

S Tide Evol.

Von Tukuyomi

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, eying 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."

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.

—

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.

—

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."

"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.