

S Tide Evol.

Von Tukuyomi

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, eying 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 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 the 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."

—

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."

"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?"

—

"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.

—

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."

—

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?"