

S Tide Evol.

Von Tukuyomi

Kapitel 2: The Olympic games? Are you serious?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Up until now, Hitomi had never had the chance to watch Leifang like that. The only times she had seen her style from up close had been on the few occasions where they had competed against each other. Though in those cases, Hitomi hadn't seen the style as much as she had experienced it. And it was good.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Would that have been so terrible?"

"Yes. Very." Hitomi let her head sink back into the pillow underneath, a smirk dancing

on her lips. But then Leifang looked away and the special moment broke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You sure did." Stretching comfortably, Hitomi regarded the contents of the tray with

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nah." Waving her hand dismissively, the brunette chuckled at her friend's guess. "Not like that." With a curious glint in her eyes, she leaned close to Leifang. She smiled widely. "We'll do it in pairs."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Which was with an arm draped across her face this morning, as opposed to the leg of

the previous day. Which didn't make anything better, just different. She really should be used to this, but she wasn't.

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

Only wearing her over-sized shirt, she trod across the large room of the Gemstone Suite. Looking at herself in the large mirror as she passed it, she noticed her ruffled hair but didn't bother to set it straight just yet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So...", she eventually said, trying to change the topic which Leifang was surprisingly

privy on. "What brings you here?" With a glance at her clock, she grinned. "So early in the morning?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

tongue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I...actually meant the casino."

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

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

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

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"Out!"

"But Ayane-chan..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you like green tea?" Helena had a knowing smile on her lips as she asked this, and

received a simple nod in response. "Good." Instead of standing up, however, she cast a quick glance at Christie, who simply shrugged in return and went to prepare two cups of tea.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How would I know? She said she'd be here on time." So far Leifang had pretended not to notice the pearls of sweat on her forehead quite successfully, but she really wished Hitomi would just hurry up already. She hated being the only one left alone among all the others, without knowing any more about the tournament than they did.

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

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

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

"Lei!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Beach Flags, Water Slide, Pool-Hopping, Tug-of-War, Jet Ski, Butt Battle and Beach Volleyball, of course. Points will be given from three to one, and the pair with the

most points in the end wins. Careful, though. Most events are for one player only, so the pair has to decide on the one to compete. I hope you all know each other well enough for that." With an impish smile, Hitomi shot a suggestive glance at Leifang before continuing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let's just say that the winnin' pair can make the losing pair do anythin' they want. Does that sound interesting enough for ya?" Lisa's eyes grew wide as she listened to her partner's words. For some reason, this seemed like a really bad idea. The wicked look on Ayane's face didn't help things, either.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

disappointment.

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

"Please don't tell me you really forgot her.", Leifang muttered under her breath, standing right next to the German. She knew that it was partially her fault too, but she wouldn't have guessed that the situation would turn out quite as...awkward as this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

distance.

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

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

"I wonder if they'll be able to win their own tournament?", the blonde wondered aloud, causing Lisa to look at her sternly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"About us being a...team. You don't mind?" The words her sister had said in the

morning still rang in her ears, but even though Ayane had made it clear that she didn't want her around anymore, she hadn't objected to them being a pair in this tournament. Though Kasumi knew that this didn't equal acceptance, either.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You see...", the white-haired woman explained, "I'm terribly untalented when it comes to pool games, and your sister here..." Carefully putting emphasis on the word

"sister", she watched Helena's face darken even more and relished her achievement. "She feels a little unwell today. So we'll be counting on you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And with that, the game began.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, please. You've been all pumped up ever since the tournament started, Tina must

have told you something. I wonder what it is..." She sang the last bit, succeeding in causing the other woman's cheeks to flush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You sure?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not that it mattered, really.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ouch."

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

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

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

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

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

"A-ah..."

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

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

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

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

And right now, Kasumi found that this door resembled the imaginary wall between

her and her half-sister perfectly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

she let her.

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

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

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

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

"Fine."

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm home."