

S Tide Evol.

Von Tukuyomi

Kapitel 1: One-of-a-kind

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

God, how she hated thi-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

captor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damn, but it was hot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Darn it.", Leifang said in defeat, but still giggled at Hitomi's behavior. Seeing how

both Helena and Christie obviously demanded an explanation, she turned to Helena with a disarming smile. "Sorry. We were just having a little race to see who got to you first."

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

"Well..." Leifang lifted her hands defensively, then ran over to the nearby volleyball net and picked up the volleyball that lay close to it. "What do you think?" She demonstratively let the ball spin on her index finger, giving a smile as she did so.

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

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

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

Hitomi and Leifang cheered and clapped their hands together.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boy, was she wrong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In response, both women gave noncommittal shrugs.

Hitomi wondered just what had happened. She knew Helena to be a fairly passionate fighter, and even Christie seemed duller than what Hitomi remembered of her when

she had seen her in the early stages of the last tournament. For both of them to be so aggravatingly distant seemed off, even to herself, who usually lacked the sixth sense when it came to relationships.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Even if that's the case, it still gets on my nerves. I guess I'm just diligent in everything I do, nothing special.", she said and shrugged, but was surprised to hear Hitomi giggle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

better to leave those two on their own did cross her mind.

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

"It's probably not that easy for them. But I'm sure they'll work it out somehow. They're no kids.", Leifang said, but wasn't sure whether "working it out" was even the real problem between those two.

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

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

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

"What's your problem? Get lost!"

"We were here first!"

"So?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in the face as soon as she tried to get out.

Wait. She would never do that, would she?

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

Leifang hesitated for a few moments, now even more than before just wishing to leave the poolside. But she could already imagine Hitomi to fret about those two for the remainder of the day, so instead of worrying about what happened to them, she could as well take it into her own hands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who'd want to get close-", Leifang asked with a questioning look, but stopped

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

argument in itself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"N-not at all. Both are fine, really." Masking her embarrassment with a smile, Leifang

hoped to have gotten out of trouble until she noticed the glare Hitomi was giving her. "What...what is it?"

'Did she notice?'

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

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

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

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

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

'You're in trouble, Leifang.'

—

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

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

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

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

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

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

blonde hair twirling in front of her face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

thoughts had cleared a little.

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

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

"Sorry.", she tried to amend, touching Tina's shoulder gently. "Look...could you get me something to drink? Water." The last bit brought a grin to the blonde's lips, and she nodded before walking off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure!", Lisa agreed gladly.

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

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

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

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

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

cards.

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

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

"That's no fun then, is it?", Tina complained meekly, but let it go. She was more than a little sick already, and any more would surely do her in. Though there was always the tiny nagging thought that at least the incoming headache would be postponed if she simply continued drinking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's not over yet, and I doubt that trick works twice." With a sheepish laugh, Hitomi

handed the deck of cards to Lisa. "You wanted to shuffle, right?"

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

"I guess I'll have to be really careful from now on.", Hitomi mumbled as she carefully stacked her chips in front of her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone pass the table, and looking up revealed Kasumi and Ayane. Kasumi wore an elegant and immensely expensive-looking dress, while Ayane had gone with a far simpler, but nonetheless fitting outfit. The ginger-haired ninja looked up and caught Hitomi's eyes with a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't get it. Ayane's always moody and mean, who'd want to put up with her

willingly?" Leifang wasn't the type to gossip or badmouth people, but that purple-haired woman just gave her the creeps.

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

"Don't make fun of me!", the blonde whined, pushing a whole stack of chips to the middle of the table. "Rather, watch how I win this game!" Laughing hoarsely as she said this, she didn't hear Lisa's sigh, which was followed by her averting her eyes from the table.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, good night."

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

"I wasn't really...I mean..." Leifang stumbled over her words, wondering whether that

last cocktail had been a little too much, after all. Hitomi on the other side seemed pretty normal considering that she downed three of them straight. "Yeah, it was fun. Let's go again."

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

"Silly, why shouldn't we? You're acting like a kid.", Leifang said with laugh, but stopped abruptly by the time they left the hotel grounds. Hitomi looked at her curiously but when Leifang faced her, she wore an almost lecherous smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—

"Ayane-chan, please open the door." Despite having knocked countless times already, Kasumi tried again, rapping on the door three times. She was sure she had knocked loud enough, but there was still no response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks...Ayane-chan."

—

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

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

The British assassin on her windowsill had been the first thing Helena's eyes had come across of upon entering her apartment. The lock to the apartment had been intact,

and while the French woman didn't know how Christie had gotten inside, she didn't care to know, either.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So you're the coward."

—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mad about what?"

"About losing the volleyball game."

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

"But you hate losing."

"So? It was still just a game."

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

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

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

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

"At me?"

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

"Not really."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Alright."