaced at these words, but quickly stopped herself in favor of her head's well-being. "He'd never. You know he's loved you ever since you saved my butt back there."

"Yeah, remind me of that bear hug the next time I'm about to do that for you.", Lisa joked, remembering Tina's father with a sense of dread. Not that he wasn't a good guy. But damn, he was strong.

Noticing that Tina had already finished her coffee, she took the cup from her hands and stood up. "A little better already?", she asked lovingly. She knew she was spoiling the blonde too much, but she couldn't help it.

"Only a little.", Tina pouted, but actually felt a lot better already. There was just something about being treated gently when feeling bad instead of getting lectures. Though Lisa really was unusually understanding today. Something was off.

"Say, Lisa...", Tina eventually said, trying to remember the previous evening with little success. "Did something...happen, last night?" Maybe she did something incredibly stupid or embarrassing. She wouldn't know.

Not turning around from where she stood at the table and flipped through a magazine, Lisa could imagine the questioning look the blonde was giving her and laughed. "No way, you were way too out of it. You were fast asleep the second you hit the bed."

"I...actually meant the casino."

Tina could see the other woman blushing even though her skin tone hid it well as she turned to stare at the blonde. "What did you mean?", she asked with arched eyebrows.

Lisa's expression froze as her whole face colored several shades of red.

'Damn that Leifang for putting these thoughts into my head.'

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"Out!"

"But Ayane-chan..."

"OUT!" With one last forceful push, Ayane sent Kasumi out into the hallway even though the only thing the ginger-haired girl was wearing was her underwear.

"I'm sorry, I can explain...", Kasumi pleaded, trying to catch the clothes the other girl was throwing at her. When she caught the last article of her attire, Ayane pointed at her angrily.

"Don't show your face to me ever again!" Rummaging in the pocket of her shorts, the purple-haired girl took out a key and glared at it before flinging it at Kasumi. "And take your key with you!"

The other ninja caught it and placed it on top of the heap of clothes she was carrying. "I just wanted to spend time with you." Her voice was quiet and she seemed close to tears, but Ayane didn't falter.

"Is that your excuse for lying to me? If you're lying, at least make sure that I won't notice!" There was a hint of desperation in her voice as she yelled at her half-sister in spite of the small distance between them.

"If I had told you the truth...", Kasumi said, walking closer to Ayane, who threatened to close the door, but didn't, "you wouldn't have let me in."

It was a statement rather than a question, and Ayane could see small tears in her eyes even though her voice was serious.

She didn't reply. She couldn't. She really wanted to, but her words were the truth. But still, being deceived even for such a small thing...

She had wanted to trust her a little, but she just couldn't. They could never stand on the same ground, just like they could never go back to the way they had once been.

"Uh...um...I'm sorry?" Ayane didn't want to hear a thing, but noticing that this voice didn't belong to Kasumi, she looked to her left and spotted Hitomi.

The German didn't do much to hide her surprise, and upon realizing that she'd been caught staring, laughed sheepishly.

"S-sorry, this is probably really bad timing...", she said, her eyes still darting between the half-sisters, one of whom was hardly dressed. She couldn't even begin to think of what might have happened, and looking at Ayane confirmed her suspicions that she

wouldn't have the time to find out.

"Yes it is. Get lost.", Ayane snarled and waved her hand, motioning for her to disappear.

"What...do you want?", Kasumi asked in a much more friendly voice, heedless of her half-sisters glare as she did so.

"Well...Leifang and I had this idea, and we think it might be fun and-", gulping as she noticed Ayane's impatient and unforgiving eyes on her, Hitomi wondered why it had to be her.

Leifang sure knew how to pick the easy jobs. She would have to get back to her about that.

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It was the right door, she knew. There was no mistaking it. And yet she didn't dare to knock.

'She's my sister, I should at least talk to her once. I can't avoid her forever.', Kokoro thought glumly. She didn't want to, either. It was awkward to avoid her on purpose, but it didn't feel any less strange coming to her room to talk to her when Helena hadn't shown the slightest interest in speaking to her so far.

She had been standing in front of the blonde's room for several minutes now, only the occasional faint sounds from her half-sister's room disrupting the silence.

She felt stupid, too. All of her life she hadn't had the slightest idea that she had a sister, so why would she want to be with her now?

It wasn't just about her being alone, though she admitted to herself that this was part of it, too.

She briefly wondered if she shouldn't have let Hitomi go so soon, but then shook her head. She wouldn't have been able to stand the other girl for another day. Hitomi's thoughts had always been elsewhere, and when Kokoro had found out its cause, she had felt more than a little unneeded. She wasn't about to play the replacement for anyone, and certainly not with the original walking around so close by.

'Hitomi's such an airhead.', she thought, not entirely malevolently.

With a glance at her watch, she sighed. Almost ten minutes. She was hopeless.

"...hey there." Hearing the hesitant greeting from her right, Kokoro turned to look at its possessor and groaned inwardly at the sight.

"Hey...Leifang." Another airhead. She was out of luck today.

However, the Chinese seemed equally uncomfortable about the unexpected meeting. "What are you doing here?", she asked, pointing at the door to Helena's room.

"Nothing.", Kokoro answered without missing a beat, not even looking at the door.

"I see...", Leifang said a little sarcastically, but then shrugged. It wasn't really her business. "Well, I guess it's good I met you here. That way I won't have to search for you."

"...what do you mean?" The Japanese considered herself to be naturally wary around people, but knew that she was probably acting too distanced regardless. Leifang didn't seem to mind in particular, though.

"Oh, um...there's going to be a tournament starting at noon at Niki Beach, and everyone's invited to come. Hitomi came up with the idea, so don't ask me for details, but...we're supposed to compete in pairs and see which one is the best. So...make sure to come, alright?" Leifang didn't force herself to add a nice smile to the explanation, but looked remotely friendly still.

"That sounds nice...", Kokoro said after some deliberation, but then smiled awkwardly and looked away. "I don't have a partner, though, so I guess I won't-"

"Don't expect me to feel sorry for you.", Leifang sharply cut in before the other woman could finish the sentence, but then softened slightly. She knew she wasn't being fair, but could do little to suppress the leftover resentment. Hitomi would probably tell her to forget about it.

"But I guess one team of three would be alright...it's not like there's much of a choice." There was a flicker of relief on Kokoro's face as Leifang said this, causing the Chinese to look at the other woman dangerously to make clear that she hadn't meant herself. Or Hitomi.

"Just see if someone takes you. And while you're at it, tell Helena and Christie about the tournament, too. I'm no good talking to those two." Coming from Leifang it sounded like a brazen request, but Kokoro quickly nodded her head, taking the hint. "Will do."

"Good. See ya around, then." Without another word, Leifang turned and left Kokoro in the same situation as before.

Well, almost. Now having a plausible reason to be in front of Helena's door in the first place, she had no problem at all to simply move her hand forward and knock.

Allowing herself one last deep breath, she put on a bright smile as the door opened.

"Hi, I hope I didn't wake you. I'm here to tell you about-", she started while bowing forward politely, but stopped at once when she lifted her head again to look at the person in front of her. It wasn't her sister.

Christie seemed slightly confused by Kokoro's energetic greeting, but didn't say anything in response and simply stood in front of the smaller girl.

"Ah..um...I'm sorry! Maybe I got the wrong door...?", Kokoro quickly said, racking her brain to understand exactly what had just gone wrong.

She wanted to see Helena, but instead, there was Christie at the door. Did she really get the wrong door? She was pretty sure she didn't. And in the first place, did Christie's presence completely negate Helena's? She didn't know.

Kokoro was almost about to bow and run for it when she heard a familiar voice from behind the white-haired woman. "Who is it?"

Again, Christie didn't say anything, but gave a slight smile as she stepped to the side to allow the blonde to see their guest.

"Kokoro...", Helena breathed as she regarded her half-sister. She had expected anyone but her and wasn't sure whether to be angry or glad. Kokoro shouldn't be here, but at the same time, she was glad to see her. She hadn't had any time to explain anything, the last time they had met.

Pulling the dressing gown she was wearing tighter around herself, she stepped closer to the door. She eyed Christie warily as she did so, but still managed a soft smile at the sight of Kokoro.

"What brings you here, Kokoro?", she asked, but at the same time lifted her hand invitingly. "Please come in."

"I...uh..." Equally as astounded as fascinated by the unexpected display of kindness, Kokoro followed her sister inside, where she was directed to a large table near a broad-paneled window.

"Do you want something to drink?", Helena asked with reassuring eyes, but in spite of the question sat down in front of her guest.

"...tea, maybe..." Bothered by her own apparent weakness in unfamiliar situations, Kokoro didn't meet Helena's eyes.

"Do you like green tea?" Helena had a knowing smile on her lips as she asked this, and received a simple nod in response. "Good." Instead of standing up, however, she cast a quick glance at Christie, who simply shrugged in return and went to prepare two cups of tea.

Kokoro would have expected her sister to repeat her previous question, but the blonde remained silent, seemingly satisfied with just sitting together at the table the way they did right in this moment. She didn't seem uncomfortable at all, but Kokoro felt all the more so.

"Um...Leifang told me to come here. She said something about a tournament." Seeing Helena's expression fall after saying this, Kokoro knew she should have said something else instead. She wasn't here because of that, after all. But having Christie around made her even more nervous than she already was, and she was secretly grateful to the Chinese woman to have given her this alternative.

"Is that so?" Helena didn't seem very interested, and as Christie set both cups of tea onto the table, she seemed similarly indifferent.

"Yeah...she said something about pairs and...well, I'm not really sure what she meant, but she told us to meet everyone at Niki Beach at noon. So...I simply came to tell you."

"Thanks...Kokoro. But I don't think-" Helena shook her head slightly as she said this, but was interrupted by Christie.

"We'll come. Thanks for telling us." The blonde didn't like the way Christie suddenly smiled at Kokoro as she said this, but didn't say anything.

"That's good." Sipping at her tea, which tasted surprisingly nice, Kokoro looked away self-consciously. When she finished, she set the cup back with a grateful nod. "Thanks for the tea. I guess...I'll see you at the beach, then."

"...yes." Helena finished her own cup with as much elegance as her sister expected of her, but put the cup back onto the table with a little too much force, which Kokoro immediately took as her sign to leave. Standing up from the table, she excused herself with a quick bow and then went in direction of the door, Christie following her. Things hadn't gone quite as well as she would have liked, but she still managed a smile.

"See you at the beach.", Christie said as the Japanese girl stepped out of the door, still the same mysterious expression on her face. While Kokoro had thought the white-haired woman to appear rather cold and distanced at first, she seemed rather amiable now.

"Yeah, see you." With another bow, Kokoro left and Christie closed the door. The small smile refused to leave her face even as she turned around and looked at Helena.

"Your sister is cute.", she said, the almost playful undertone of these words sending a shiver down Helena's spine and her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Don't you dare to lay a hand on her.", she found herself hissing, masking her surprise at the British woman's knowledge. She didn't know how Christie knew of her relation to Kokoro. Nobody but the two of them did, and the blonde was sure that she hadn't mentioned anything of the sort. But this was Christie, and Helena chided herself for inwardly underestimating her. "...how much do you know of her?" Even she, as her half-sister, knew next to nothing about her.

Seeming obviously pleased to see the blonde so nervous, Christie walked past her with an indifferent shrug. "Not much. She's not the reason I'm here."

This was their game. The hints, the allusions. The illusions. But today, Helena was tired of it. The Briton could tell by the dull expression of the other woman, which was devoid of the usual pride and self-assuredness that always seemed to overpower the threat that was her.

"I know.", she simply said and turned away, hiding her face from Christie's view.

"Of course you do." Disregarding the blonde's solemn behavior and the lack of any of the stubborn counters that she had gotten so used to, Christie walked over to Helena's dresser and opened the doors in a wide arc, just as though it was hers.

After a quick assessment of its contents, she picked out a scant, all-white bikini, which she promptly handed the other woman. It was the Jasper swimsuit she had given her two days ago, though the blonde hadn't worn it even once since then. Christie knew perfectly well that Helena didn't like it, but pushed it toward her regardless.

"So let's play.", she said, picking one of Helena's suits for herself. It was all black, not revealing too much but not hiding much, either. The matador.

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Everyone had come. It was still a little early, but everyone had come to Niki Beach to see what this 'tournament' was really about.

Looking around, Leifang spotted Tina and Lisa fooling around at the shore in their trademark American-styled swimsuits, Lisa actually wearing the more daring one. The Chinese had to admit that they looked kind of cute with their almost 'partner-look' choice of wear.

Ayane and Kasumi to her other side were also already present, but after the few minutes of waiting, Ayane already looked as bored as though it had been three hours.

Helena and Christie however looked impassive as ever, and Leifang was secretly grateful for it. The bold outfits they were wearing did raise some eyebrows, but it was to be expected. They were literally the odd ones out, and if they didn't dare to wear something like this, one would probably have to worry.

Despite that, it didn't go by her that Helena didn't seem comfortable in her suit at all.

"How long does she take?" The nagging voice to her left, who had asked the same question for the last five minutes, was Kokoro. With her arms crossed and her right foot tapping the ground with increasing speed, she looked in direction of Hitomi's cottage.

"How would I know? She said she'd be here on time." So far Leifang had pretended not to notice the pearls of sweat on her forehead quite successfully, but she really wished Hitomi would just hurry up already. She hated being the only one left alone

among all the others, without knowing any more about the tournament than they did.

Ayane was already shooting highly impatient side glances at her, which, while not bothering her per se, did make her feel a little...vulnerable.

...not that she was scared. God, no. Just...uncomfortable. A little nervous, maybe.

And she had the sinking feeling that Hitomi was letting her wait like this on purpose, which didn't make things easier.

"Lei!"

Finally hearing the desired voice behind her, the Chinese immediately turned around. "Geez, what took you so long?", she found herself asking even before she looked at her friend. As she did, though, she closed her mouth again and shook her head.

Clad in her favorite swimsuit consisting of a dark blue shirt and yellow bottoms, her friend also sported a bright yellow sun visor and completed her outfit with a stopwatch and a notepad.

"...you're serious about this, aren't you?", Leifang asked, but couldn't suppress a grin. Her friend looked every bit like a sports camp instructor, though not necessarily negatively so.

With one last wink aimed at her Chinese friend, Hitomi turned to the others with an apologetic smile. "Sorry I came so late, but we can start now."

"About time.", Kokoro mumbled in feigned disinterest.

"So what is this about?" Kasumi was the first to ask this question, looking genuinely interested.

"Well..." With a confident expression and her hands on her hips, Hitomi smiled knowingly, having expected this question. "The rules for this tournament are really simple. We'll all split up into teams of two and then compete in all of the seven events. Which will be..." Raising her hands, she counted with her fingers as she mentioned each of them.

"Beach Flags, Water Slide, Pool-Hopping, Tug-of-War, Jet Ski, Butt Battle and Beach Volleyball, of course. Points will be given from three to one, and the pair with the most points in the end wins. Careful, though. Most events are for one player only, so the pair has to decide on the one to compete. I hope you all know each other well enough for that." With an impish smile, Hitomi shot a suggestive glance at Leifang before continuing.

"This is just for fun, so I can't promise you a huge sum of money as a reward if two of you were to win...but I hope everyone of you has enough fighting spirit to participate in spite of that." Concluding her bold no-nonsense explanation of the tournament, Hitomi dared to look at the faces around her. The reception...varied.

"Ooh! Like the Olympic Games!", Tina was the first to exclaim, clapping her hands together excitedly. However, her explosive joy was quickly subdued by an incoming headache, causing her to wince and clutch her head. Leifang found herself chuckling at the sight, mainly because she too, had thought of that at first, but also because it was...well, Tina. She couldn't even remember how she had gotten so angry the previous evening. It made no sense whatsoever.

"Not quite that grand, but...close enough. I promise it'll be fun.", Hitomi said, giving the victory sign.

"Count us in, then.", Lisa spoke for herself and her partner as she put her arm around the blonde, giving Hitomi the thumbs up.

"Though there's no point to compete if there's no prize, is there? Just a waste of time.", Ayane then said, stepping forward. Helena nodded at that remark, indicating that she thought the same. There was no sense in doing this without a prize. She didn't have the nerve for this.

The look on Hitomi's face told them that while having expected this kind of comment, she hadn't come up with a suitable response yet. Leifang wanted to help her out, but she too, couldn't find a good argument.

They were right, of course. It was just that she had thought that it was the idea that counted, so that they could have fun even without spectacular prizes and a fortune in prospect.

"If you want to gain something from this, shouldn't you be the first to offer something in return?" To everyone's surprise, Kokoro spoke up, glaring at Ayane as well as her half-sister. "If you want your win to be somebody else's loss, then it should work the other way around, too."

While Ayane merely scowled at that remark, Helena bore a look of embarrassment, looking away from Kokoro. Both of them uttered nothing in response.

"So I guess that's settled.", the young geisha concluded.

Hitomi breathed a sigh of relief, and even Leifang let a flicker of gratefulness cross her features as she looked at Kokoro.

"...let's make a bet, then." Everyone's head turned to look at Tina, who had made the suggestion.

"What kind of bet?" Ayane didn't even try to mask her utter dislike for the blonde American. And judging from Tina's grin, she was either dumb or had completely forgotten about all of the events on the previous day to not even twitch at the glare she was subjected to.

"Let's just say that the winnin' pair can make the losing pair do anythin' they want.

Does that sound interesting enough for ya?" Lisa's eyes grew wide as she listened to her partner's words. For some reason, this seemed like a really bad idea. The wicked look on Ayane's face didn't help things, either.

"You sure about this, Tina? Maybe it's a little...", she whispered, only for the blonde next to her to hear.

"Absolutely. Just trust me.", Tina answered in an equally low voice, before directly pointing at Ayane. "So? Are you up to it or are you...scared?"

"I hope you know that you're going to regret this.", was all the purple-haired ninja said to this, agreeing to the bet.

"Of course.", Tina said coolly. "That alright with you?" She looked alternately at Hitomi and Leifang on one side, and Helena and Christie on the other.

"S-sure...", Hitomi agreed a little reluctantly, her eyes searching for Leifang. "Right?"

"Fine with me.", the Chinese woman said, her twinkling eyes the only indicator that she actually loved the idea. She looked at Helena and Christie opposite her, arching her brow at the uncommunicative pair. "Are you okay with this, as well?"

Helena didn't answer directly, but shrugged and looked at Christie to her side, indicating for her to decide as she always seemed to do. Her arms were crossed in front of her and, as always, she didn't look too happy, though the only one who seemed to see that was Kokoro.

"We accept.", Christie answered with a nod of her head, allowing the small hint of a smile to cross her face which only ever appeared when she was excited.

"Great! Then everything's settled!", Hitomi cheered and took her notepad, quickly scribbling down some notes. "I guess the teams are obvious?", she asked, taking a quick look around. All of the four pairs stood close to each other, leaving little doubt as to whom they preferred to play with. There was one exception, though.

"So...I guess I'll be the referee or something? I mean...well...", Kokoro said, but simply shrugged when she didn't find the words. It had been obvious all the time, but she felt she had to point it out again, even though everyone else had done well to overlook the fact that she was, in fact, the only one without a partner. She tried her best to look indifferent, but wondered whether or not she really did a good job at hiding her disappointment.

Looking at Hitomi's face though, she didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. The other girl looked genuinely surprised, and as her eyes darted around to count all of the people present, her eyes widening as the realization hit her, Kokoro couldn't even bring herself to be mad at her. God, but she was hopeless.

"Please don't tell me you really forgot her.", Leifang muttered under her breath, standing right next to the German. She knew that it was partially her fault too, but she

wouldn't have guessed that the situation would turn out quite as...awkward as this.

"No! I mean...I thought...you know? I didn't really think...", Hitomi mumbled, pearls of sweat appearing on her forehead. It wasn't that she had forgotten about her on purpose, just...

Leifang groaned inwardly at her helpless partner, as well as the only option to remedy this situation occurred to her. She didn't like it, but there wasn't really any alternative. If none of the other teams wanted her, then...

"What are you doing, Koko? Come here." Just before Leifang could open her mouth to invite the Japanese girl over, the one she would have least expected to called the girl by a nickname, and grabbed her wrist to draw her over to herself and her partner.

It was Christie. In open-mouthed surprise, Leifang stared at the white-haired woman who gently led Kokoro over to herself and Helena, who seemed equally surprised.

Realizing she was being stared at by everyone around her, Christie lifted her head and met everyone's gaze confidently, but friendly. "She's with us, of course."

Looking directly at Hitomi, she saw the most grateful expression she had ever seen directed at herself, and as she let Kokoro stand right in between herself and her half-sister, she could see that those two were pleasantly surprised as well. Though if left alone, none of the two would have extended their hands toward each other. It was almost funny.

"O-of course. Right. Great.", Hitomi said and nodded eagerly, still looking embarrassed. "I-I guess we can start, then." Quickly scribbling down each pair on her notepad, she made a tally sheet with all of the events and everyone's name on it.

"So what's the first event? Don't leave us all excited like that.", Tina asked impatiently, causing Hitomi to smile.

"Let's start with something easy. Pool-hopping!"

"Easy, you say..." Leifang groaned at the suggestion, but smiled nonetheless. Linking her arm with Hitomi's, she elbowed her friend playfully. "I'll let you do that, so let's go."

Arm in arm, they led the way to the pool, the other pairs following them at a small distance.

"Aren't those two cute?", Tina sang quietly as she imitated their pose and also linked arms with Lisa.

"...y-yeah.", the dark-skinned woman stuttered in surprise, but didn't object to the intimacy.

"I wonder if they'll be able to win their own tournament?", the blonde wondered

aloud, causing Lisa to look at her sternly.

"Tina! I thought you were sure that we would win? What if we lose?", Lisa asked, actually a little worried. "That Ayane...she seemed really serious."

"Don't you worry.", Tina said with a wave of her hand, smiling. "I'll make sure we won't."

"How so?" Not that Lisa actually thought that they would necessarily lose. She simply dreaded the unlikely event that they would. Stranger things had happened.

"How? Well..." With a mysterious gleam in her eyes, Tina leaned close to the other woman, drawing her head close to her own to whisper into Lisa's ear.

Her message was short, but by the time she finished, Lisa's face was considerably redder than before, and Tina couldn't help but giggle at her achievement, poking her partner's nose like a little child's.

"That should do it, right?", she asked, but turned her head away before Lisa could answer and quickened her pace to catch up to Hitomi and Leifang in front of them.

Left behind with her beet red face and her mind in utter disarray, Lisa needed a few moments before she also caught up to them.

Winning seemed just a little bit easier now. She could do it. Probably.

Even farther behind, Ayane and Kasumi walked side by side, though none of the two made any advances to touch or even walk close to each other.

"Is it...alright?", the ginger-haired ninja asked softly, not daring to look at Ayane, who hadn't spoken a single word to her since morning.

Ayane didn't intend to answer at first, but as she saw her half-sister's shoulders falling more the longer the silence between them lasted, she decided do at least this much. "What do you mean?"

Her voice was cold as usual, and even though Kasumi had heard it many times, she could never get used to it. It stung every single time.

"About us being a...team. You don't mind?" The words her sister had said in the morning still rang in her ears, but even though Ayane had made it clear that she didn't want her around anymore, she hadn't objected to them being a pair in this tournament. Though Kasumi knew that this didn't equal acceptance, either.

The younger girl sighed at this question, but Kasumi couldn't see her face as she now walked two steps behind her. "As long as you don't hold me back."

Even though those words were spoken as coldly as ever, they managed to bring a small smile to Kasumi's lips. "I won't, I promise."

Holding her sister back was the last thing she wanted to do. Even though they were here on this island, the battle didn't seem to end, the competitions were always between them.

But she knew. She knew that they only ever got close through fighting, it was simply their means of communication. So fighting was what she was going to do.

And Ayane knew this, too. "...I'll forgive you, if we win.", the purple-haired ninja said after a while, forcing herself to sound indifferent.

"We'll win, then." Kasumi didn't know how, yet, but it didn't matter. They would.

With this promise between them, Kasumi quickly took the few steps necessary to be right next to Ayane. It was enough progress for a day.

But even so, she couldn't help but be filled with envy as she watched the other pairs in front of them. She wanted to be there, she really did. But it was a long way.

With those three teams off in their own worlds, none of them noticed the last group falling behind as they made their way along the shore at a slower pace than the others.

Kokoro was at the front, humming a faint melody as her steps sounded clearly in the shallow water.

"Thanks, for earlier.", she eventually said as she turned around to look at the women behind her, overcoming the silence.

"You're welcome.", Christie answered, causing the younger girl to giggle as she bowed deeply as she said this.

"You're funny.", Kokoro said, eyeing the Briton with a grin. "But really, thanks."

"You will have to pay for it, though.", Christie then said, returning the grin with what seemed like outright malice. The sharp intake of breath that followed by Helena was expected, as well as Kokoro's puzzled and slightly wary expression.

"You see...", she white-haired woman explained, "I'm terribly untalented when it comes to pool games, and your sister here..." Carefully putting emphasis on the word "sister", she watched Helena's face darken even more and relished her achievement. "She feels a little unwell today. So we'll be counting on you."

More than the surprise of Christie knowing about her and Helena, Kokoro found herself looking at her half-sister to see her condition. She hadn't noticed until now and had taken it as simple unwillingness to talk to her, but she did seem a little ill. She couldn't look at her for long, though, for as soon as Helena noticed her stares, she turned away.

"Oh...um...I got it. I'll give it my best." Putting on a smile to not seem too worried, Kokoro ran a little ahead of them before turning around again. "I'll catch up with the rest so I won't miss the start. You two take your time." Without even waiting for an answer, Kokoro ran away from them and toward the other teams.

"Well, that was easier than expected.", Christie said once Kokoro was out of earshot, falling a step behind to walk right next to Helena, who eyed her angrily.

"You're a great actress.", she said, the edge with which those words were spoken making it impossible to miss the accusation behind it.

Everyone had noticed. Everyone had stared when Christie had suddenly smiled like that, talking to Kokoro as though they had been best friends for years. As though everything was normal.

They had all noticed, but no one had seemed to mind.

Christie wasn't fazed by Helena's words in the least, simply laughing hollowly. "You too."

Not having expected that kind of response, Helena came to a sudden halt and directly stared at Christie. "What do you mean?" She wasn't in the mood for games.

"Don't play dumb.", Christie said warningly, stepping closer to the blonde. "You can fool your sister, but not me."

"If you see that, then you should also know why." So she had noticed. Christie knew how she longed to talk to her sister, to be with her. But she couldn't bring herself to overcome this wall because she knew that it wouldn't last. Some things couldn't end well.

"Show me that you can win for yourself, and you won't need to fool her." This was the last thing Christie said before walking to the pool, leaving Helena alone to decide whether to follow her or stay away.

The blonde wanted to ask what she had meant, but by the time she had processed her answer, she was already gone.

And after taking a deep breath, Helena followed her. Because even though she couldn't be with her, she couldn't be without her, either.

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"Damn, it's so hot I almost want to lose this game."

The sun was at its peak and shone unhindered onto their heads, and as the group of nine eventually assembled at the poolside, most of them wore a telltale expression as they looked at the cool, clear water.

Tina, who had been the loudest one complaining about the heat in spite of her supposed acclimatization to this kind of weather, was about to leap right into the water when Lisa's hand firmly stopped her.

"Don't. If you're wet, you'll slip right off the pads when the game starts.", she said firmly.

"True...", the blonde admitted, eyeing the floating pads on the pool's surface not far away from her. "...but I'm hot, thirsty, and my head hurts."

Lisa had to chuckle at her partner's childish antics and patted her head accordingly. "I'll get you something to drink, just bear with the rest for a little longer."

With that, she went over to the bar to get refreshments. She was sure Tina would prefer a cold beer, but Lisa was aiming for fruit drinks instead.

Meeting Leifang halfway, she stopped in her tracks and nodded at the other woman.

"I wouldn't go there now.", Leifang said, pointing at the bar behind her, which seemed to be quite busy at the moment in dealing with the other women, who downed the drinks as though there was no tomorrow. "Take that instead."

Handing Lisa one of the two orange juices she was holding, she nodded in direction of Tina. "She seems to need it more than I do."

"Thanks. You're awfully considerate." Lisa meant it as a joke, but Leifang looked genuinely apologetic in response.

"I'll have to make up for it somehow.", she said, but chuckled softly with another glance at Tina, who lay sprawled out on a sun bed, looking dead to the world until further notice.

"But really, your partner has the worst hangover. Are you sure it's okay to let her do the pool-hopping of all things?", she added mockingly, causing Lisa to smile as well.

"She said it was alright. And I feel better letting her do the pool hopping instead of Jet Ski later. She'd drown or be run over."

"Or both.", Leifang joked, and just barely escaped a mild punch on her shoulder.

After that, the Chinese returned to her own partner, who in all honesty didn't look all that much better than her American counterpart.

"Here, drink up. You don't want to set a bad example from the first event onwards, do you?", she asked Hitomi, who took the drink gratefully and emptied the glass with a few gulps.

"Nah, it's not that bad. I'm fine." As though to prove that, Hitomi leaped up from the sun bed and clapped her hands together. "We could start right now."

The 'right now' quickly evolved into half an hour though, due to a certain someone falling asleep in the sun and not feeling a bit better after waking up.

Though eventually everyone was ready and the four contestants lined up at the edge of the pool, the other five watching them from the sun beds.

"I'm up against...", Hitomi mumbled, staring at the small scrap of paper in her hand. It bore a bold cross and, looking around, Hitomi quickly found the other person with the same mark. "Kokoro."

That combination left Tina and Ayane to compete against each other, as well. None of them looked particularly pleased, though Tina still managed a smile, if just to spite the purple-haired girl. "Let's get crackin'!"

And with that, the game began.

In the end, it was a surprisingly short affair. Each round of pool-hopping took less than a minute, and while Hitomi won against Kokoro in the first run, Ayane lost against Tina in the second, to the shock of many, but most of all herself.

The subsequent battle between Hitomi and Tina went well for Hitomi, if only for the fact that Tina messed up the start so badly that it was a miracle that she even reached the middle of the course by the time Hitomi set foot on the other side. The blonde was also the only one actually proud of that fact.

The fight for the third place then started out with Kokoro and Ayane running across the surface of the water head-to-head, though Kokoro decided the race for herself at the last second.

Ayane would later deny the fact that she was distracted by someone shouting "Ayane-chan!" all across the poolside.

When the game was over, Leifang immediately jumped up from her sun bed and ran over to her partner, grinning from ear to ear.

"Looking good!", she called out, giving the victory sign.

Getting out of the pool into which Tina had pulled her only moments ago, Hitomi looked down at herself and smiled saucily. "What? Me or our score?"

Instead of falling for the German's trap, Leifang walked closer to her partner and drew her to herself. "Both.", she whispered in a sultry voice, but cut Hitomi's following giggle short by pushing her back into the pool.

Hitomi needed a few moments to emerge again, but when she did, her face was covered by her hair and she was laughing merrily.

"Great. Let's get to Jet Ski, then."

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"Wow, those things are fast!" Never having actually used a Jet Ski before, Leifang stood a little wobbly on the machine, only making very tentative use of the accelerator.

"You'll better get used to it quickly. The route your partner picked out for us is one of the hardest." Lisa watched the other woman's first attempts to drive a Jet Ski with a sympathetic smile.

"That's so typical of her, isn't it? I always get shafted.", Leifang complained meekly but smiled nevertheless in amazement. She had to concentrate on keeping her balance, but found that she was growing accustomed to it quickly. She was secretly grateful that the weather was perfect today. She didn't want to imagine how much harder it would be to learn this under lesser circumstances.

Daring to look up from the handlebar for a few moments, she watched the test runs of the other two participants: Kokoro and Kasumi.

While Kokoro seemed rather confident and experienced, Kasumi looked about as unsure as she herself did, only steering the machine at a very moderate pace.

"I admit this seems a little unfair.", Lisa said as she circled Leifang playfully. "Just don't blame me in the end."

"Aren't you a little overconfident?", the Chinese asked, finally having gotten the hang of the cornering ability of her flaming red Jet Ski.

Though if she pulled hard on the accelerator, it was so loud she could barely hear her own words. "It doesn't have anything to do with Tina, does it?", she shouted loud enough for the American to hear as she whizzed past her.

"...wait...how do you know that?", Lisa called after her, halting her machine in surprise.

Leifang did a sharp turn and came back to the other woman, grinning at her achievement to both maneuver the Jet Ski as well as seeing right through Lisa.

"Oh, please. You've been all pumped up ever since the tournament started, Tina must have told you something. I wonder what it is..." She sang the last bit, succeeding in causing the other woman's cheeks to flush.

Looking back to the shore about seventy meters away from them, Lisa's eyes searched for her partner, who seemed to be watching them along with the others. "It's...just a small encouragement, really."

"You call a kiss a small encouragement?", Leifang asked, regarding Lisa with a look of utter scandalization.

If it was possible for the dark-skinned woman's face to get even redder, it did. "H-how do you know all this?" She was pretty sure that nobody had heard the two of them. So how came Leifang knew everything?

"I didn't.", Leifang grinned, sticking her tongue out. "Now I do, though. Thanks."

Despite being embarrassed, Lisa had to laugh out loud at being tricked like that. To fall for such a childish trap, she probably really behaved like one herself.

She didn't feel bad about it, though. She wanted to be like that, sometimes. To feel nervous when being around her, to be at a loss for words whenever she teased her mercilessly, to feel her heart flutter whenever she was close.

"So, don't you have a similar prize waiting for you? I bet with your partner setting up this whole thing, she has something in store for you?", Lisa asked with newfound confidence. There really was no need to be embarrassed.

"With Hitomi? Never.", Leifang immediately denied and crossed her hands in negation. Receiving a sign from Kasumi that they were about to start, she waved in understanding before turning back to Lisa. "She wouldn't...she's not like that." She tried to laugh as she said this, but out came only a soft chuckle.

"You sure?"

Thinking back to the incident earlier that day, Leifang nodded. "Pretty much, yeah." When a tinge of sadness threatened to overcome her, Leifang quickly shook her head to rid herself of these thoughts.

"With you at her side, she must be the biggest dork, then." After saying this, Lisa revved up the engine with a broad smile and brushed past the Chinese woman on the way to the starting point.

"...yeah. She really is, isn't she?" Seeing that the other three were already lined up, Leifang followed suit. And as the race was about to begin, even she felt a little excited. She didn't have anything to lose.

But then, there was always such a thing as 'fate'.

Which also tended to be called 'bad luck' by people who didn't believe in the former.

Leifang was one of those. She didn't believe in not being able to do something. Everything was possible, it was as simple as that.

Though sometimes, just sometimes, the will alone was not enough. Leifang had never reached her own limits like she had today. And it had never felt worse.

The course was riddled with obstacles of various kinds, and both women came face to face with too many of them to count. Rocks, ramps, buoys, they took it all.

Though in all honesty, the obstacles hadn't even been the real problem.

Their loss was the obvious result. They lost the game terribly. Horribly, miserably, so badly that Leifang was glad that most of the course wasn't visible from the shore while Lisa seemed more concerned with the fact that she had to actually tow her Jet Ski to the finish line in the end.

"Not a...word to Hitomi...about this.", Leifang panted as she dragged her machine through the ankle-deep water at the shore. She bore a few slight scratches and bruises on her arms and legs, but didn't seem to notice them at all.

"Same here.", Lisa replied, staring at the ground. "I'm never going to live it down if Tina finds out I lost because of Kasumi's...you know." Her cheeks flushed a bright red as she said this, and she cursed herself inwardly for her weakness.

"That woman is...dangerous.", the Chinese woman hissed as she finally pulled her heavy Jet Ski far enough onto the beach to prevent it from drifting off again.

Not that it mattered, really.

"Tell me about it." Lisa huffed, heaving her own demolished vehicle onto the sand.

"I swear she lost it on purpose..." Wringing her soaked hair, Leifang grimaced when she saw the others rushing toward them, eager to learn of the results.

"You really think?", Lisa asked, but after a short pause shook her head. "Yeah, she probably would." To think that she actually fell for that, it was ridiculous. This was the worst.

"Lei!" "Lisa!" Hearing both of their partners' shouts, they put on the best smile that they could manage as the small group of spectators approached.

"How did the game go? Who wo-", Hitomi shouted while still running, but quickly stopped herself as she got a closer look of the two and their Jet Skis. "E-everything alright?", she asked, quite visibly shocked.

And Tina, too, looked worried at the sight of their wounds, but all the more so as she inspected the machines a little more closely, finding one completely wrecked and the other one in the worst shape imaginable while still running.

"Did you...hit a rock or something?" Tina looked genuinely worried as she pointed to the smashed vehicles.

'Rock bottom, more like.' Lisa thought in defeat, but nodded. "Y-yeah."

"Those curves...were wicked.", Leifang admitted, but didn't dare to look either Hitomi or Tina in the eyes. As she averted her gaze from them, however, she caught Kokoro looking at her in the distance. She smiled and stuck her tongue out at her.

"Ouch."

"Does it hurt?", Hitomi asked, but instantly regretted her unnecessary question. "Of course it does. I'm sorry for making you do this." Stepping closer to the Chinese woman, she embraced her carefully. "Is it that bad?"

"N-no. It's okay.", Leifang denied, allowing Hitomi to tighten the hug a little. Despite being a guilty pleasure, it felt good, and Leifang only drew back as she saw Lisa and Tina grinning at her, unknown to Hitomi.

"Y-you know, still better than you getting hurt, right? Haha."

Never mind that Hitomi wouldn't have gotten into this kind of situation in the first place, and Lisa's broad smile behind Hitomi's back told her as much.

"So, where's the winner anyway?", Tina eventually asked, planting a spontaneous 'get well' kiss on her partner's forehead.

"A-ah..."

In the distance, a certain topless ninja could be seen making a mad dash for the Moonlight Reef.

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"It's me." Kasumi knew that she didn't need to say this as she knocked at the door for the third time, but did so regardless. As expected, she didn't get a direct response, so she continued on.

It was well past the end of the Jet Ski race, and she had gone straight to her room for a shower and a change of clothes, but now she was in front of Ayane's room again, trying to get past the door that stood in her way.

It was always the same. Things got into her way, people got into her way. And feelings got into her way, more so than anything.

And right now, Kasumi found that this door resembled the imaginary wall between her and her half-sister perfectly.

It stood never open, though she knew that it could be opened. She was never invited in, but wanted to enter still. And if it took a thousand tries to overcome this wall, she would do it. For she could be just as stubborn.

After a few more consecutive knocks, the door opened and Ayane stood in front of her with the same look of distaste on her face as always. She didn't even need to ask what Kasumi wanted, the way the older girl looked at her said it all.

"Don't tell me you lost your key again.", she said warningly, but Kasumi could still hear the undertone of disappointment in her voice, reminding her of their fight in the morning.

Taking a deep breath, Kasumi shook her head. The downside of tricks was that they only worked once. But honesty could get you anywhere, as often as you wanted.

"No, I won't lie anymore." Looking directly into her half-sister's eyes, she managed a weak smile at being met with utter distrust.

"I...like being with you, Ayane." Careful to avoid the suffix her sister hated so much, she allowed herself to look a little hopeful. "So I'd like to stay here again, tonight. If...if you don't mind."

Instead of doing something that would make this situation easier, Ayane made a face at her sister's supposed truth. "You already know that I do mind and yet you come."

She didn't even know why she was being so harsh. She told herself that it had all to do with today's events, but knew that this wasn't entirely true. But she was so used to it by now, she didn't know how to be any other way around her.

"Is that so...", Kasumi mumbled to herself, but instead of giving up and leaving, quickly stepped forward and hugged her unsuspecting half-sister.

Caught completely off guard, Ayane didn't struggle against the sudden contact, but didn't return the gesture either. She wasn't sure whether she waited for Kasumi to let go again, or do something else.

"But...you said you would let me be with you if I did well. I won the Jet Ski race, you know.", the ginger-haired girl said in a whisper, leaning close to Ayane's ear.

She had promised something like that. She had said that she wouldn't be mad anymore, if only to get Kasumi to fight to her fullest. But she was so sick of her own overarching ego right now, that she found she was even angrier than before. At Kasumi, for simply being who she was, and at herself too, for not being able to change the way she was.

"...I never said that.", Ayane retorted after a small pause, momentarily trying to push the other girl away from her. Kasumi's grip around her only tightened, however, so she let her.

She didn't like it, but she liked it.

Staying like this for a few more moments, neither of them uttered a word, or dared to move. It felt strange to both of them, though for different reasons.

Eventually, Kasumi loosened her arms around her sister's body, but when Ayane made no attempt to step away from her, she smiled softly. "Let me stay...okay?"

It seemed like a question, but it wasn't. There was an obligation to it that the purple-haired girl couldn't quite place, but complied to nonetheless.

"Fine."

There were so many things she hated about her. The way she always got what she wanted without doing anything for it. How she always played dumb but was the one who knew the most. And most of all, her way of sneaking around other people's barriers for as long as it took to find the weak spot. She hated how Kasumi did all those things, and still beat her in everything they did. Without trying, without giving it any credit.

She hated those things about her, loathed them with a passion.

But then, there was this smile, this touch, this look in her eyes. Those memories. She wanted to hate it, but couldn't.

Kasumi didn't need to respond, didn't say 'thank you', or smile in gratitude as she achieved her goal and watched Ayane step to the side.

However, as Ayane closed the door behind her half-sister, two words came across the elder sister's lips.

"I'm home."

## Kapitel 3: Love spelled backwards

"S-so...whose idea was this, again?"

It was a completely rhetorical question, since Leifang knew just who had thought of including the water slide into the tournament. She just wanted to make absolutely sure who it was that would be receiving the bill for her burial.

"Come on, Lei, it only looks so...bad." It was meant reassuringly, but even Hitomi had pearls of sweat on her forehead as she looked at the giant water slide from up close.

It wasn't just the height of seventy meters that was intimidating. Her fear had more to do with the fact that the whole water slide was devoid of any sort of guard. If one were to go too fast, there would be no stopping the fall that would surely follow.

"Is that so?", Leifang asked, not hiding her skepticism. "I heard there have been...casualties."

"Y-you're kidding, right?" Hitomi's eyes still fixed on the long slide, she gulped. She couldn't do this.

The group of nine had completely assembled in the forest at the base of the water slide, and each of the contestants seemed to have a different take on the upcoming event.

"Don't worry, guys!", Tina then spoke up, patting both Hitomi's and Leifang's backs as she came to stand in between them to also look at the long plastic tube. "If you fly out of the curve, just make sure to hold onto the rail or nearby branches or something. If you don't...well, it hurts a little to hit the ground from this height."

The pair simply gaped at the blonde's statement, trying hard not to imagine this worst-case scenario.

"You sound as though you've experienced it.", Hitomi eventually said with a slightly forced chuckle. She couldn't be this 'casualty' Leifang had talked about, could she? No, impossible.

"She has." Lisa came to stand to their side, joining in their collective view at the construction that mocked all safety standards. "I swear she took a few years of my life, there.", she added with a decisive look at her partner.

"Ah, it was nothing.", Tina laughed and shrugged it off. "The scratches healed in a flash. I'll do better this time."

"No you won't." Lisa had thought it had been obvious, but Tina seemingly hadn't caught on. "I'll do this.", the dark-skinned woman said flatly, allowing no opposition.

Tina had half a mind to argue, but shut her mouth upon seeing Lisa's serious expression. Her lips curled up in a cocky smile. "You're too overprotective... honey."

The last word was more than enough to set Lisa's cheeks on fire, but she reacted swiftly and turned away before it became too obvious. "I'm worried, is all."

With that, she was the first one to climb up the stairs that led up to the top of the water slide. Kasumi eventually followed, casting a long glance at her partner as she ascended, who didn't seem to be in the best shape this early in the morning.

Helena looked similar, but still stepped up to the challenge, leaving only Hitomi and Leifang to decide. A few moments passed between them as both girls waited for the other one to move first. However, when nothing happened, Leifang was the one to eventually give in.

"Hitomi...", the Chinese said, eying her partner meaningfully. "I hope you know that I'm only doing this for you."

The German's expression fell for a second, but then she smiled and laughed sheepishly. "Thanks, you're my hero." With those words, she gave her friend a playfully dramatic hug before Leifang also ascended the wooden stairs.

Reaching the top, she struggled with herself again. 'It's certainly not the ideal way to go for a hero...'

She was such a wuss. No matter how hard she tried to keep her tough image up, this stay on this island was gradually chipping away at it with growing force.

However, Hitomi's whistle blow indicating the start of the event didn't leave much time for regret. Grabbing the floating tire needed for the slide, she went to get this over with, not wishing to watch the others first and thus being the starting participant.

The start wasn't even too bad, but by the time she got to the high-speed curve that ran almost vertically to the ground, she simply forgot to breathe until she reached the goal safely, but not without a part of her in mute shock.

The others soon followed, and while the French blonde seemed genuinely unimpressed by her victory, Lisa seemed to share some of the panic, whereas Kasumi simply reveled in the exhilaration of the experience.

"Sorry, Lei.", Hitomi said as she scribbled down the results, adding no stroke on her partner's side. "But don't worry, we'll do better next time."

Lost in a daze, Leifang hardly recognized her partner talking to her. The droplets of water on her forehead didn't need much imagination to be identified as pearls of sweat.

She didn't know how she had made it through that thing without falling, but she knew

one thing: It was Hitomi's turn to get wet, next.

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Truth be told, there were a great many things in Hitomi's life which she wasn't good at. She wasn't the best swimmer, her grades at school were mostly average and she seemed to lack common sense part of the time.

There really were a lot of things she couldn't do well.

And then there were pool games. Namely, Butt Battle, the event where it had yet to be determined which of the two were more fun: participating or watching.

Leifang was happy to be doing the latter, watching Hitomi's smashing success in the aforementioned event with a mixture of glee and envy. She was happy for her partner, of course.

But at the same time she was a little envious and dreaded the next event, which she had a feeling would be her task again. Beach Flags.

She didn't buy Hitomi's excuse of it being bothersome when the sand clung to her wet body right after the pool game, but agreed to compete nevertheless, if for one reason only: She had yet to win a single game.

And while Beach Flags was certainly the simplest of the games, it wasn't quite easy, for the competition was fierce.

"Everyone ready?", Hitomi called over to the others, who stood twenty meters away from her. Sticking the flag into the sand next to her feet, she waited.

"Sure.", Leifang answered half-heartedly, eyeing the opposing pair, who had yet to decide upon the contestant.

"Don't suppose I have much of a chance against ninjas...", she muttered to herself, regarding Ayane and Kasumi. Her round would be against one of the two, so it didn't even matter which of the two participated. She was screwed either way.

However, as though reading her mind, Hitomi called to her from behind. "Don't even think of giving less than a hundred percent, Lei!", she shouted in a scolding tone, pointing her finger directly at her.

"Give me a break, it's not like I'm doing this on purpose!", Leifang called back, but couldn't constrain a laugh. She really was losing all the time. But right now, she felt more like making fun of this single thing she hated the most. It was strange.

Under different circumstances, she would be raving mad right now. There was no such thing as an undeserved loss, so whenever she lost, she simply hadn't been good enough. She always used to go to great lengths to prevent this, but this was different.

Her life didn't depend on a victory in any of these games. If people laughed at her for losing, it wouldn't bother her. And Hitomi of all people knew better than being impressed by someone solely over something like this.

There. Nothing changed whether she won or lost, aside from a dent in her ego in the case of the latter. It was entirely inconsequential, as long as she could get that self-esteem of hers to shut up.

Hitomi wouldn't leave her if she lost, probably wouldn't even tease her with it, even though the Chinese herself would do that without a doubt. Not that she had any chance to try it, now.

If she had a reason to give it her best in this race at all, it would be to make Hitomi smile. And that alone was more than enough.

"Hey, you ready?", Ayane interrupted Leifang's daydream without hesitation, looking at the Chinese girl skeptically.

"Oh, um, sure." Quickly shaking her head, she looked over to Hitomi, who had the whistle already in her mouth. Stepping away from the flag by a meter, she motioned for Leifang and Ayane to lie down, which they did. The sand was still warm even though it was evening, a fact that wasn't all that unwelcome to either of the girls. Leifang idly wondered about the direction she should turn upon starting, while Ayane simply closed her eyes and waited for the sign.

However, before the German could blow the whistle to start the race, Kasumi interrupted her.

"Wait a second.", the ginger-haired girl said as she left the others and jogged over to where Hitomi stood. Both Leifang's and Ayane's eyes followed her until she came to stand right next to the brunette.

"...what is it? Did I forget something?", Hitomi asked with arched eyebrows, checking her notepad to see if something was wrong with her planning.

"Yes, but it's alright now. You can start." A content smile crossing the ninja's lips, she slowly undid the golden ribbon that held back her ponytail, letting her long hair spill all over her shoulders.

Seeing Ayane's jaw drop at the sight, she gave a small wave, smiling cutely all the while.

"Um...I'll start, then.", Hitomi said a little hesitantly. She half-expected the other girl to go back as she put the whistle back into her mouth, but she didn't budge. And Ayane, too, was still facing them, staring in disbelief.

"Go away!", the purple-haired girl yelled, but the redness of her face was visible even at this distance.

"No way, I can't give Hitomi the sole advantage.", Kasumi called back sweetly, not offended at all by her half-sister's rude dismissal. She hesitated for a small moment, but then opened her mouth to speak again. She knew that she was pushing it, but this was something she could only allow herself to do when everyone else was there. She couldn't do it alone. "So give it your best, okay? I'm right here, waiting for you."

Ayane gritted her teeth at Kasumi's teasing words, but turned back around so that the race could start. She was determined not to give in and allow her sister the pleasure of seeing her weak.

"...we can start then, right?" The apparent tension in the air made Hitomi a little nervous, but she eventually blew the whistle and watched Leifang and Ayane rise simultaneously before they turned around and dashed toward the flag.

It was a close race, but in the end Ayane lunged at the flag a little earlier than Leifang, resulting in the Japanese's victory. And while the defeat was written all over Leifang's face, Ayane merely nodded in acknowledgment of the result.

"You did well, Ayane.", Kasumi said sincerely, regarding the back of her half-sister, who had just rushed past her without looking at her at all. And even now, she avoided her eyes and immediately went back to the starting position without another word.

"Sorry, Hitomi...", Leifang apologized to her partner as she leaned forward with her hands on her knees, panting heavily.

She had done it, again. 'I keep on losing!', she thought angrily, but Hitomi laughed it off, patting her partner's shoulder. The result wasn't wholly unexpected, and she couldn't say that she didn't like this weak side of Lei. It was remarkably different from her usual self.

"Don't worry, it's not the end yet." Poking Leifang's cheek playfully, she smiled as Leifang went back to the others, allowing the third round to start.

"So it's my turn again, huh?" Stretching her arms in front of her, Lisa went to the starting point as well, giving Leifang a sympathetic glance as she did so. She had won the previous round against Kokoro, and wasn't afraid of taking on Ayane, either. Even though she had done badly in earlier events, she was quite confident now.

"Ooh, I want to try it, too!", Tina exclaimed and clapped her hands together before running over to where Kasumi stood, Hitomi by now having stepped a little to the side.

"This really should make it easier! Eh, Kasumi?", Tina asked with a laugh, drawing the Japanese close to her and having her join in the pose she was striking for her partner.

Being twenty meters apart from Ayane, the blonde didn't hear the low growl that followed this action. Lisa did, however, and it sent an uncomfortable chill down her spine.

"Don't make it easier for her, stupid!", she shouted to the blonde, who in return struck an even more provocative pose together with Kasumi. The Japanese seemed a little startled, but didn't wholly object to it.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry-", Lisa whispered in rapid succession, staring at the ground beneath her and hoping that Ayane wouldn't kill her or Tina right away.

When the whistle finally signaled the start, Lisa sprang up and ran like the devil. Sand as fine and powdery as seen at Niki Beach was hard to run on, but Lisa's feet dashed through it, away from Ayane more than actually toward Tina.

The result was the same, however, and she won the game with the best time ever recorded.

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The last day of the tournament started out as early as the previous one, and even though this was bothersome to many, no one admitted it by saying it out loud. Everyone was a seasoned fighter, and a disheveled bed-head didn't fit the image too well.

The group of nine had met up at the pool side for the last time, and with all preparations done, the Tug-of-War event was about to begin.

"This can't be much harder than Butt Battle...right?", Hitomi mumbled to herself before getting into the still rather cold pool water. Swimming over to one of the two round rafts on the pool, she climbed on top of one with moderate ease.

She had known it to be a little risky to propose all of the available games for the tournament, regardless of whether or not she had done them before, but so far she had been able to avoid those events by letting Leifang compete in her stead.

And she didn't even have a guilty conscience because of it, because this was all part of the plan. Admittedly, a plan that contained severe errors, but a plan nonetheless.

However, Tug-of-War was something she didn't get past so easily now, and whether planned or not, she didn't want to make a fool of herself all that willingly, so she had at least to try. It had worked well enough with the other pool games.

Picking up the rope that already lay ready, she lifted her head and looked at her opponent on the other side.

"Hey, Hitomi! Ya better watch out!" It was Tina, and she pointed at her with a huge grin. "I'm pretty good at this."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Prove it!", calling back to the other woman, Hitomi demonstratively got into a fighting stance before taking the rope in earnest.

This was all about the fun, so she didn't mind losing. But it wasn't any fun if she didn't do her best in spite of that.

"Let's start!"

Both of them were bent on winning, even though only one could take the place.

This 'pool Tug-of-War' was a little different from the standard game. Being played on the surface of the water, instead of mere strength, it was all about the tactics and tricks that decided upon the winner.

In other words, one could say it was a game made for people with bad personalities. ... not that there was any such person on this island.

But at the very least, that impression made bearing her sound defeat a lot easier for Hitomi. As she fell into the water for the third time in a row, she had to smile as she imagined Leifang's face.

She probably looked surprised, but at the same time trying not to laugh at the way Hitomi had struggled in vain right before falling into the pool.

Reaching the surface again and taking a deep breath, she grinned at the victor.

"Hey...if you manage to beat us at volleyball too, the ice cream is on Leifang."

Hitomi laughed brightly as she heard her partner's vocal rejection.

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This was it. The last event, the last chance to score. Everything was possible.

Every pair had a chance to avoid the last place, still. Though one certain team already needed a miracle if it wanted to be the winner in the end.

"This is it!", Hitomi dramatically proclaimed to the group who had gathered on Bass Island at noon. "The following Beach Volleyball games will decide upon the winner. Give it your best, alright?"

Receiving a few cheers as well as a few groans, she continued unhindered: "And this is where we'll play." Pointing to the volleyball field to her left, she smiled from ear to ear, her excitement as clear as day.

Everyone except of one person found themselves nodding at the statement, looking at the beautiful beach that had the volleyball field just mere meters away from the ocean.

"Um, Hitomi...", Leifang protested hesitantly, but upon being looked at by everyone around her, shook her head and walked over to her partner to whisper into her ear instead of saying it out loud.

Listening to Leifang's words, Hitomi's eyes widened in apprehension before she broke into a sheepish laugh. "R-right, I almost forgot, um...one game will be held here, the other one will start at the same time at Niki Beach. Saves time that way...right?"

The tide. Of course, she had forgotten. By the time the tournament would finish, the whole volleyball field here on Bass Island would be submerged, rendering it useless. She didn't have the slightest clue why her thoughts always missed out on the important stuff.

Though Leifang always thought of such things, no matter what. Hitomi would be so lost without her, that much she knew. But for some reason, that thought didn't make her feel uncomfortable at all. She liked depending on Leifang, even though she did wonder whether Leifang was bothered by it and just didn't say anything.

"Aw, and here I wanted to watch the others play.", Lisa complained meekly, but then shrugged. "But you're right."

"Time to draw the lots!" Producing the same four scraps of paper they had used earlier, Tina rolled them up again and mixed them in her hand before eventually handing one to each of the pairs and keeping the last one. "Y'all saw I wasn't cheating, right? So no complains later.", she added, but grinned as she unrolled her piece of paper in secret, only for her and Lisa to see. It was marked with a cross.

"Let's see, we're up against...", Hitomi muttered as she did the same, Leifang leaning close to catch a glimpse of the scrap, as well. The sheet was completely blank, and as Hitomi's eyes searched for the other pairs, she saw Christie holding a similar sheet between her fingers.

"Who is it, who is it?", Leifang asked impatiently, trying to follow Hitomi's eyes. Stopping when Hitomi's did, her eyes widened ever so slightly. "You don't mean..."

Instead of answering right away, Hitomi laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of her head. "The...return match?"

"Hitomi..." Covering her face with her palms, Leifang sighed at the almost mockingly unlucky hand of her partner. They weren't off for a good start, that much was for sure.

On the other side, Lisa didn't seem any more pleased with her opponents, either. "So it comes down to this, huh..." A pearl of sweat ran down her temple as she tried to look past Ayane's unforgiving gaze at Kasumi, who smiled invitingly as if to wish her enemies good luck for the game. It was a strange pair, really.

"We'll go to Niki Beach, then.", Kasumi eventually said to de-escalate the situation, tugging on Ayane's arm as she lead the way to Niki Beach, leaving Hitomi and Leifang

alone together with Christie, Helena and Kokoro.

Kokoro shortly leaned toward Christie and Helena to talk to them. However, her voice was too low to hear for Hitomi and Leifang, who stood about ten meters away from them. Eventually, the Japanese turned to them and smiled before stepping backward and sitting down on the sand near the volleyball field.

"Great...", Leifang sighed. So the younger girl probably knew of their last game against them.

This wasn't good. She had to think, and fast.

"Hitomi? We need a change of plans."

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"Are you finally ready?" She couldn't take it anymore. Patience had never been her strong point, but she really hated how those two Americans seemed to delay the start of the match on purpose.

"Wait a minute. Does that mean we don't have a referee for this match?" Looking around, Tina asked a question of her own instead of answering Ayane's. Finding no one else there except the four of them, she didn't see anyone who could serve as a dependable referee. And she didn't like it one bit.

"You only noticed now?" Touching her forehead with a sigh, Lisa shook her head at her partner. She was really unique in that regard, a fact that Lisa had come to realize more often recently.

"Come on, we're all adults here, aren't we?" Even though she said that, she of all people was more than prepared for any more of Kasumi's surprise attacks.

Instead of taking Lisa's remark to heart and stopping her teasing, the blonde looked at the younger ninja decisively and sneered. "...not really."

This wasn't good. Sensing Ayane's body stiffen at those mocking words, Kasumi quickly laid her hand on her sister's shoulder in an attempt to calm her.

"Ayane...", she whispered, but didn't find the right words to say any more. She didn't want to appear too patronizing. However, Ayane still shrugged the gesture off immediately.

"You talk too much. Let's start.", she said to the other team, and even though her voice revealed clearly how mad she was, she tried to control herself. It was always her against the world, no matter what she did.

Without further ado, she picked up the ball and served it far into her opponent's field. She didn't let Kasumi in on any tactic or formation they were going to use, simply

letting her search her place as she herself remained close to the net most of the time.

The match was fierce, but surprisingly remained within the general rules the entire time.

It was difficult. While especially Tina was clearly ahead in terms of pure strength to the point of it being ridiculous, Lisa had an upscale playing-style that wasn't easy to go against. Together with their lack of team spirit, the game was frustrating at best, and a disaster at worst.

Lacking any real strong attacks of their own, scoring almost became a matter of luck for the Japanese team, whereas blocking Tina's telltale smashes relied almost as much on matters beyond their control.

In that regard, it was a miracle they reached a score of nine to nine after more than fifty minutes of playing. The next point would decide, no matter what.

"Give it your best, alright?", Tina called as sweetly as she could manage over to Kasumi, who was about to serve the last ball. Standing right in front of the net just as Ayane did, the blonde didn't miss the subsequent glare she received.

Ayane didn't look at her partner as she waited for the serve, concentrating on blocking the smash that would surely follow. She couldn't afford to lose, even though the other team was at a clear advantage. This was her last chance to show that she wasn't, in fact, inferior to her sister in every way. She didn't want to be pitied, any more.

Shaking her head and focusing once again on the blond enemy in front of her, Ayane grimaced. She had commented often enough about her animal-like strength over the course of the game, but the fact remained that Ayane hadn't found a way to successfully parry her attacks yet.

Though it was too late now, either way. Only one more serve.

After thirty seconds, she grew impatient again, but it wasn't until a full minute had passed without Kasumi doing anything, that Ayane allowed herself to fall a few steps backward and turn her head to check on her sister.

The ginger-haired girl stood just where Ayane had expected her to, looking straight ahead with a strong determination rarely seen on her face. Her mouth, however, was slightly opened, allowing for the deep breaths she was taking. Her forehead glistened in the sun, and her stance was a little unsteady.

She was tired.

It had been a long and wearying game. It was almost too hot to be out, much less playing for so long. And admittedly, Kasumi had really given her all to get the both of them to the point where they were now. Nine to nine.

For a short moment, Ayane struggled with herself, but ended up doing nothing when Kasumi set her body into motion after taking one last, deep breath.

Intent on making a flying serve, she leaped as high as she could after throwing the volleyball vertically into the air. However, her timing was a little off and her hand hit the ball lower than necessary to give it enough momentum.

The ball made it past the net still, but from there, it was no challenge for Tina to strike it right back.

Ayane should have seen it coming, but was too late to react as her eyes were still on her partner's exhausted body. As she jerked her head around, she concentrated on running to where the ball was aimed, but by the time she realized that she didn't need to run, the volleyball struck her right shoulder with a force that sent her flying backward.

"Ayane-chan!" Completely disregarding the spinning volleyball that flew into her direction, Kasumi immediately ran over to her half-sister, who clutched her shoulder and grimaced. As she saw Kasumi approaching however, she bit her lip to distract from the pain, forcing herself to look indifferent.

"It's nothing.", she muttered just as Kasumi came close enough to hear her, looking away from her sister's concerned gaze. She hated that look. She hated to be looked at as weak.

Not accepting her half-sister's offer to help her get up, she tried to do it on her own. However, as she pushed herself off the ground with her right hand as support, she winced and almost fell back down. Kasumi reacted quickly enough to catch her and help her to her feet before Ayane could struggle against it.

"It hurts, doesn't it?", Kasumi asked softly as she regarded the red skin worriedly, extending her hand to touch the bruise tenderly.

She just wanted to help, but the glare she received made her hesitate, and her hand stopped halfway between her and her sister.

"I told you it's nothing!", the younger girl repeated with considerable force this time, pushing Kasumi away from her. Her eyes searched for the volleyball, and, finding it in the same place where Kasumi had stood just moments earlier, her hands clenched into fists.

It was Kasumi's fault that they had lost, not hers. If she had just stayed where she was, they could have won.

"Geez, Tina! The goal is to hit the ground, not the opponent! Be a little more careful!" After her initial shock of the full-on hit of her reckless partner, Lisa chided the blonde for her awful aim.

Ayane heard Lisa's reprimand, but only had eyes for Tina, who to her surprise didn't

even smile at her supposed achievement.

"S-sorry. Guess my aim's a lil' off.", she then said awkwardly, avoiding Ayane's glare as she scratched her head.

"...whatever." Not bothering to even be mad anymore, the purple-haired ninja turned away and left the volleyball field.

Tina helplessly watched her leave, unsure whether to say any more or not. But looking at Kasumi, who already ran after her, she remained where she was.

"I really did it this time, huh?", she asked, looking at Lisa for help, who in turn simply shrugged.

"I don't think it makes much of a difference, really.", she said, smiling slightly. At least there didn't seem to be any severe injury, and above all, it had been an accident. "She probably hates our guts anyway."

"Heeeey! You done already?" Surprised at the sudden voice, both Tina and Lisa lifted their heads to see Hitomi and the others running towards them.

"Y-yeah, just finished. Though the others are...", nodding her head to the side, Lisa wanted to indicate that Kasumi and Ayane were gone, but found that they were already returning, with Kasumi almost dragging her half-sister back to the field. "...ah, never mind. How did your game go?"

Hitomi's expression immediately faltered at this question, and Leifang, who came to stand beside her, moved her flat hand horizontally across her throat to explain.

"That...that bad, huh?", Lisa asked with a sympathetic voice, but actually had to keep from laughing when Leifang's hand formed a zero.

"Total annihilation.", the Chinese girl added dryly as she pulled a face. Hitomi on the other side smiled from ear to ear.

"It was awesome! Helena and Christie played so well, you wouldn't believe it! Every time we were so sure that the point was ours, Helena reacted in the last second and got every single one. She ran after them as though her life depended on it! It was out of this world.", the German babbled in utter fascination, her eyes sparkling as she gestured with her hands while talking.

"Hey...", Leifang cut in, shooting her partner a doubtful side-glance as she poked her with her elbow. "Whose side are you on, again?"

True, they had never lost a game in a more spectacular fashion, but that wasn't really anything to be proud of, was it? With a look behind Hitomi, she saw that the three women in question were once again taking their time to catch up with everyone.

"Now you're trying to scare us.", Tina said with arched eyebrows and a knowing smile,

her previously gained self-confidence unbroken.

"Not at all! But say...", Hitomi said, smiling curiously at the two women in front of her, who seemed in awfully high spirits. "...how did your game go?"

"Well..." Looking around, Lisa's eyes searched for Kasumi and Ayane. Finding them at a decent distance, she leaned closer to the other pair and lowered her voice as she continued. "It seems Tina barely escaped a doping charge. Ayane's so pissed."

"Hey, totally not my fault.", Tina shrugged but had to laugh still, Hitomi soon joining in. Leifang on the other hand didn't feel like laughing at all.

"No way, you two won?", she asked, not hiding her surprise in the least.

Damn, this was bad. Looking over to the losing team, she had to keep from gaping. Really bad. To say that Ayane looked angry was the understatement of the century.

"That was obvious, wasn't it?", Tina asked with an arrogance reserved for those who had actually won seven to zero, but Lisa didn't feel like correcting her, secretly just as glad as her partner.

"So who's gonna go next? The losers, I suppose?", she asked, smirking at the other team.

"Probably, yeah.", Hitomi said and smiled a little sheepishly as she looked over to her friend. "You ready?"

"Not really, but whatever. Let's get this behind us." It wasn't that she didn't have any hope of winning anymore. But with her self-esteem all beat up and down in the dumps as it was, it was a little hard to look forward to the next round. However, her lack of enthusiasm showed a little too clearly for Hitomi, who immediately frowned at her friend.

"C'mon Lei, cheer up! We're so gonna win this time! Show a little more spirit!", she said cheerfully, causing Leifang to actually giggle as she pumped her fist into the air.

Spirit. Leifang wondered how Hitomi could bring herself to have so much of it. No matter how bad the situation looked, or how down she was, she always had a smile to spare. To her, it really was all about the fun. Hitomi was special that way.

"Hey, what's taking you so long?"

And what could be more fun than beating the crap out of their opponents in the next round?

Leifang sang quietly as she followed her energetic partner onto the field. A small smile crept onto her lips as she did so.

There was no such a thing as a truly bad day when with Hitomi. Leifang knew this, but

had to admit that this day was really testing the limits of that rule today.

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"Say, it's not looking too well for us, is it?", she asked her partner when the tournament was officially over, laying down on the sand right beside Hitomi to catch a glimpse of the notepad she was writing on.

"Not yet.", the German giggled as she covered the notes with her hands. "We'll all meet up later and I'll announce the results. You'll have to be a little more patient."

"Not fair.", Leifang whined childishly as she climbed on top of Hitomi. "I'm your partner, you know." This statement caused Hitomi to chuckle, but she determinedly kept her hands where they were, not relenting even as Leifang threatened her with tickling.

The other pairs had already left the beach, going to their respective hotel rooms or wherever they needed to be to relax until they all met up again. Only Leifang and Hitomi had stayed behind at the beach. But with Hitomi busy counting the points in secret, Leifang had nothing to do.

"You could at least give me a hint. How bad were we?" In truth, Leifang had a fairly accurate idea of how bad they had been, but asked nonetheless.

"I can't tell you for sure yet, but I think I can safely say that we were pretty horrible.", the German said and chuckled, earning a weak punch on her shoulder in return.

"You just had to go and say that, didn't you?", Leifang asked in feigned annoyance, but had to chuckle as well. "Really though, how embarrassing is that? We lost at our own tournament!"

Getting off Hitomi, she rolled around in the sand, clutching her head in frustration. "Ugh, so annoying, so annoying...", she mumbled repeatedly until Hitomi finally cracked and laughed out loud.

"I still think you were pretty awesome, though.", she said, looking over to Leifang as she put the notepad down. She wouldn't find the time to count the points now, anyway.

"Thanks, that's sweet of you." Leifang smiled sweetly as she returned the gaze, but then stuck her tongue out at her friend. "I really hate liars, though."

Hitomi winced at the remark, looking apologetic. "Ouch. I just wanted to cheer you up, you know."

Leifang, who had been about to roll over again, stopped in mid-movement and turned back at Hitomi, frowning. "Wait, so you really were lying? How mean! Take that!"

"Ah, sorry, sorry!", Hitomi cried when Leifang's skillful hands attacked her once again, sending her into a fit of giggles that didn't let up for the next few minutes.

"That'll teach you about playing with my feelings.", the Chinese panted as she gripped Hitomi's wrists and pressed them down, effectively pinning the girl beneath her to the ground.

"Now you're being mean. I really meant well, honest.", Hitomi said sincerely, but it wasn't enough to melt Leifang's defenses.

"That won't work, missy.", Leifang said in a forcedly dark voice, looking down at her friend with a stern expression. "It's not enough to get you out of here."

Trying to free herself regardless, the German wriggled under Leifang's grasp, but soon found that no matter how hard she struggled, she stood no chance against the other woman's adamant grip.

"So...what do I need to do for you to release me?" The sultry undertone with which Hitomi spoke those words wasn't lost on Leifang, though she didn't relent to it, instead reinforcing her grip.

"I don't know, think of something that'll make me change my mind.", Leifang said in a whisper, leaning down until their faces were only inches apart.

Those eyes. They were only hers for this moment. They only looked at her, with this intensity that made her heart ache, and they didn't stray until Leifang smiled when no answer from Hitomi came forth.

"Didn't know you were so uncreative.", Leifang teased with a smile as she let go of Hitomi and stood up. However, Hitomi didn't move at all, staying exactly where she was.

"I'll leave you to your numbers now and go for a walk or something. You think you're ready in half an hour?"

"...sure." Hitomi looked a little puzzled as she watched Leifang leave so abruptly, but let her go in spite of that.

When Leifang was gone and Hitomi found herself all alone, she let out a deep sigh.

Her lips were dry, and trembled slightly when she touched them. Her heart beat a little faster than it should.

"Maybe...I didn't want to be freed."

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Being third was only one place short of the ultimate disgrace, and being the one

mostly responsible for it made it feel even worse. She felt cheated.

Having done her best in every event she had partaken in, she didn't see how there had even been the possibility of her not winning in the first place. Naturally, the one who put the most effort into something should be the one to be rewarded in the end.

Though life was never that fair.

As the sun slowly descended on the horizon, tinting the high water around Bass Island in a soft orange hue, Ayane drew her knees closer to her body. She honestly had no idea what she was doing wrong. Nothing worked the way she wanted it to. Ever.

"Ayane...?" Her only solace of being in peaceful solitude was destroyed when she heard wet footsteps on the sand behind her, accompanied by a beautiful, but unwelcome voice.

"Don't come closer.", she growled, more out of reflex than anything else. But as always, the ginger-haired girl was reluctant to comply.

"You...suddenly vanished, I...I just wanted to see if you're okay.", Kasumi tried to explain her presence, but faltered. However, when no reaction came forth, she continued. "Hitomi said we'll be meeting up, soon. She just has to get the results ready."

"What should I have stayed for? I know the results." Who would be as stupid as to not keep track of their enemies' and their own points? She had known they weren't going to win the second Kasumi had disregarded the game in order to run over to her. She wasn't happy about it at all.

She would never tell anyone that her shoulder still hurt and that she still hated herself for having been distracted like that.

"I know, too." It took Ayane a few moments to realize that Kasumi was talking about the results as well. "It was fun though, wasn't it?"

With that question, Kasumi sat down next to her half-sister. Seeing that Ayane didn't move away from her, she smiled softly.

"What's the fun in doing these stupid games?", Ayane complained as she looked to the side. "If it had been a fighting tournament..."

She wanted to say that she would have won, but the sentence cut off without being finished. Maybe 'she would have liked to win' was more accurate. But then, that would mean that she hadn't had any intention of winning this Beach tournament, which was incorrect. There really wasn't any way to finish the sentence properly, so she left it as it was.

She felt Kasumi looking at her even though her own eyes were still averted, avoiding hers on purpose. "I don't really like fighting, so maybe that's why...", the older girl said

with a faint chuckle, which was still loud enough to annoy Ayane to no end.

Standing up, she glared at her sister. "Why do you always come to mock me? You won, okay? Leave me alone." Those last words came to her easily, she had said them more often than she could count.

Kasumi was so strong, and without a doubt the better fighter. And yet she always played the defenseless little girl walking the path of least resistance, even though she was so used to the harsh reality and still had never relented to it once.

Ayane wanted her to apologize, but knew that it was a foolish hope. Her sister would never do that. She had already made it clear that she stood by her decisions, that she wouldn't run away from the consequences they had brought. That she wouldn't let Ayane get in her way. And that was all she had needed to say.

It really was foolish. Kasumi had done it for her brother, something she couldn't possibly bring herself to regret, so she would never apologize. She would never ask for forgiveness.

And Ayane couldn't give it to her just like that.

When Kasumi suddenly stood up to meet her eyes on the same level, Ayane knew that she wouldn't get to hear another excuse again.

"I already did that, once. And you hated me for it."

There was a force behind those words that almost scared Ayane, and she didn't even dare to turn her eyes away. Instead she looked directly into the other girl's eyes, trying to assess her reaction.

For a moment, Kasumi seemed ready to lash out at Ayane were she to say the wrong thing. But keeping silent and simply staring at her half-sister, Ayane was eventually drawn into a tight hug.

She didn't fight it, even though her first instinct was to struggle free and push the other girl away. She always did that. She didn't like to be touched, especially not like that. But hearing faint sobs and realizing that her sister was crying, Ayane found herself doing nothing.

She didn't want to fight with Kasumi all the time, but she didn't want to be weak, either. And both of them knew that they couldn't act as though nothing had ever happened. All the harsh words between them, all the fighting, all the hatred. It wouldn't disappear suddenly.

But wasn't she just looking for excuses not to forgive her?

Right now, she seemed so weak, and she held her so closely as though her life depended on it. Ayane's heart ached the more Kasumi clung to her, but she didn't let it trap her. She was like that now, but once she had her trust, wouldn't she leave her

again in the next moment?

'Why is it so difficult?', she thought, but didn't say it. "Why...do you always mess up my life?", she chose to ask instead, her voice low but lacking the edge it usually had.

"I'm sorry.", was all Kasumi managed to answer, not looking up from where her head was buried in Ayane's shoulder. It hurt, but Ayane didn't say anything.

Her arms still hung limply to her sides, unsure of where to be. "No, you're not."

"I am." Kasumi shook her head, and her beautiful hair whirled in front of Ayane's face for a few seconds before it calmed down again. "Will you...listen to me?"

Listen. It was easy to do, but Ayane wasn't sure whether she wanted to hear it all.

After a while, she separated herself from Kasumi and sat down again, waiting for her to do the same. Once she did, Ayane found the same arms from before draped around her again.

Kasumi had always been this clingy, even as a child. But that alone hadn't been enough to stop her from leaving her.

"I'm sorry. For everything.", Kasumi said, and Ayane didn't have a single doubt that she was serious. But it wasn't what she wanted.

"...is that all? Do you think that's what I want to hear?", she asked, the tone of her voice standing in stark contrast to the embrace she was held in.

Kasumi's voice faltered for a moment and she simply shook her head. "I'm sorry I left you, back then. I wanted revenge for what...he did, and didn't think of anything else when I left the village. And you were too..."

Instead of being angry, Ayane forced a thin smile onto her lips as she interrupted her. "Too much of his daughter."

What had she expected? Everything in her life had been ruined by her bastard of a father, even her own life to begin with.

"No!" Kasumi drew the both of them impossibly close, as if to make up for the distance of their minds. "That wasn't it." Though she couldn't say what it had been, either. Maybe she had thought it was for the best. Maybe she had thought that Ayane was better off if she left. She just didn't know.

But after what had happened back then, she just didn't have a choice. He had had to be stopped. Not because he had been her uncle, or Ayane's father, but because he had been evil. Though the accomplishment of that deed hadn't been enough to last her through every single day of running away. It had been necessary, but she wasn't happy with it.

Closing her eyes when Ayane didn't say anything, Kasumi's mind wandered back to happier times, long ago.

They had been so small, and had only been able to be this close because of their ignorance of the situation surrounding them. Still, she wanted it back. She wanted it all back.

"Princess Kasumi..." Whispering those two words was enough for Ayane's body to stiffen, but Kasumi smiled as she remembered hearing them. "You never call me that, anymore, do you?"

Of course she didn't. Ayane didn't call her anything, anymore.

Looking up from where her head had rested on her younger sister's shoulder, Kasumi saw Ayane's surprised face. It really had been long ago. Her lips trembled, but eventually formed a sad smile upon remembering the events that had led up to that nickname.

They had been as young as five or six years old. She had sworn to protect Kasumi, back then, calling her her princess, while she was the knight. It had been a game to them, but they had taken it seriously.

She recalled how Kasumi had given her a golden ribbon to show her gratitude. It had been exactly the same as the one Kasumi had worn. It had been the same as her sister was still wearing, even today. Though it was tied around her wrist now, because her hair was open and not tied into a ponytail.

Ayane unconsciously reached out to touch the cloth on Kasumi's arm. The older girl looked better without it, if only because it didn't remind her of the time when she too, had worn a ribbon like this.

But she had cut it later, and had chosen to replace it with a headband instead. Just as the ribbon had tied her hair, it had tied herself too much. And like that, her time as a knight had ended just as quickly as it had begun.

Maybe it had had to come to this. Once their game of princess and knight had become reality, it had lost all of its sweetness. Too harsh was the life of an abandoned knight, and too busy was the princess to see her loyal friend's hardships. Reality wasn't a fairy tale.

But what had become of the princess? She had grown beautiful and strong. Independent.

Kasumi had never once pleaded for her life, all those times she had faced her.

And looking back, it wasn't even the fact that Kasumi had always been the loved one and she hadn't, that had hurt her the most. It was the knowledge that her older sister didn't need her, that killed her and made her feel worthless above all else.

Had she asked for help just once, Ayane would have given it all up. This whole charade would have been meaningless.

But Kasumi didn't need her, didn't rely on her nearly as much as she herself did.

Kasumi could survive on her own, and she couldn't. And that was something Ayane could never forgive herself for.

"I don't have the right to call you that anymore, do I?" The words came slowly across her lips. She had never been good with these things.

But Kasumi simply smiled, releasing some of the pressure her tight embrace had put on the other girl. "That's right."

Ayane responded with an awkward smile of her own, and for the first time ever since they had parted ways, Kasumi allowed herself to hope.

"Truce?", the ginger-haired girl asked softly, dreading the answer a little bit.

It was a strange word. Taken in its direct sense, it meant a ceasefire, meaning they wouldn't fight each other.

But they had never really done that, anyway. Being completely honest with herself, Ayane knew that she had never wanted to see her half-sister dead, and Kasumi too, had never wanted to hurt her.

But there was a little more to this word than just that, and Ayane agreed to it without fully understanding what it meant.

"Truce."

No more fighting. At least for now.

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Half an hour, she had said. She'd had something in mind when she had said that, but finding it proved to be much more difficult than she had hoped. And that in spite of the shop being more than big enough.

She wanted something special, but none of the offered swimsuits piqued her interest. Sure, they looked nice, and some of them she really liked, but in the end, she didn't buy any of them because she didn't know whether Hitomi would like them. She wasn't good at estimating other people's interests, and buying a bikini that Hitomi absolutely hated was the last thing she wanted to do.

Though her partner would probably never tell her that she didn't like it, and still put on a smile for her. But she didn't want that, either.

In the end, when time was running out for her, she decided to buy something else entirely. It wasn't all that special, but hopefully, it would get the message across.

Once she had paid for the gift that had been put into a light blue case, she left the store. She wondered why she was already thinking of the end of the holidays and buying parting gifts when the first week was just barely over.

The truth was, she already couldn't stand the thought of parting with Hitomi. She wondered if it would be as bad for the other teams, as well. But then, they lived so much closer to each other.

Germany and China were half a world apart.

It wasn't like they could see each other every weekend. She didn't even know whether Hitomi would like to. She just knew that she wanted to.

But not just every weekend. She wanted to be with her every day, every hour, every minute, every...

Letting out a long sigh, Leifang hung her head and stared at the ground on her way to her hotel room. To be having such thoughts, she was hopeless. It was almost frightening how much power Hitomi had over someone like her, who considered herself to be quite an independent person.

But then, she had already admitted it to herself, hadn't she? That she was in love with Hitomi. She had known it all along.

The last time they had been on this island, she had shrugged it off as a temporary thing, induced by too much sun and the general fun atmosphere. But this time it had been real. She had felt it the second she had received the obviously fake invitation letter for the fifth tournament. She had known what awaited her, but her hopes of seeing Hitomi again had made her come here in spite of that. And then, it had been settled from the second she had seen the other girl again. Hitomi was special.

She did not like this troublesome discovery about herself, but she couldn't change it, either. She loved Hitomi. More than a friend. More than any man.

Her heart beat quickly at the thought of Hitomi unpacking her gift at home. She would probably be surprised.

Hurrying back to her room to make it to the beach in time, her eyes stumbled across two familiar figures walking in direction of the Moonlight Reef hotel. They had their backs turned to the Chinese woman, so they didn't see her. Though Leifang saw them, with their heads close to each other as they walked, and their fingers intertwined between them.

It was an unlikely image, and Leifang couldn't help but stare after them until they got out of sight.

"Lucky them.", she sighed with a weak smile, but eventually shook herself out of it and entered the Gemstone Suite hotel.

Some people had more luck than others. But regardless of how lucky she was, she wanted to get the most out of this last week on this island. She wanted to have enough fun to last her a lifetime.

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The iced tea tasted awkward today. Maybe there was too much sugar in it, she preferred her tea bitter. Or maybe it was because her lungs hurt and her throat ached for liquid so much that she had emptied her glass far too quickly to be able to appreciate the taste.

It was unbecoming of a lady, but she was thirsty, and tired.

After refilling the glass for the third time, she slowed down a little, glancing over the brim of her glass at Christie.

They hadn't exchanged a single word ever since Kokoro had left them twenty minutes earlier to go to her own room to freshen up and change clothes. It wasn't unusual for them, but it felt as though it was.

Kokoro had been so proud of them when they had won against Hitomi and Leifang. And while Helena didn't share the joy of winning the other girl obviously had, she was relieved. She had put far more effort into the game than she would normally have.

It hadn't been a hard game, by any means. Hitomi and Leifang had played better than the previous time, but all in all, had still been far too concerned with each other to concentrate enough on the game. It had been a little endearing, even.

Those last three days...they had been a mirror image of normality. If she didn't know better, she would even say that they had, indeed, been normal. She had even been a little happy, in the few moments where she could forget about everything else.

Those moments when she would inwardly cheer for Kokoro to win the games she was competing in, and the moments when she would catch herself hoping in spite of herself.

A small smile grazed her lips as the image of her energetic half-sister came to her mind. Her geisha training had made her serious and proper, but it was in those moments that Helena had been able to discover the child-like side of her underneath her conditioned behavior. And once broken free, it didn't halt.

Helena didn't notice she was smiling with an absent-minded gaze at her glass until she caught Christie smirking at her. The other woman sat directly opposite of her, her

right hand toying with the straw in her already empty glass.

Helena wasn't bothered by it, her accomplishment of winning the volleyball match having given her something to counterattack with.

"It was...fun.", she commented after a while of simply regarding the silver-haired woman in front of her. She inevitably thought of Kokoro's beaming face upon winning, looking as though she'd had the most fun in ages. Maybe she had.

She didn't know much about her half-sister, but she could imagine that living with her mother as a geisha in training was very strict, and arduous.

Christie raised her eyebrows at the unexpected statement, but then allowed for a slight smile to break through her ever-serious expression, completely devoid of ill intent. "It was worth my time."

The Briton then stood up and went to prepare another carafe of iced tea. It was Helena's room, but Christie acted as though she was at home, while Helena was being served and actually felt that she didn't quite belong here. Not one day had passed so far without Christie being here.

"It's almost like the old times.", Helena said, facing Christie's back. It hadn't been that long ago, but it felt like an eternity had passed ever since then.

It had been just like this, back then. Christie had been her bodyguard and servant, but they never had had those roles between them. If it weren't for the fact that it had probably been all fake, they had gotten along well.

"Almost." Christie said, adding to the space between them. Despite that, her voice sounded strangely softer than usual.

"...we can't go back, can we?" It was an odd question, one Helena immediately regretted asking after it had left her mouth. Of course they couldn't, she didn't know why she even bothered to ask.

The blonde almost expected a derisive snort in response, but was only met with silence from the other woman. Allowing herself to look up, she found Christie staring at the window. For a moment, she seemed almost lost in thought.

Kokoro would be back in about five minutes to go back to the beach with them. Helena didn't know whether she was the only one thinking about that right now, or if it was the same thing that Christie had on her mind.

Her half-sister's broad smile once again flashed through her mind, and she gave a long sigh as she stared into her glass. She really was sick of this. If there was just one way to end this, she would do it.

"How much did he pay you?" She raised her voice involuntarily as she asked this, and shortly after that saw the surprise on her partner's normally passive features. "I'll pay

you more if you...if you'll protect me instead."

It had been an unspoken rule between them to never talk about this directly. They had both known what was going on, and that had been that. Helena had sworn not to plead for her own life, and Christie had never made a point of threatening her unnecessarily.

If what she had said was considered a plea for her life, then she had just lost the game. And the hollow laugh that followed from Christie didn't indicate anything else.

"You don't want me as your bodyguard. Not after everything." The British woman said this with a stern look at the blonde, even though she was sure that she didn't need to remind her of what she had done.

It was true, it was pathetic. To beg for your life from the one person who had destroyed it in the first place.

"That's my decision to make. How much?" Repeating the question, she stood up and walked over to Christie to stand right in front of her.

The Briton looked at her almost angrily. "Too much. Much more than you have." With that, she turned away from her and walked over to the window.

It was Helena's turn to laugh now, though it didn't sound wholly genuine. "I'm really worth that much? Who would've thought?"

"..." Helena had a feeling that Christie wanted to say something, but she didn't. And the fact that the British woman had her back turned to her prevented her from seeing her clenched fists pressing against the windowsill. Maybe she would have said something else, had she seen it. Maybe it would have been for the worse.

"It's almost funny, isn't it? So there are really things in life which even I can't buy." The way the blonde said this made it sound like a joke, but she was entirely serious. So far she had only ever been the rich daughter, even after her parents' death. Her supposed career as an opera singer was something she hadn't done for money, but solely to continue what her mother had wanted her to do. It was entirely irrelevant, at least regarding financial means.

But there was a first time for everything, and even though she had never faced an obstacle that couldn't be overcome with money, she did now.

Completely lost in her own selfish thoughts, Helena didn't fully hear Christie's words when she unexpectedly spoke to her. "...time."

To someone as clear-spoken as Christie, it sounded a little too quiet, and Helena had to look at Christie to search for any confirmation of what she had just heard. "Excuse me?"

Turning to the blonde, Christie gave a small smile that was meant to seem casual but

lacked the edge Helena had grown so used to hear. Her right hand still played with the straw, twisting and turning it randomly. "I can give you time...to get the money."

It was the best Helena could do to keep her face straight as she listened to the other woman's words. She had no idea what to say, or if she should say anything at all. She wasn't even sure whether Christie had been serious.

In the end, she didn't ask for a verification, or doubted the British woman. If Christie wanted to play openly, then she did, too.

"How long?" There was no 'What do you mean?', no 'Are you serious?', no 'What do you gain by this?'. Just those two words, that would let her hope, or despair.

Instead of being surprised at the direct question, Christie simply chuckled and pointed her index finger at the blonde, playfully moving it from side to side as if to scold her. "That's so typical of you, Helena. You always want to know everything exactly, so you can construct the schedule of your life around it. You don't even think about your plans fitting your life, and not the other way around."

With those words, she pushed herself off the windowsill and went back to Helena, who clearly struggled between facing her and turning away. "What do you mean?"

It had always been a habit of Christie, to tease her with sentences like those, which didn't make much sense without thinking about them first. And the white-haired woman didn't seem to know how hard it was to think clearly in her presence.

"What I mean...", Christie whispered as she leaned dangerously close to Helena, without the slightest trace of malice, "is that I'll give you as much time as you need."

Helena simply stopped breathing when Christie came so close to her, and only allowed herself to resume when the other woman averted her eyes and made to leave the apartment.

"Christie..." She didn't know why this name crossed her lips all of a sudden, but nevertheless, it wasn't enough to halt the woman in question.

However, she didn't run after her, didn't see how she could. She hadn't even understood what had just happened, much less processed the information. She just couldn't find a plausible reason to do so.

Just as Christie couldn't think of anything that would justify her stopping. What she had done just now, she had never done before, and never would, again.

When had it begun? When had she turned this contract into a game? And just when had she stopped taking this game seriously?

It wasn't even about the money. She knew that the part about the money wasn't any more than an awfully crude attempt to save a last shred of dignity.

She had given up before her set time had run out, and the blonde had taken it even better than expected. Helena was truly strong, and if she hadn't known that before, she would know it now. Nothing could hurt this woman anymore. She was so utterly set on despair and pain, that all the things around her were of no significance at best.

Remembering the same woman from a little time back, there wasn't even the slightest similarity.

Helena had won.

Reaching out to open the door of the large apartment, Christie found that the door opened on its own accord, forcing her to quickly step backwards to avoid being hit.

"Christie!" It was Kokoro who, before Christie had even the slightest chance to react, lunged forward and blindly hugged her. Her bright laughter sounded through the whole apartment, and when Helena came to see the scene, she almost froze in her tracks.

"We won!", the smaller girl cheered, her eyes positively beaming. "Now we just have to meet up at the beach and make it official!"

Christie subtly raised her eyebrows at the energetic girl. She was very young, but the sudden changes were still surprising. Helena would do well to take her as an example. "Aren't we in high spirits today?", she found herself asking. It didn't even feel particularly forced.

Kokoro giggled in response, looking up at the woman in front of her. "You were so strong!"

Christie couldn't help but chuckle at the unexpected praise. "No. There's someone much stronger than me. We won because of her."

Looking surprised at first, Kokoro regarded Christie with a puzzled expression on her face. But when her gaze shifted to the side and she saw Helena standing not too far behind the silver-haired woman, she smiled shyly. Disengaging herself from the taller woman, she went over to her half-sister. She stood in front of her awkwardly for a few moments, but then hugged her as well.

"You were great.", she said with honest gratitude. "Thanks."

Helena returned the embrace, allowing a slight smile to cross her lips. "You're welcome.", she whispered, looking up at Christie as she did so.

When Kokoro turned to look at the Briton as well, a playful smile formed on her face. "You know...you're nicer than I thought."

Christie's eyes automatically searched for the blonde's when she heard this, and with her right hand on her hip, she grinned. "Maybe I tricked you into thinking that."

The playful spin on the sentence came so easily as though Christie had never said anything in earnest, and Kokoro giggled in response.

"Nah."

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"Hey there, beautiful. What are you doing out here all by your lonesome?"

Hitomi had been about to drift off to sleep with her head snugly nestled on her crossed arms when a sudden voice startled her. The voice had sounded rather dark and husky, but turning her head around revealed a grinning Leifang and she had to smile herself.

"Heeey...", she moaned, rubbing her eyes as she looked at her watch. "You're five minutes late."

"Sorry.", Leifang replied, smiling a little sheepishly as she came closer to the other girl. "Here, something to make up for it." Handing her friend a large soft ice cream cone, she contently watched Hitomi's eyes sparkle at the sight. When Hitomi noticed that however, she put on a frown.

"Bribing won't work, you know.", she said sternly, but took the ice cream nonetheless. "I was so bored because you took so long." Pouting while licking at the ice, Leifang couldn't suppress a smile at the cute expression.

Tallying up the points had really only taken her a few minutes at best, even double and triple-checking the results, so she had been pretty darn close to dying of boredom after just ten minutes of waiting for Leifang.

"That bad?", the Chinese girl whispered as she climbed onto the brunette's back and gently began to massage her shoulders.

"Worse.", Hitomi complained indignantly, but her voice quickly died down under Leifang's strong hands until the only sound that came across her lips was a low purr. Finishing her soft ice cream in a flash, she stretched out under Leifang's touch, enjoying the sensation of the massage more than the sweet treat, even though she wouldn't admit to it openly. The strange thought brought a smile to her lips. She felt good when with Leifang. She preferred to think of it in those simple terms.

On top of her, Leifang couldn't keep a silly grin off her face, either. To touch Hitomi like this, and moreover, being allowed to touch her like this, she never wanted to stop.

"Mmh...you should do this every day, Lei."

Being too far away with her thoughts, the Chinese only heard a part of it, causing her to look at Hitomi with a confused expression. "W-what did you say?" Her cheeks

reddened when she noticed that her hands had wandered too low, and she quickly brought them back to her partner's shoulders.

"Do this for me every day. I'll hire you as my personal masseuse. How's that sound?"

Leifang hesitated for a moment, knowing full well that the other girl was simply joking. She still played along, though, massaging Hitomi with even more passion than before.

"Sweet deal." She giggled as her hands eventually strayed from their path and tickled Hitomi's sides, causing the German girl to squeak and twist under her. She loved this, and even though her friend had hardly time to breathe, she knew that she loved it, too.

"Oh, get a room, you two!" Before Leifang could even get serious, she was abruptly interrupted in mid-assault by a loud voice. She didn't even have to think to know who it was, and her face flushed against her will.

Turning her head in direction of the voice revealed Tina, who stood only a few meters away from them, looking decisively impatient. As always, her partner wasn't too far off, standing right beside her. In contrast to the blonde, she looked slightly apologetic, but still grinned at the sight of Leifang's red face.

"W-well, took you long enough.", Leifang quickly said and got off Hitomi's back to allow her to turn around as well. 'Caught red-handed.' The thought crossed her mind, but she quickly pushed it away.

"The others not here yet?", Hitomi mumbled as she looked around, her face lighting up when she spotted another pair. "There they come."

Lisa's eyebrow twitched nervously at the sight, while Tina looked fearless as always, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Really."

"Hey there!", Hitomi waved over at Kasumi and Ayane, and Leifang was already about to stop her partner when Kasumi surprisingly waved back as she approached the other two pairs with Ayane in tow.

"I hope we're not late?", Kasumi asked with a look at the brunette, who shook her head with a smile.

"Nah, one team's still missing.", smiling knowingly, she shook her head in direction of the Gemstone Suite hotel. "Anyway, have a seat.", she added jokingly, generously pointing to the sand around her.

Ayane was the first to respond to that offer. However, before she could sit down, Kasumi sharply tugged at her arm. Presented with the accompanying glare from her half-sister, Ayane quickly averted her eyes, trying to maintain a straight face.

"Fine.", she growled. Her eyes wandered around for a moment as she took a deep

breath, but eventually settled firmly on Tina. "You!", she said louder than intended, and Tina couldn't help but gulp as she backed away slightly.

Preparing for the worst, her arms remained exactly where they were as her feet got into a position that would allow her to dodge any possible attacks.

However, instead of being attacked by a rabid and unleashed ninja, Ayane surprised her by bowing deeply in front of her, her hands pressed together in front of her. "...sorry.", she said, but with her head facing down it was almost inaudible and Kasumi cleared her throat exaggeratedly.

"I said I'm sorry!" The usual angry tone returned, and Ayane's shoulders trembled as she waited for a response, not daring to face upward any sooner.

"Ah...", Tina croaked, wondering what exactly had just happened. Pointing at herself, she looked around helplessly until she found Kasumi smiling at her, nodding for her to accept. "Ayane..."

Looking up upon being named, the purple-haired girl faced the blonde with an expression that was softer than expected. "My apologies.", she said insistently, ignoring her warming cheeks upon noticing that everyone was staring at her. "My hostility was uncalled for." Ayane gritted her teeth when she heard Kasumi's muffled laughter behind her, making fun of her formal phrasing.

"You really hate this, don't you?" Having recovered from her initial shock, Tina's lips curled up in a smirk. "Don't sweat it. You don't have to apologize if you don't mean it." She ignored the nudge of her partner as she said this, facing the ninja without even blinking.

That wouldn't do. Ayane hated how this wasn't going even slightly as planned, and now that stupid blonde had had to go and say that. "I said I'm sorry, so just accept it already!", she yelled angrily, her face red with fury and embarrassment alike.

However, instead of backing away, Tina stepped forward and touched Ayane's left shoulder encouragingly, smiling at her achievement. "I suppose you were pretty mean, but...apology accepted." With a friendly nod, she stepped back, but not without grinning at Kasumi.

"Don't worry. With a cutie like that as my partner, I'd get possessive, too.", she finished with a look at the smaller girl in front of her, but swiftly received a slap on the head from behind.

"Don't push it, idiot." It was Lisa, and the frown on her face betrayed a tinge of jealousy. She wouldn't be surprised if her partner received another slap from Ayane, as well.

But instead, the feisty ninja laughed. It wasn't just a chuckle, she actually laughed out loud, so hard that she had small tears in her eyes.

"Stupid, what did you do?", Lisa hissed at her partner, who simply shrugged open-mouthed. She must have broken something. "I didn't...I mean...not my fault!"

She was about to make up excuses, but when Ayane's laughter died down, she quickly lashed out and pushed Tina backwards with a force that sent her straight to the ground. "Now we're even.", she said dangerously, ignoring the sharp intake of breath from her half-sister.

"Humph. Not bad.", Tina commented dryly as she immediately got up again, brushing the sand off her body. Facing her attacker, she reached out her hand in a manner that wasn't threatening, but not wholly friendly either. "...enemies for life?"

Ayane had been about to turn around and leave, but now she stopped, raising her eyebrows at the strange suggestion. She remained like that for a few moments until she eventually allowed herself to show a small smile before taking the blonde's hand. "Right."

Next to Tina, Lisa looked more confused than ever. "I don't get it...", she mumbled to herself before turning her eyes away and looking to her right. Seeing Kokoro running straight towards them with Christie and her half-sister on either hand, she had to chuckle.

"Wow, did we...miss anything?", Kokoro whispered in between deep breaths when she came to a halt right next to the dark-skinned American, pointing at Tina and Ayane.

Lisa nodded in response, but shrugged when she found that she couldn't quite explain the situation. "You can say that again."

"Oh, there are our stars!" Hitomi called merrily as she spotted the team of three, but quickly went silent upon being collectively stared at. "...oops. Spoiled it, didn't I?"

Leifang was the loudest to groan at her partner's apparent mishap, whereas most of the others simply smiled, turning to look at the winning team.

"Well, I guess that one was obvious, anyway.", Leifang said, smiling sincerely at Kokoro and the other two. "Congrats."

"So who's second?", Lisa asked curiously, looking at their enemies, who were now friends. Or something.

"Well...", Leifang said, quickly glancing to the side to steal a peek at Hitomi's notepad, who hid it from her sight a second too late. "I have no idea how that happened, but...you.", she said with a look at the one who had raised the question.

"Or should I say your better half? Truth be told, I didn't see you doing particularly well in any of the games.", Leifang added with a sneer, but the playful glint in her eyes proved that she was just joking.

"And that makes Ayane and Kasumi third place.", Hitomi said, flinging away her notepad. "Because obviously, we aren't it. Right, Lei?"

Leifang knew that the sweet smile her friend gave her was just to mock her, and leaned back to lie on the sand. "Man, this tournament really did my ego in. At least it's over now, saves me the embarrassment."

"Uh, Lei?"

"What?"

"It's not...quite...over."

"What do you mean?"

Grudgingly opening her eyes again, she looked at Hitomi, who pointed directly at Kokoro. The small Japanese woman wore a devilish smile that needed no words to get the message across.

The bet. They were doomed.

## Kapitel 4: Now and Forever

There were dreams that you never wanted to wake up from, dreams that you would do anything for to make them last forever. Yet they never did.

When Leifang awoke shortly after the first sun rays had crawled over the horizon, her first thought was to cry, and the second one to smile.

Cry because it was the last day on this island, but smile because the position she found her friend in was absolutely impossible to resist.

Turning her head a little to the side, she found the other girl snuggled tightly up to herself. Hitomi's right arm was firmly wrapped around Leifang's stomach, while their legs were completely entangled. Even though it was already warm enough as it was, Leifang didn't mind the closeness of their bodies. At all.

Though she found her heart to be beating a little too hard to be completely comfortable, and her skin tingling far too much for her liking.

The second week on this island had passed in a flash, and very much like the previous mornings, the Chinese girl had awoken to see her partner's face. It was the icing on the cake complementing their fantastic time.

But it wasn't just her. Everyone had passed the last week in high spirits and they all had gotten along a lot better than before.

After countless tries and the expense of endless patience, Leifang had finally mastered the water slide, at least to a degree that allowed her to race it without risking another nervous breakdown. Hitomi on the other hand had made tremendous improvements at volleyball, though they still hadn't gathered up the nerve to challenge Helena and Christie for a third time.

Kasumi could be greeted with a smile now, and if one were to talk to Helena and Christie out of the blue, one would receive an answer that wasn't wholly indifferent. While the former probably had to do with Tina keeping her hands to herself more, the latter was actually because Kokoro had hers in it, as even Leifang herself had noticed. Not that it really mattered. She was simply glad that they had had such a good time.

Hitomi and her had wasted hours soaking in the pool until their skin was all wrinkly, and had spent even more time making photos of each other at the beach, filling film after film until both of them had so many photos of each other that they could decorate their walls at home with it.

Every evening, they had talked so much that they had rarely got into bed before midnight, and had looked accordingly tired the morning after, until they'd take a nap at noon. Neither of them cared for the circadian rhythm here. It was the holidays, after all.

Remembering what Hitomi had told her the previous evening, Leifang gently brushed a stray lock of hair out of her friend's face, touching her skin ever so softly as she did so. The brunette's brows creased for a few moments, but then relaxed again without rousing her.

"You'll be angry if I don't wake you, but...", Leifang whispered and her right hand stretched out to stroke her friend's head, which lay snugly on her shoulder. Careful to not stir her out of her sleep, she softly ran her fingers over Hitomi's head down to the nape of her neck. Her fingertips trembled as she did so, and she stopped herself from going further. She shouldn't be doing this.

Deciding not to wake Hitomi even though she had promised to do just that, Leifang carefully retracted her arms and disentangled her legs from the other girl's before sitting up.

It was time for her training. Even though she was on vacation, she hadn't skipped out on her morning exercises even once. If she did, she would just regret it later. Just one day from now on, her life would be back to normal, after all.

Back in China, back with her family. Back to her solitude.

"So that's it, huh...", she mumbled to herself, allowing herself one last glance at Hitomi before getting up.

This afternoon, she would be on her flight back home.

Leifang let out a long sigh as she rubbed her head in irritation. This was the worst.

"I'm gonna miss you, silly.", she said with a sad smile, gingerly touching the German girl's cheek with her fingertip. "I really will."

Hitomi's lips parted slightly at the caress, causing Leifang to withdraw her hand quickly. She really shouldn't be doing this, however tempting it was. If Hitomi were to know just what kind of thoughts she'd been having, she would be disappointed.

She had been content with watching, up until now. She had been satisfied with playing around occasionally. But now it wasn't enough, and it took all of her willpower to last through this one last day without cracking. It was better this way. Hitomi already had so many worries, so it was the best she could do not to add another one out of her own selfishness.

With another sigh she eventually got out of bed, unaware of Hitomi's eyes fluttering open as she shifted her weight on the mattress.

"...Lei?", the German girl asked drowsily, not quite awake enough to know what was happening. She just saw her partner move away, and her arms reached out on their own, trying to grasp Leifang's hand before it got out of reach. "Meanie..."

"...eh?" Feeling her hand being pulled at, Leifang turned back to her friend.

"Don't leave me alone...", Hitomi whispered, tugging harder at the hand she was holding to force the other girl back toward her.

"Silly. I was just going to do some exercises and then come back." Leifang chuckled softly when Hitomi looked at her with a pouting face, refusing to let go.

"Not today." Contemplating her choices for a few moments, Leifang eventually gave in and lay down again, watching a content smile spread over her partner's lips. Hitomi immediately resumed the position she had been in just moments earlier, hugging the Chinese girl almost too tightly for comfort.

"You're unusually clingy today.", Leifang commented, facing the ceiling to avoid Hitomi seeing her reddening cheeks. Maybe she really wouldn't get around to doing her exercises, today.

"You say that as though it's a bad thing.", Hitomi said and chuckled. Closing her eyes, she relished the calm atmosphere. Leifang's even breathing, the waves outside, the wind in the curtains in front of the open wooden doors. If she had the choice, she would stay in bed with Leifang all day.

But there were still things to be done before the day ended and she would board the helicopter that would take her back to Germany. She was looking forward to being home again, but at the same time she dreaded to go. She didn't want to.

Leifang was unusually quiet this morning, and Hitomi gathered that the other woman felt it, too. They didn't really want to leave.

"How late is it?", the German girl asked after a few minutes of silence, even though she had told herself not to count the remaining hours.

Lazily turning her head to the left to take a look at the alarm clock, Leifang gave a small smile. "Half past six." It was still early.

"That means we still have one more hour.", Hitomi concluded, thinking about how to put the time to good use.

"Hey, what're you thinking about?", Leifang asked, curiously regarding Hitomi's brows crease in deep thought, until they finally relaxed again.

With a suddenly enthusiastic smile, Hitomi grinned at her friend. "Training, what else? Let's start right now."

Without even waiting for a reply from her friend, the German girl hopped up to her feet and bounced on her toes, causing the mattress to shake slightly.

"What, a pillow fight?", Leifang asked a little sceptically, noticing her friend's sudden change in mood.

"Now that you say it, that would be good, too." With a look to the spot where she had just been lying, Hitomi frowned slightly. "We've only got one pillow though, so that's out of the question."

"True. But..." In spite of the silent agreement to let that idea slide, Leifang's hand immediately reached out for the long cushion and flung it at Hitomi. "...it's good enough for me!"

"Hey!" Having almost anticipated this attack, Hitomi's hands immediately shot forward to catch the pillow. However, the forceful throw was enough to send her tripping off the bed.

The moment she regained her footing however, she threw the pillow right back at Leifang. The Chinese girl saw it coming from miles away, though, dodging the harmless projectile and grabbing one of its corners with her hand right before it got out of reach.

"Gutsy, aren't you?", she called, aiming for another hit on Hitomi, who in turn made a run for it and turned her back to Leifang.

"You won't get away!" Easily leaping over the broad bed as though it was half in width, she dashed after her friend until she had her cornered on the terrace. "Trapped."

Seeing Leifang give a satisfactory grin at her accomplishment, Hitomi had to smirk as well. "So come and get me, why don't you?"

The way Hitomi boldly faced her, with her hands on her hips and her slim but strong body only covered with her underwear, made it impossible for Leifang not to falter for a second.

That particular second was enough for Hitomi to get away. With a strong push she heaved herself over the wooden rail behind her and before Leifang was able to react, she was gone.

"Whoa!" Darting forward, Leifang leaned over the rail to look into the ocean. And sure enough, Hitomi was looking at her from a few meters away, waving at her with a huge grin on her face.

"You wouldn't get the pillow wet, would you?", she called, pointing at the soft cushion Leifang was still holding.

"Well, you got your underwear wet.", the Chinese girl pointed out, a telling smirk visible on her face. "But you're right. No point in dragging the pillow into this."

Climbing onto the rail and standing up with her arms crossed in front of her chest, she looked at Hitomi dangerously. "I'd better get you myself."

"Then go ahead and try." With one last wave, Hitomi turned around and swam away

from the cottage and Leifang.

For a few moments, Leifang simply gazed after her with a look of complete contentment. "Trust me, I'll get you wherever you are.", she whispered and waited for five more seconds until she leaped in a long arch into the water and followed her.

The water was cooler than she had expected, but was still bearable as long as she kept moving, which she was doing rather fervently right now.

After emerging on the surface again, she could see Hitomi several meters ahead of her, swimming toward a large red buoy in the distance. She was doing breaststrokes, while Leifang went for butterfly strokes to catch up quickly.

Hitomi wasn't the greatest swimmer, so she was caught up on soon even though she'd had a head start. However, Leifang patiently trailed her until they reached the buoy that was anchored a hundred meters away from the shore.

Just before Hitomi could touch the buoy and look behind her to check for her follower, Leifang swam past her and blocked her way.

"...gotcha.", Leifang grinned, spreading her arms to block Hitomi's path, only using her legs to keep her afloat. Her breath came in short and quick intervals, but her face wasn't quite as red as Hitomi's, who was similarly panting for air.

"Aww, I'd thought I'd be able to make it.", Hitomi said, but there wasn't a shred of disappointment on her face. Instead, she was smiling happily. "Still, you don't look too tired. So how about we go a little farther?"

So that was Hitomi's idea of alternative training. Leifang certainly didn't object to it, even though swimming only served to strengthen the body and not the techniques. It was certainly more fun than her usual solitary exercises.

"No way, it's dangerous. What if you get a cramp or something?" While Leifang herself felt perfectly fine, she worried a little for Hitomi, who while smiling, seemed a lot more exhausted than her. As always, she had probably given more than a hundred percent.

"Then...I'd count on you to be my lifeguard.", the German girl answered easily, swimming close enough to Leifang to look straight into her eyes, but without hindering her legs' movement.

"How presumptuous of you.", Leifang smirked. "So what if I get a cramp, too?"

"Then I'd go down with you. ...sounds kinda romantic, don't you think?"

"Silly." Rolling her eyes, Leifang made a face at her friend. "Let's go back." However, before she could distance herself from Hitomi, the other girl slung her arms around her neck, holding on tightly.

"Take me with you.", she whispered into Leifang's ear, drawing her body close to hers.

The Chinese didn't say anything for a few moments, but eventually giggled while trying to stay afloat in spite of the added weight. "What, a cramp after all?"

"No, but I'm lazy, and you...", Hitomi immediately replied, pecking Leifang's neck playfully. "...need more training."

"A-alright, alright.", Leifang said, inwardly grateful that Hitomi wasn't facing her as her face took on unnatural shades of red, which were even worse than usual and only intensified when Hitomi placed one ear onto her back as she swam.

She was sure the German girl could hear her heart's every beat, which didn't calm down in the least until they reached the cottage.

Stepping onto the terrace with their clothes still dripping wet, Hitomi immediately went over to her wardrobe to pick out two dresses, heedless of the trail of water she left behind.

"So it's these two today?", she asked, holding up the dresses for Leifang to see. However, the Chinese girl just grimaced before facing away and making a half-hearted wave at the rightmost dress.

"Honestly, where on earth did she get these?", she asked, catching the large towel Hitomi was throwing at her, eyeing the dresses with utter contempt. Even though she had picked the red over the blue one, it didn't really make a difference. They both looked horrible, with their knee-length cut and nauseating amount of frills.

"Beats me. Not sure I wanna know.", Hitomi laughed softly as she laid her dress onto the bed in front of her. In contrast to Leifang, she didn't mind the dresses as much. They looked kind of funny, even. At least keeping in mind that she only had to wear it one morning.

Using her own towel to dry herself off, she then took off the top and bottom of her underwear, replacing them with dry ones.

By the time she turned around because of the frantic steps she had heard behind her, Leifang had already vanished into the bathroom, taking her dress with her.

And said girl didn't leave the bathroom earlier than fifteen minutes after that, giving Hitomi more than enough time to get dressed.

When she finally stepped outside, though, her look was even more miserable than before. "Seriously, I'll never make another bet in my entire life."

At the sight of her friend, who stared at the ground and for all the world looked like an angry little child, Hitomi couldn't help but grin broadly.

"...wanna bet on that?"

—  
"Leave me alone!"

"Ayane..."

"Is this some funny game to you? Go away!"

"Ayane!"

Kasumi had been prepared for being yelled at. Though she could never say that she was used to it, she could at least endure it most of the time. But the way her half-sister was looking at her with so much disappointment and anger in her eyes made her feel a lot worse than she had expected. She felt horrible.

"You have to understand...", she said in an almost pleading tone, but her younger sister blocked her excuse off immediately.

"Well, I don't! You try understanding being toyed with!" Ayane was angrily packing her clothes, forcing the garments into a suitcase that was obviously too small to fit all of them. Her half-sister stood in the doorway, having been told to leave. Again.

"I wasn't toying with you.", she said truthfully, but didn't even succeed in making her sister turn around to look at her.

"Oh yeah?", came the angry reply. "So how come you just told me you're going to disappear?" Finally succeeding in closing the suitcase even though some fabric was still sticking out, Ayane gave a long sigh.

Kasumi bit her lip at these words, squeezing her eyes shut. She hadn't wanted for this to be so difficult.

Maybe she had tried too hard to make light of the situation, asking her younger sister for a head start. Maybe she shouldn't have said: "Please take care of my other followers, like you always do." And maybe she had been better off leaving without a word, even though it would have broken her heart.

"The two weeks are over. I just-", she tried to explain with trembling lips, but wasn't given the chance to do so.

"You're just mocking me! Now get out of my sight!" Ayane didn't know what to say, anymore. She had never been good with words, so she always kept on repeating the same things, and getting frustrated once they wore off and lost their effect.

Her hands clutched the suitcase in front of her, which didn't break even though it bore all of her aggression.

"No...no...", Kasumi shook her head violently. This wasn't fair. "I just..."

"I don't want to hear it!" Ayane's yell resounded throughout the room, and Kasumi felt her ears ring at the sheer volume. Ayane had shouted at her more often than she could count, but never quite like this. Never with such finality.

"Go away, leave me alone like you always do!" The younger girl's voice broke near the end, and she continued in a quieter, but not less angry voice. "I hate you. Get lost!"

After that, the only thing that could be heard was Ayane's heavy breathing. Her whole body was still trembling despite her efforts for the contrary. When had she begun to feel quite like this? She had been far better at hiding her feelings, once.

Kasumi didn't do anything for several moments. She didn't say anything, she didn't move. She didn't even breathe.

However, when she did, out came a few choked sobs until she hastily covered her mouth with her hands. Tears poured out of her eyes as she tried not to breathe at all, for fear of being caught crying.

But Ayane had already noticed. She had heard the first high-pitched sound, which seemed remotely like a hiccup, but too forced not to be something else. And now that she turned around and stared at Kasumi's face, she found that she was surprised even though she had known. Her sister was crying. She couldn't see her eyes, but could tell from the wetness on her hands and the sounds she was making.

And it made her unbelievably angry.

"Why...why are you crying? You're not the one who's supposed to cry here!", she shouted, but Kasumi didn't stop, continuously trying to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"W-what are you, you cry-baby?" Ayane's words only increased the flow of tears on her cheeks, and the younger girl was left staring at her sister, whom she had never seen like that before. Kasumi had often been close to crying, but had always had enough willpower not to. She was a runaway ninja, she couldn't afford to be weak. Never.

And yet, there she was, right in front of her. Covering her face with her hands, unable to look up.

"...stop it already!", Ayane eventually shouted, walking up to her and grabbing Kasumi's hands to tear them away from her face to be able to look into her eyes. She couldn't stand it. She couldn't stand to see her sister cry even though she was always strong. And not when Ayane herself was the one who felt like crying the most.

"No!" She was caught off guard when Kasumi suddenly pushed her away with surprising force, violently jerking her hands free from her younger sister's grasp.

"How can I do that, when you continue to say those things to me? It hurts, you know!"

Kasumi glared at Ayane in defiance, stepping closer to her as she continued. "How am I supposed to know how you feel? You never say anything!", she hissed with an irritated look on her face, glaring at Ayane when all the other girl had to offer was an open-mouthed stare.

Looking at her hands, as though Ayane was sure that they bore marks from what happened only seconds before, she shut her mouth.

"S-so you're blaming me now?", she asked after a few moments of complete silence, trying hard to regain her features and get the look of utter perplexity off her face. "Is that it?"

She knew that she was being too hard, and she knew that her sister was doing what she did out of consideration for her. She knew all of this, but it still hurt too much to see that Kasumi didn't understand in the least how that made her feel. But seeing the anger in her sister's eyes, she knew she had gone too far.

"No!" Kasumi's voice was so loud that even Ayane was startled by it. "I know it's all my fault. But you know..." Trailing off for a moment, Kasumi used it to close the distance between herself and her sister, taking both of her hands in hers.

"Won't you believe me? Just...believe me..." Reducing her previously loud voice to a whisper, she regarded Ayane's warm hands in hers as though she was seeing them for the first time. Her long, slender fingers, her light skin that was also a little rough to the touch.

"I never...wanted things to end like this for us. I'm sorry for never standing up for you when the others treated you badly. I'm sorry for not saying anything when you were taken away from me, even though you hoped I would. And I'm sorry...for not thinking about you when I ran away."

Her voice cracking at the last part, Kasumi took a deep breath and forced the sob that threatened to emerge again down her throat. Squeezing her sister's hands gently but firmly, she looked directly into her eyes, trying to manage a small, hopeful smile. It was hard.

"But trust me...when I say that I haven't thought about anything but you ever since."

By the time she finished, her eyes were averted from Ayane's, and she couldn't bring herself to look at her again. Instead she felt Ayane's shivering hands, unconsciously squeezing her own tighter. There was no response coming from her lips, and Kasumi's heart sank with each passing second until she couldn't bear it anymore.

"But I can't....do...any more than apologize, and there's just no way this...can work between us. I want it to, but..."

"So you're giving up before even trying." It was a statement rather than a question, and Ayane drew away her hands as she eyed Kasumi stubbornly. "You're running away, again."

"I'm not-", Kasumi protested, but was quickly silenced when Ayane pointed directly at her.

"You are!" She was always like this. Realizing she was shouting again, she forced herself to calm down, looking decidedly past her sister. "But not this time. You won't get away. I won't let you."

"But..." Her eyes wide with surprise, Kasumi stared at her half-sister, not sure what to make of this last sentence.

"No buts. I'm coming with you. I don't care where you go, but I'm not letting you get out of my sight." Saying it in her usual dismissive voice, Ayane was startled to see new tears in Kasumi's eyes and immediately frowned. "What's it now?" Had she said anything wrong again?

"You...you can't say that so lightly." Feebly wiping away the tears, Kasumi looked at Ayane with a mixture of happiness and sadness alike.

"I'm serious, you know." She hadn't said it without thinking about it. She had already made her decision. She would follow Kasumi wherever she went. But this time right beside her, instead of a few steps behind.

"I know...Ayane." She always hesitated for a short moment when calling her sister's name, though she didn't know why. "That's why you just can't say it like that." She bit her lip as she said this, trying hard to refrain from saying too much.

"You think it's easy to get rid of me, but it's not. I won't let you leave me behind again." With those words, Ayane turned away again, occupying herself with packing her clothes and putting everything in order. Anything that kept her from looking at Kasumi.

"Don't...make me say it again." Kasumi's voice trembled as she said this, but Ayane refused to look at her. She heard her sister walking away, but didn't react. However, when Kasumi was about to step out of the door, she called after her.

"What?" She couldn't believe that Kasumi would actually leave like that, and went after her to stop her. As she touched Kasumi's shoulder, her sister immediately whirled around, her features contorted with despair. "That you can't! You can't come with me!"

"...so you really hate me that much?", Ayane asked warily, taking a step backward only to be caught in her sister's arms again.

"No, I love you. More than anything! That's why you can't come with me." The words came too fast for Ayane to make any sense of them, and she forgot her own questions as she was simply held tightly.

Kasumi didn't know what to do, anymore. She wanted this, more than anything else.

To hold her, to touch her, to be able to look at her all the time. To be able to talk to her.

She didn't want to go back to her previous life, but at the same time knew that this was the only option for her.

When she spoke again, her voice was soft, loving. She didn't want to shout at her sister, anymore.

"A ninja who runs away...they would chase you forever. You'd never be able to live in peace." There were so many things that got in the way, too many consequences each of their actions brought.

She didn't want the same for her sister, it was just too hard. Being chased every day, being hated by everyone. Not for who you were, but simply for one single decision you made. Ninjas didn't believe in second chances.

Though the hardest part was the loneliness. She hated being alone.

Kasumi didn't lighten the embrace until Ayane started to laugh. It wasn't a happy laugh, however, but one born from the sense of irony that both of their lives held. And looking at her younger sister, Kasumi realized that Ayane too, was crying. Like the small child she used to be, only that it broke her heart in ways far crueler than before.

"So what? Is this peace? Am I any better off chasing you, but never quite reaching? Having to think of excuses to make the others believe that you're still the hated outcast whom I want to kill? How is that peaceful?", she asked with her voice raised, but didn't let go of her sister. "I hate them! I hate all of this!"

At first, it had felt good to finally be accepted by everyone in the village. But that victory had been empty. She hadn't had anyone to show it to, no one to mock with it. No sense of vain superiority. And also, she knew. She knew that underneath, the people in the village were still the same. They were cheering for her now, but for how long? One wrong step and she would be killed. There were no mistakes in the life of a ninja.

She knew she didn't need those kinds of people in her life. She needed no one. Just...her.

"Are you sure you can do this? If you come with me, you'll be hated forever by the villagers, and you'll never be able to return." Kasumi faltered for a moment as she said this, but lifted Ayane's chin with her finger to look into her eyes. "It'll be hard."

Ayane knew this. She certainly hadn't said what she had, without knowing of the severity of its consequences. And yet, the all-embracing sadness she saw in her sister's eyes was so deep and genuine that it took her breath away for the faintest of moments. It wasn't the kind of sadness that had developed out of simple worry. This was what she knew, what she had experienced. Those were her scars. Kasumi knew exactly how hard it was and how much harder it would be, from here on.

And Ayane realized that it hadn't been just herself who had been suffering all this time.

"Well..." Rubbing her nose with the back of her hand, which was still wet from her previous tears, she tried to smile easily. "Just as usual, then."

Staring at each other for the longest moment, Kasumi couldn't say whether her head or her lips started moving first. However, as she silently whispered words left her mouth, her lips seemed to be already on Ayane's.

"...got it."

Even though Ayane hardly reacted, and even though Kasumi herself didn't know what to do once the sensation of kissing her sister hit her, it didn't matter. Nothing else mattered. She completely lost herself in it, closing her eyes when she felt Ayane's arms wrap around her.

They were strong, and they held her more securely than she would have ever dreamed. She wanted this. More than anything in the world.

Breaking the kiss, Kasumi buried her face in Ayane's shoulder, not daring to open her eyes in between to look at her sister, out of fear what she would find.

However, the embrace didn't loosen. She wasn't pushed away, and as Ayane's voice reached her ears, she heard something she would have never dreamed of hearing again.

"Let's go...Kasumi." She felt Ayane's warm hand on her head and between her hair, stroking it with a gentleness and carefulness that made her want to cry all over again.

"Let's run, together. Far, far away."

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Tina had always liked to sleep in. Late. And even though she hadn't made a single exception of this rule while staying on this island, it had been her earnest endeavor to make one, this last day.

Not that her endeavors usually amounted to much without the help of others. But by the time she opened her eyes and saw the glaring red LED's on her nightstand forming a large eleven, she couldn't suppress a groan even though she wanted to. It was too damn late.

As her eyes roamed around to get her bearings, her limbs stretched into every direction to feel for the familiar body somewhere close to her. It wasn't there.

"Lisaaa...", she moaned weakly, yawning halfway as her eyes were dangerously close to shutting themselves again.

"Right here.", came the soft response, and when the blonde's eyes finally managed to focus long enough on the figure in front of the dresser in the far corner of the room, she had to smile.

"Hey...what'cha doin'?", she slurred in the way she knew would make her partner laugh, which it did without fail, even today.

"Packing. What do you think I would do with your clothes?", came the question back, accompanied by a light chuckle.

"Do I really want to know?", Tina teased playfully, now completely awake. "But really, packing already?" She watched her friend with raised eyebrows, wondering just why Lisa was wasting so much of their fun time to neatly fold every piece of clothing to fit into a suitcase.

"Don't 'already' me, it's only a few hours, you know.", Lisa said, and the sigh that followed sounded too disappointed for her own liking.

Tina didn't pick up on it, though she was a little disappointed herself. Two weeks had passed much too soon, and as much as she loved her current life, vacation with Lisa beat the hell out of work any day. She wondered if the other woman felt the same, being the workaholic that she was.

Usually, she couldn't keep her mouth shut even if she wanted to. But there were some things that were just a little hard to say, even for her. "You should've woken me sooner if there's so little time."

Putting the last article of clothing into the suitcase that now looked as though it could hold at least twice as many, Lisa turned around to the blonde with a playful smile dancing on her lips. "You know you're grumpy in the morning."

"And you know that's only...sometimes. Just risk it." A huge grin spread across Tina's face as she used her right hand temptingly to beckon Lisa to come over to the bed. "Aren't you always the brave one?"

"Don't make fun of me." To Tina's surprise, Lisa even blushed slightly as she said this, which was something that she just found irresistibly cute, no matter how often she saw it.

Eying the blonde's outstretched hand as she walked over to her, she eventually took it in hers. "Your clothes are all packed now. I hope I didn't mix any of our clothes up."

"Doesn't really matter either way.", Tina grinned, pulling her partner close to her.

The look didn't mirror on Lisa's face, however. "You sure?", she asked a little hesitantly.

Tina knew exactly what this question meant, and immediately frowned. "...didn't we talk about this?"

"Sure, but..." Lisa was at a loss for words. She knew that they had discussed this and it had sounded like a good idea, but in the end it was just a little too fast.

"You said you were coming with me." Tina knew that she didn't need to remind Lisa of what she had said just the night before, but felt the need to say it again. She didn't know what the problem was.

"I know, but....maybe it's too soon?" Trying to look Tina into the eyes but only succeeding to do so for a few seconds, Lisa's eyes strayed toward the window. "I mean..."

"Don't tell me you're scared.", Tina said incredulously, staring at Lisa even though the other woman wasn't looking at her.

"I'm not...not really scared. It's just...sudden." She knew that her insecure voice didn't help to get this point across, but couldn't force herself to sound absolutely confident. Especially when Tina was looking at her as disappointedly as she was doing now.

"I don't get you at all.", she said and looked away, indicating that the conversation was over. Lisa remained where she was for a few moments more, but when neither of the two said anything, stood up and went over to the window and opened it. She felt she needed a bit of fresh air to clear her thoughts.

Of course she wanted to be with Tina, this part had never been the problem. She had loved the blonde ever since attending the same school as her, and had always kept in touch with her to a small degree, even after they had parted ways to follow their own dreams.

Though she had later picked up fighting because of her, hiding under a mask so she could watch over Tina without risking to be exposed and losing her job as a scientist.

But even though she had long lost that job now due to other reasons, she didn't regret it.

She had wanted a whole new start, and Tina's suggestion should have been perfect.

But it wasn't, because Lisa was still scared to give up her old life so easily, because she didn't know if her new one would last. Because she didn't know what others would think.

Completely lost in thought, Lisa didn't hear the blonde walking up to her and was startled when her arms sneaked around her neck from behind.

But it wasn't until Tina kissed the spot just above her shoulders that every hair on her body stood up and a shiver ran down her spine.

"Wha-what are you doing?" Alarmed, but not protesting against the other woman's advances, her hands sought out Tina's, which she found crossed in front of her throat.

Giggling softly as her kisses formed a trail downward, her answer was simple. "Trying to seduce you."

Squirming uncomfortably at the unexpected sensations, which intensified the lower Tina went, Lisa could hardly get her mouth to talk. "You're awfully...honest."

"Don't you love that about me?" Tina said it boldly as always without missing a beat, but was secretly glad that Lisa couldn't hear her heart beating so much faster than usual.

A giggle escaped Lisa's throat as Tina moved back up again, kissing her ear from behind with a tenderness that she rarely showed, as though she reserved it for occasions just as these. "A-among other things."

There was a flush of excitement that went straight through her heart as she said this, watching Tina step around her to look into her eyes. "Now I'm curious. Tell me."

As though to give her enough time to think of an answer, she leaned in to kiss Lisa, who in turn drew the blonde closer to herself. Tina's hands came to a momentary rest on her partner's hips when her lips did the contrary.

"Not a chance.", Lisa whispered when she eventually drew her lips away, smiling shyly. "You'll probably have some time to find out for yourself, though."

Tina didn't think of herself as usually perceptive. But upon hearing Lisa's last sentence, she immediately sought out her lips again, pushing her backward as she kissed her until the both of them stumbled onto the bed and collapsed on top of each other.

They stayed like this for the longest time: kissing, touching, exchanging smiles. And it wasn't until Lisa had pinned Tina down long enough to talk, that she asked the inevitable question. The one that had held her back the whole time.

"Will it really be okay?"

Knowing this question would come, Tina put on a knowing smile. "Don't ya worry. I'm pretty sure he thought worse of my acting career than he will about me having a girlfriend."

Amused at Lisa's blushing reaction to the word 'girlfriend', the blonde nudged her partner's nose with her own as she leaned up to kiss her cheek.

"Such a pretty one at that."

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"They're sure taking their time today..."

Not that she minded. The warm bed she was currently in was by far the best place to be, in her opinion. If she had things her way, she wouldn't set even one foot outside all day.

"Well, your demands were rather...exceptional, Koko.", Christie said tauntingly, shifting her weight on the mattress as she turned to the side to look at the younger girl.

"It must be a lot of work.", Helena agreed, also turning to regard her half-sister, who lay in the center of the bed. It was a guess more than actual experience. She had never earnestly cooked in her entire life.

"Oh, that's just like you two! Don't put the blame on me alone, when you had special wishes of your own.", Kokoro scowled, reaching out both of her legs to give each of her partners a playful kick under the blankets. While Helena was caught unaware, Christie was quick to evade.

"Tomato juice isn't hard to make.", she said decidedly with a shrug, having no intention whatsoever to take any of the blame.

"Blancmange either.", Helena quickly joined in, and with her 'opponents' on either side of her and her own excuse-lacking self in the middle, Kokoro gave in with a long sigh.

"Alright, alright. So that Japanese fruit salad, waffles and omelet might have been a little over the top.", she admitted, careful to avoid her partners' knowing looks.

Especially Christie's, who by now looked almost sadistically in her effort to make fun of Kokoro. "You forgot the Black Forest cake."

Kokoro had seen that comment coming from miles away, and immediately snapped back. "It was just a joke! I just said it because it's typically German!"

Truthfully, she only had wanted to tease Hitomi a little, but that plan seemed to have backfired on her. At the very least, she had a pretty good idea that it was, indeed, said cake that delayed their meal for an indefinite period. Who could have known that the brunette would actually do that?

"Still, a cake for breakfast...", Christie continued, until she received a better placed shove from Kokoro's foot that silenced her momentarily.

"Hey, it's almost twelve! Cut it out, you two." Now completely embarrassed for her insolent abuse of the wish her team was granted for winning the beach contest, Kokoro dove under the covers and shielded herself from Helena's and Christie's eyes.

Above the covers, Helena shot a long glance at the silver-haired woman opposite her, allowing for a small smile to cross her lips for one short, intangible moment.

"I'm sure she doesn't mind.", she said to her sister's aid. Hitomi struck her as the sort of person who would do any sort of work with a smile on her face. However, when her eyes fixed on Christie, her own smile faltered slightly and she looked away.

"Y...yeah." Slowly drawing the cover down again to reveal her face, Kokoro's face brightened slightly. "She probably really loves this, so it's all goo-"

Being interrupted by a sudden knock at the door, Kokoro stopped herself and instead grinned at both of her partners before clearing her throat over-dramatically. "Come in."

By the time Hitomi and Leifang entered the room, both laden with tablets, the Japanese girl wasn't the only one who had a hard time in keeping her lips straight.

"You're late.", she said in the most bored and disinterested manner she could muster, but quickly went silent when Leifang turned to look at her dangerously. Someone wasn't in for jokes. "G-great, I mean. You're great. The food looks amazing. Right, Helena? Christie?"

Both women on either side gave their silent approval by nodding while staring blatantly at Hitomi and Leifang, who were dressed in what seemed like old-fashioned maid dresses, carrying what they knew to be far more food than they could eat in a whole week.

"Sorry for the small delay." Hitomi's face was a little red, but she was beaming all over as she spread the tablets on the mattress in front of the trio.

Leifang on the other hand looked dead tired on top of seeming highly uncomfortable in her outfit that wasn't far from being utterly ridiculous.

"The meal is served.", she said sarcastically, but still had to smile when she looked over at Hitomi and caught the other girl admiring her own creations, which Leifang herself had had an amazingly small part in making.

"Why, thanks.", Kokoro said warily, not sure how far she could actually push it. However, spotting another small smile on the Chinese girl's lips as she stole a second look of her partner, Kokoro relaxed and turned to take in the whole extend of their 'brunch'.

"I rushed a little with the cake, but I hope it's still acceptable.", Hitomi apologized a little sheepishly, but then bowed wholly maid-like. "Will there be anything else?"

Instead of answering directly, the team of three simply grinned and shook their heads, watching their servants obediently leave and close the door behind them until they allowed themselves laugh openly.

"That was...wicked." Christie was the first to comment. She considered herself rather indifferent when it came to clothes and the various occasions on which specific outfits were necessary, but this was a little much, after all.

Kokoro on the other hand, who was looking at her with a puzzled expression, seemed to be of a different opinion. "What do you mean, 'wicked'? They were the cutest pair ever in those matching outfits!"

"...so that was your intention."

Helena didn't like to disrupt Kokoro's and Christie's conversations, and had come to love listening to the two of them quarrel playfully this whole last week. She was surprised about the both of them. About Christie, because she had never heard her laugh happily before, and had never seen such sincere smiles on her lips in all those years of knowing her. And about Kokoro, for her deep insight into other people's hearts and her ability to adapt to them almost effortlessly.

This whole vacation had felt so surreal, and only now that things were about to fall apart again, did she start to get used to it.

"They're both so thick when it comes to stuff like this, I just wanted to give them a hint...or something. So I had them doing partner activities the whole week." The fact that Kokoro didn't seem to mind that Hitomi and Leifang didn't know that, and were probably angry at her for all the tasks she had had them performing, was even more amazing in the blonde's eyes.

"Not without a bit of self-interest, though. Right?", Christie asked offhandedly as she sipped at her tomato juice and eyed the Black Forest cake with growing interest.

"Just...a little." Giggling as she cut a piece from the huge cake, which looked as though Hitomi had worked a few days on it rather than a few hours, Kokoro handed the plate to Christie before regarding her sister. Helena simply nodded, and without another word received a piece, as well.

"This is bliss, isn't it?", Kokoro sighed as she laid back, wondering if the three of them would even be able to eat half of the food they had been served. "Too bad it's over today."

"Aren't you glad you're rid of me, at least?", Christie asked with raised eyebrows, eying the younger girl challengingly. She didn't know why talking like that came so easily in her presence. Maybe it was the naiveté that surrounded her in spite of her otherwise sharp mind that made her easy to talk to. Though regarding the changes she was seeing in Helena, Christie knew it was more than that.

"You know...", interrupting Christie's train of thought with usual ease, Kokoro smiled knowingly at her. "As much as I'd like to say yes...I know I'm going to miss you, too. Well...kind of."

Turning around to her half-sister before she could see the slight redness on the Briton's cheeks, Kokoro blushed herself. "And you...too, Helena. I'll...really miss you."

She had lived sixteen years without even knowing of Helena's existence, but now that she had gotten to know her, she didn't want to let her go again. She wanted to know even more about her. She wanted to know the things that made her laugh, she wanted to hear her sing in front of hundreds of people, she wanted to be able to see her whenever she wanted to.

She felt childish.

"You don't need to." Hearing those words spoken to her as Helena looked deep into her eyes, Kokoro thought for a moment that the blonde had just read her mind.

"What I mean is..." Helena's eyes threatened to stray, but she kept them firmly on Kokoro's, trying to express herself in a manner that she wasn't used to. "That I'd like you to come with me."

Helena half-expected the other girl to stare at her in disbelief for saying something that was so unlike herself. But instead, the Japanese girl beamed all over her face, and without questioning immediately drew Helena close to her, laughing as she did so. "Really? Really?"

"Yes." Taking a stray lock of her younger sister between her fingers and softly placing it back behind her ear, Helena smiled almost shyly before placing a gentle kiss on Kokoro's forehead. "Really."

When she lifted her head a few seconds later to look at Christie, she found her head turned away, her face thus shielded from view.

Keeping Kokoro still in her arms, Helena reached out her right arm to touch Christie's shoulder cautiously. She didn't expect an immediate reaction, and was surprised to see the silver-haired woman turn around instantly. Her eyes regarded Helena with unusual intensity. It wasn't hate. But when Helena looked more closely, she found that there was nothing behind it. The gaze was empty, devoid of any emotion at all.

And that look made it all the more difficult for Helena to think, much less speak. "What about...you?"

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"Hurry with the suitcases!" She had known that lying in bed for too long might cause things to get a little hectic in the end, but seeing that the helicopter was already waiting for them made the both of them considerably quicker in their steps. Though Lisa still seemed to lag behind.

"What about...you carry it...for yourself?", said dark-skinned woman panted with as

much indignation as frustration. She couldn't believe the blonde sometimes. And even more, she couldn't believe that her own body would betray her like that after just two weeks of resting.

"Sorry honey, gotta stop the pilot!", Tina called with a smile, which widened upon seeing her girlfriend's helpless expression, who was heaving two large suitcases on each side of her.

Running ahead, Tina aimed for the helicopter that stood right in the center of the landing pad. However, running around the helicopter to get to the pilot's seat, she found it empty.

"Don't sweat it, he's off for a cigarette break...or something." A voice called from her left, and lifting her head to determine the person that belonged to it, Tina spotted Leifang a couple of meters away from her.

Hitomi was with her too, and the two of them sat on top of their suitcases in the arguably cool shadows of the trees, waiting for their flight just as she herself was.

"In that case..." Turning back around and putting on her sweetest smile, she waved at Lisa. "Take your time!"

Leifang couldn't help but grin all over her face at the sight of Lisa, who slowly approached the group in a state of obvious exhaustion. "Always having your servant ready, I see.", she said decidedly loud to make sure that the dark-skinned woman could hear it, as well.

"Not...funny.", Lisa panted as she set down the suitcases in front of her, bowing forward and steadying herself with her hands on her knees as she gasped for air. Running the entire way from the hotel to the landing pad had been more than enough workout for that day, that much was for sure.

"She's no servant.", Tina said, her voice slightly raised. But when she went over to the other woman, her voice softened. "She's just sweet that way. Right, honey?"

Kissing Lisa passionately without granting her the slightest chance to respond was more than enough to instantly wipe the grin off Leifang's face, who simply stared at them in open surprise.

Hitomi on the other hand wasn't surprised in the least, smiling contently at the other pair. "Now, that went well.", she whispered to herself, but when Leifang looked at her curiously, she simply shook her head.

She had known it since Helena, Christie and Kokoro had passed her and Leifang about twenty minutes earlier, collectively heading off for France. She had known because the three of them had looked so peaceful and content with themselves, walking arm in arm even though everyone could see them. Because Christie had looked at her for one long moment, seeming to say 'thank you' as well as giving a warning to stay away, in that unique way that probably only Christie could muster.

She was glad that the tournament seemed to have had the desired effects so far. She really was.

Smiling at the pair, whose grins looked like mirror images of each other, she didn't see Leifang's expression fall for the shortest of moments before it was replaced by another smile.

"So I guess you'll be leaving together?", she asked, giggling when Tina caught Lisa's hand demonstratively in response. "Yup. Lisa's comin' with me."

"Uh oh, going to meet her dad?", Hitomi asked with raised eyebrows, and even Leifang had to laugh, especially when Lisa blushed fiercely, which only intensified when Tina kissed her cheek.

"He loves her." The blonde positively beamed as she said this, and even Lisa soon relented, shrugging. "He loves me."

Even though Lisa couldn't say this with absolute certainty, she knew that it would be alright, as long as Tina was with her. As irresponsible as she was sometimes, as dependable she could be when it was important.

Looking at her partner lovingly, she caught sight of another pair approaching them, smiling widely as she did at the unexpected image. "Kasumi, Ayane!", she called and waved, causing the others to turn their heads as well.

Waving back with her left hand as her right one was held tightly by Ayane, Kasumi greeted the group as they walked over to them. "I didn't think you would still be here.", she said, looking both at Tina and Lisa, and Hitomi and Leifang. "I'm glad we can bid you goodbye before you leave."

Smiling sweetly as she said that, Tina had a hard time keeping her hands to herself, but one look at Ayane helped her in her decision. While not looking at all angry, the blonde had a feeling that even though they had all gotten along greatly this past week, doing something stupid now would push it a little too far.

As she looked over her shoulder to check for the pilot, she found him already waiting for them, tapping his foot impatiently. "Good timing then, we're just about to be off." Drawing everyone, even Ayane, into a quick hug, she grabbed her suitcase and girlfriend. "Not sure about you, but I had one hell of a time here! I guess we'll see you guys at the next tournament, right?"

"Well, if there ever will be another one.", Leifang muttered thoughtfully, but regretted her pessimism when everyone turned to look at her, their faces a little less cheery than before.

"Guess it depends on DOATEC's heir.", Lisa said, thinking of Helena. She had talked to the French woman a few days ago, scratching the topic that connected the two of them slightly. But whether Helena was going to go through with what she had in

mind, and if the tournament, which had always been just a farce, would be revived along with it, she couldn't guess.

"Oh, I know!" The fact that everyone in the group looked a little gloomy was completely lost on Hitomi, who suddenly smiled from ear to ear. "It's gonna have to be a tag tournament, then!" Tapping Tina's cheek playfully, she stole a mischievous glance at Lisa.

"I'm sure I'd get into trouble with a certain someone if I were to beat you in the tournament, so I'd rather have my backup ready, too. Right, Lei?"

"Tag, huh...", the Chinese girl repeated pensively, but eventually had to grin. "Sounds good to me. I'm on."

"We're, too.", Lisa agreed, giving Hitomi the victory sign as she slung her left arm around Tina.

The only pair left to voice their opinion about the idea were Kasumi and Ayane, whom everyone's eyes were resting on now. And while Kasumi seemed positively enthusiastic, Ayane was obviously less so.

"It's a great idea!", the ginger-haired girl exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "Right, Ayane? That way we could compete together, and not against each other. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Kasumi pressed herself close to her half-sister as she said this, smiling even though Ayane was decidedly avoiding her eyes to hide her embarrassment. Her arms found their way around her stomach to hold her close.

"A-as long as you don't hold me ba-", Ayane started, but was soon stopped as Kasumi's lips brushed over her neck from behind and her weak resistance was melted away much faster than she liked.

Tina, who was the only one to witness this scene with gaping eyes, while the others exchanged knowing smiles, coughed awkwardly. "W-well...we gotta get goin'. See ya, girls."

"Right. Have a safe trip home." Waving as Tina and Lisa left, they watched the helicopter take off.

It was strange to see them go like that. All the times they had met before, they hadn't put any thought into who their opponents were, and what kind of motives they had. But now that they were friends, they couldn't wait to meet again.

There were only a few minutes of silence until they could hear the roaring of another helicopter approaching, which was the one Kasumi and Ayane would be boarding.

"Where will you be going?", Hitomi asked in her innocence, but swiftly received a soft nudge from her partner at the question. "Don't ask that, dummy.", Leifang tried to whisper low enough for only Hitomi to hear, to little avail.

"That's...a secret.", Kasumi answered the question regardless, showing one of her mysterious smiles that always seemed to work its way around difficult subjects.

"...right. Sorry." Even Hitomi could see that Kasumi didn't look at all satisfied with the answer she had offered and immediately regretted her insensitive question.

Of course they couldn't tell them where they were going. They were ninjas.

"Don't worry. I'm sure we'll see each other again, some time. The world is pretty small." The ginger-haired girl eyed Leifang knowingly at the end, but before the Chinese girl took note of it, bowed and left together with Ayane.

Leifang let out a long sigh as she saw the helicopter disappear into the bright sky, wondering where it was heading to despite herself. They would probably tell the pilot to set the two of them off in the middle of nowhere. For some reason, she was really happy for them regardless of their tough situation.

A problem shared was a problem halved. She was even a little envious of them.

"I guess mine will be next, then.", Hitomi eventually said, forcing a small laugh as the sadness dreaded to sound too clearly in her voice. "Really, Lei, who did you bribe to be able to stay on this island the longest?"

"Hey, it's not like I asked for it. It'll be pretty lonely once you're gone." It was the truth, but they both laughed it off as though it wasn't.

"Oh, that reminds me...before I forget..." Opening her large suitcase and rummaging around until she found what she was looking for, Hitomi took out a thin case wrapped in light yellow paper.

Leifang didn't need to be told that it was a gift, the color alone made it obvious enough. However, instead of accepting it, she turned to her own belongings, opening one of her many bags she had carried on top of the single suitcase, taking out a gift of her own. She felt stupid for not thinking about it any sooner.

"For you!", both girls exclaimed at the same time she they extended their hands with their presents toward each other. Taking each other's gifts into their hands, both looked at them wonderingly. While Leifang could make a fairly decent guess as to what kind of item was inside due to the packaging, Hitomi was left utterly clueless.

"Mine's just...a small thank you for the great time with you." The German girl almost stumbled over her words, but managed to finish with a smile. "Don't you dare to open it before you're home, though!"

"Promised. And thank you." Leifang let her sweetest smile reign over her face, barely trying to contain the giddiness she suddenly felt. "You can open mine on your flight if you want. I'm sorry if it's not that special."

"Don't be like that. It's from you, so of course it's special." Hugging her friend to thank

her, Hitomi noticed the next helicopter approaching and sighed sadly.

"Hey, don't sigh like that. You're looking forward to being home again, aren't you?", Leifang asked, trying not to make things difficult in the last minute, even though her words reflected nothing of what she really felt.

"Y-yeah, I guess. I bet my parents are worried...you know how parents can be."

"All too well." Leifang grimaced as she looked over Hitomi's shoulder and saw the pilot motioning for them to hurry up. She drew the other girl close to her for one last time, wrapping her arms around her whole body for a few seconds before letting go again.

Though she didn't draw away immediately, and as her face came to be only a few inches apart from Hitomi's, she stopped for a moment, trying to say something but trying to keep herself from doing it, as well.

"...L-Leifang?" Hitomi kept their eye contact for a short moment longer, but then couldn't help but look away, shaking her head slightly.

"...yeah?" Something was still keeping her from drawing away completely, so she remained right in front of Hitomi.

"Do you...have anything to say to me?" Hitomi was startled herself at how direct it sounded, but didn't falter.

It was a perfectly simple question, one which Leifang usually wouldn't have any problem with finding a saucy response to. But this day was different, and Leifang could hardly bear the intensity with which the German girl was looking at her, barely getting her mouth to respond. "W-why?"

'That's what I'd like to know.' Pushing her pessimistic thoughts into the farthest corner of her mind, Hitomi cracked a smile. "It's just...I'll be gone in a few minutes, and it'll be too late then."

A sense of dread overcame Leifang as she heard nothing but the implications of this sentence. And when she spoke, it was with a little more force than necessary. "We'll...we'll keep in touch, won't we?"

"Of course! It's not like we'll never see each other again..." Hitomi put on her brightest smile as she said this, but eventually wavered. "...right?"

"Right." Touching Hitomi's shoulder but concentrating on not gripping her too hard, Leifang chuckled. "And now go before I'll start bawling."

Turning the German girl in direction of the helicopter, Leifang gave her a push, which Hitomi followed without another word. She turned around once before entering the aircraft, but then stepped inside and disappeared.

And Leifang was left alone with an unbearable silence left behind by the roaring rotor blades.

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It had been more than three hours already, and she wondered how long and how many tank fillings it would still take her to reach Germany. She wasn't impatient, she just couldn't bear to be on this helicopter anymore. Which had nothing to do with the helicopter, at all.

The pilot had given her a headset to simultaneously block out the noise of the helicopter as well as being able to talk to him. However, Hitomi wouldn't even have noticed all the noise without them, and so far hadn't exchanged so much as a single word with him. Her thoughts were much too far away.

They were with Leifang, and the gift of her in front of her. Her fingertips had traced it's outlines more often than she could count, but she hadn't even attempted to open it yet. A part of her felt the need to be alone when opening it, but the other part simply wanted to tear off the lid to see what was inside.

Knowing that she couldn't resist it much longer, she longed for a comfortable plane and her gift safely stored in the overhead bin, out of sight and touch of her restless fingers. Travelings the whole way by helicopter had certainly been the oddest idea yet, even though that the pilot wasn't to blame for that.

Leifang had said it was alright to open the gift before she reached home, though. Maybe she had said that to make sure that Hitomi did just that, knowing her curiosity well. Maybe it was even important to open it just now. A hidden message.

Her heart suddenly beat a little faster than before, and her fingertips grew hot at the thought of Leifang.

She had to open it now. She wouldn't be able to open it once she got home, by the time the full impact of having parted with the Chinese girl would have hit her.

And so her hands were quick to open the lid of the round sky blue box. She half-expected to find a hat within it, and knew that she would wear it every day even though she usually wasn't all that fond of hats. Often times, they looked just a little too girly for her taste.

However, lifting the lid up to see what was inside, she stared for a few seconds at the unexpected content and then laughed with her hands covering her mouth.

A hat, she had thought. She hadn't expected the kind of gift that was ultimately just typically Leifang. Inside the box was a sparkling new volleyball of the same kind they had played with on the island. It brought a smile to her face at the memory.

But it wasn't until she took the volleyball out of the box and spun it in her hands that she truly noticed what it was that made this particular ball absolutely irreplaceable.

There was a light red print on it, forming what Hitomi recognized without thinking to be Leifang's lips. Right above it was something written with a marker, and she pressed her lips together as she read it: 'Love, Leifang'

A lone tear trickled down her cheek in spite of her smiling face, but she made no attempt to wipe it away, instead looking into the box and spotting a neatly folded piece of paper. It was just ordinary paper and it was written on with a pencil, but the Chinese's neat and refined handwriting positively made it glow.

'To make sure you won't get bored without me, I'll give you something to waste away your time with. I still want a revenge on Helena and Christie some time, so you'd better train so we won't make complete fools out of ourselves again.

You know I hate to lose. I want to see you again.

Write me a letter when you get home, I love getting mail. The address is on the back.'

The note was short and ended as abruptly as it started. As written, turning the paper revealed Leifang's address, which she tried to memorize. Staring at the address while deep in thought, she eventually smiled sadly.

"Silly, Leifang. Don't you know that I can't play volleyball all by myself?"

Upon realizing this, she felt even lonelier than before and clutched the ball tightly to her chest.

She shouldn't have let Leifang go like that. She shouldn't have gone like that. Not when she knew that she was madly in love with the Chinese girl, and not when she knew that Leifang just had to feel the same. And reading the note again and again while trying to read between the lines, it told her the same.

But it was no good. They lived half a world apart. They probably didn't even know each other as well as they thought.

They were both girls.

"Lei...", she whispered as she faced downward, not noticing the pilot tilting his head slightly to the side.

If Leifang had just said it, Hitomi would have surrendered in an instant. But for her to take the first step without any certainty at all about the other girl's feelings was just impossible to do. She might laugh at her. She might be appalled and disgusted. She might never want to see her again.

Hitomi couldn't help these thoughts entering her mind endlessly, in a succession that left her no time to form a single, hopeful thought.

She had a thousand reasons to try and forget about Leifang, and just a single one that told her not to. And that reason was in her hands right now.

"Hey...do you have someone you love?", she asked after a few minutes, as if just remembering the functions of her headset.

The pilot was caught by surprise at the direct question, but then chuckled softly. "Sure do." His voice sounded a little hollow through the speaker, but Hitomi could tell that he was smiling.

"What would you do to be with her?"

"That's easy: everything." The answer came too easily not to be honest, and Hitomi caught herself smiling, as well.

At the very least, she wouldn't be the only crazy one.

"Why do you ask?", the pilot asked, still blissfully unaware of what the girl behind him would make him do, next.

"Just...curious." With a large smile, she bent forward, looking over the shoulder of the pilot. "Hey, let me do you a favor."

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The flight back to Shanghai had only lasted three hours, and with the crossing of time zones across the Atlantic, she had to set back her watch for two hours.

The first thing Leifang noticed when she stepped out of the helicopter at the airport in the outskirts of Shanghai was the climate. The wind was a little cooler, the air a little less humid. And with every breath she inhaled the whole lot of carbon dioxide she hadn't missed even slightly during the time she was away. It was a different world, to be sure.

Still, this was where she was born, where she had been raised, and the familiarity of her surroundings helped to raise her spirits, if just a little.

The two-hour intercity drive home through sluggish traffic had been grating on her nerves, though, even though it didn't make a difference in the end. She had nothing in particular to do at home. She would fall back into her rhythm of spending time with her family, training, and studying. Maybe going out shopping when she got too bored. The way it always had been.

She had never had a problem with her lifestyle before, but regarding it now with the distance of two weeks with Hitomi in between, it seemed empty.

She missed her already. She missed her so badly that she wanted to turn back time just to be with her again, to see her smile again. She felt that she could walk the whole ten thousand kilometers to Germany if it meant to be with her. But it was no use.

Because Hitomi was that kind of person. She was cute and all smiles to all people, she loved everyone. Equally. That's why Leifang had known when to put a stop to her delusions and let her go instead of burdening her with her own selfishness.

Leifang was a girl, and Hitomi wasn't that kind of girl.

"We're here, miss." The deep voice of the taxi driver shook her out of her thoughts, and she needed a few seconds to get her bearings.

Looking out of the window, she found the taxi parked in front of the wide wooden gate that led to the traditionally Chinese mansion of her parents. It was a little outside of the city, so it wasn't reachable by bus or train, which worked well to keep most people away.

"Thanks." Without even asking for the price, Leifang took two notes of 1000 yuan out of her purse and handed them to the driver. After that, she stepped out of the car without another word and went to the rear to open the trunk compartment.

The driver, who had previously just stared at the notes in amazement, leaped up from his seat and ran to the behind upon noticing that Leifang was taking out her luggage by herself. But by the time he did, Leifang had already removed her suitcase and bags and was heading toward the gate.

"Don't bother.", she said with a half-hearted wave and her back turned to the man, who bowed exaggeratedly but ultimately just drove away when Leifang continued to disregard him.

Alone again, Leifang solemnly faced the large doors in front of her.

"Home, sweet home.", she whispered, and then pushed the heavy doors open.

Their large garden which almost seemed like a park stretched for almost a whole kilometer, not making Leifang's luggage any easier to carry. But it was a beautiful sight regardless, if not quite natural, for the arrangement of the greenery was unmistakably man-made.

It was still early, so Leifang didn't hope to be able to greet her parents. Her father was probably off for an important meeting as usual, whereas her mother always worked late. It was a little unusual for both parents to be working full-time, but Leifang had always been proud of them for what they had achieved. Especially her mother, who had always served as a role model of sorts.

Looking at the ground as she walked, it wasn't until she stood a few meters in front of the entrance door that she spotted a person sitting on the stone stairs in front of it.

And it wasn't until she dropped her entire luggage in shock that this person lifted her head from where her eyes had been cast downward between her knees. To her left was a bicycle she had never seen before and at her feet, there were two German shepherds lying and sleeping peacefully.

However, it wasn't the fact that her so-called guard dogs were no more than harmless puppies that had Leifang staring in disbelief.

It was the brunette girl with a jean jacket and the cutest face in the world.

"Hi-Hitomi?" Leifang was amazed that she could get her mouth to speak at all, but when Hitomi stood up and walked toward her, words failed her.

"Welcome home, Lei." Hitomi's eyes were a little red, but she smiled sheepishly as she said this.

For a few seconds, Leifang couldn't react. She simply stared, telling herself that this couldn't be real, but always coming to the conclusion that it had to be. And when she opened her mouth again to talk, she voiced the sole question she was able to ask. "What...are you doing here?"

She only noticed that this was the worst question she could have asked when it was too late and Hitomi's eyes widened with surprise. But before she could amend it, the German girl shook her head.

"I...I just thought I'd...visit you." Of course it wasn't the truth, but she couldn't bring herself to say the truth while Leifang was looking at her with such an unreadable face.

"But...you can't be here! I mean..." Leifang was at a complete loss for words, feeling everything at once. She felt happy beyond words, but thinking back to Hitomi's situation, she felt guilty.

They hadn't talked about it, but Leifang knew that Hitomi's family wasn't all that well off at the moment, and that Hitomi had to take care of the dojo of her father to keep it running. She hadn't mentioned it and had instead tried to cheer the German girl up as much as she could. But for her to be here...

"It's okay...if you don't really want me here.", Hitomi said, her smile falling slightly. "I'll leave if you want. I just...I needed to tell you something that I should have told you earlier."

Hitomi had never been so unsure in her entire life, and the doubtful look her friend was giving her was enough to make her want to run away. Still, she wanted to be strong so badly.

"That's...why you came all the way here? Isn't that a little..." She knew she was saying the wrong things, but couldn't help it. Her worry for Hitomi was stronger than her own.

"No, it's not. It's important." Looking right into Leifang's eyes, Hitomi took another step forward.

"That..." Her eyes strayed to the ground for a short moment, but quickly returned with newfound determination. "I couldn't live without you...didn't you say that was your intention? Or were you all talk?" Her lips quivered as she said this, betraying the fact that she actually didn't feel half as brave as she had sounded just now.

Leifang didn't notice, however, still trying to comprehend the situation. She simply stood there with small tears in her eyes, trying to say something, anything, but finding herself unable to do so.

When no response came forth, Hitomi smiled sadly with a sense of understanding. In the end, it wasn't much of a surprise. But still, she was already too far out to turn back.

"Well, I wasn't." Taking another step forward, she half expected Leifang to step back, which she didn't.

"I know I'm a little dumb, naive, too trusty and really not one to think much before acting...but I love you. I want to be with you. And if you regret any of the things you said these past two weeks, you better say it now." Stopping to take a deep breath, she forced the sadness that was about to overcome her back down her throat. "Because it wasn't a joke for me."

She looked desperate. She was in a country she had never been to before. She didn't speak the language, not even a little. She didn't know anyone here, except for Leifang. And she had no idea how to get back.

Seeing this, Leifang did the last step to close the distance between them and hugged the other girl more tightly than ever before.

"B-but...what about school? And how will you get back?", Leifang voiced the problems that were taking over her whole mind right now. But her heart beat so fast and her body was so warm, and she felt so happy that she could hardly bear it.

"I...I don't know." Giving a sad little laugh, Hitomi looked at Leifang with the same sheepish expression of helplessness that Leifang had come to secretly love. "...not the way I came, I figure."

"Oh, you're...", Leifang started, but then stopped herself, smiling. "One of a kind."

There she was. The girl who loved her, the girl who had come all this way just to be with her, leaving behind everything else just for her sake.

Hearing Hitomi laughing cutely at her previous words, Leifang eventually succumbed to her feelings and leaned forward to kiss her.

She had never kissed anyone like that before, and it felt unlike anything she would

have imagined. But feeling Hitomi's lips moving against her own, she melted into the embrace and the sensations that flooded her body.

"Is...that your answer?" Reluctantly drawing away, Hitomi looked at the other girl doubtfully. She almost didn't dare to hope.

"Silly.", Leifang said and smiled, moving forward to kiss Hitomi again. "Do you need more proof?"

Leaning more heavily into the German girl as their kisses deepened, Hitomi was pushed backward a little and stepped back.

The subsequent howl that emerged from one of the dogs whose tail she had stepped upon startled the both of them so much that they almost stumbled and fell onto the stairs.

"S-sorry!", Hitomi panted, looking at the whining animal with a guilty look on her face. Crawling close to the dog, she patted it softly on its head.

Leifang couldn't help but laugh at the image, kneeling down to pet the dog, as well. "Forgive her Mina, she's just clumsy like that.", she said to the German Shepherd, who nudged Hitomi with its nose in response.

"I hope it didn't hurt too badly.", Hitomi apologized again, giggling when Mina licked her hand. "They're really beautiful, and so well-mannered too."

"I'm wondering about the last part...usually they show a different behavior toward strangers...which is the whole point of guard dogs, really. I guess they like you, for some reason.", Leifang said with mock disappointment, eying the dogs sternly.

"Maybe..." Standing up from where she had knelt in front of the dog, Hitomi gave Leifang another peck on the lips. "...they smelled you on me and knew that I belong to you."

Hitomi's words brought a smile to the Chinese's lips as well as a blush to her cheeks. "That...might be an explanation. Alright, I'll forgive you two this time.", she said to her dogs, who wagged their tails happily as though understanding her every word. As she looked at them, her eyes fell on the glaring red bicycle that Hitomi had leaned against the wall behind them.

"By the way...where did you get this bike? And moreover, what did you do with it?", she asked, her hands sneaking around Hitomi's hip to hold her close.

"Oh, that..." Laughing embarrassedly, Hitomi scratched her head. "I showed your address to the pilot, but of course he didn't know where it is. But he said that if it was somewhere in the city, he would let me off at the smaller airport instead of the larger one outside of the city. I hope he didn't get into trouble because he didn't have a landing permission..."

Hitomi's eyes widened at the thought, and she hoped that she wasn't responsible for any trouble the kind man had gotten into because of her. "Oh, and about the bike...I wanted to get a taxi, but didn't have any money he would take, and there was this young man with a bike, so-" Halting in mid-sentence when Leifang started to laugh, she eyed the other girl curiously.

"Now that was mean of you. Stealing a poor boy's heart to get his bike to see your girlfriend was really wicked." Not even stumbling over the word 'girlfriend', she poked Hitomi's nose playfully.

"I didn't do it on purpose...I guess I just looked really desperate and helpless, and he was the only one around who understood what I was talking about. I just wish he'd told me beforehand that the way would be more than fifty kilometers long."

"You're crazy.", Leifang said simply, both shocked and amazed at Hitomi's recklessness.

"Yeah.", the German girl agreed without missing a beat. "For you, that is."

The words came so easily for her that she wondered why she had kept them to herself for so long, waiting until it was almost too late even though the signs had been everywhere. But as long as she was here with Leifang, it was alright.

And as she entered the large mansion hand in hand with her, she knew that she had made the right decision in following her heart rather than her head.

"Now that I think of it, did you even tell your parents about this?", Leifang asked as she switched on the lights and set her suitcase down with sigh.

"Well...I called them and told them to let me stay away for at least another two weeks if they don't want me to simply elope with my new lover." Seeing Leifang's expression change from content to disbelief, Hitomi couldn't help but laugh. "I guess I just forced them to say yes while letting them know I'm okay."

"Things will get ugly...", Leifang commented warily. She didn't know Hitomi's parents, but could very well imagine the reaction of her own parents given a call such as this.

"Yeah, I'll be counting on you." Pressing Leifang's hands gently and smiling sweetly as she said this made it impossible for the Chinese girl to be mad at her.

"We'll work it out, somehow.", she chose to say instead, giggling when Hitomi took the suitcase out of her hands to carry it to her room. Trailing her with only her light bags to carry, a sudden question crossed her mind and she stopped in her tracks.

"By the way...you did tell your parents that only girls were invited to the island...right?"

Leifang took the subsequent sheepish laugh for a bad sign and didn't even need to hear the answer to know that they were in trouble.

"...did you?"