

Soulmates

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Kapitel 1: Of all the things that can go wrong

Anita King was used to sleep less than seven hours most of the time. It hardly bothered her, though she tended to feel a significant lack of enthusiasm to exercise at school whenever she did. Not that it mattered, really. She didn't go to school for that. She would occasionally drink an extra bottle of milk to make up for it, and everything would be fine.

Anita King hadn't had any problems with her lack of sleep for as long as she could remember.

But she had never expected her body to exact its revenge on her on the single special day on which punctuality mattered the most.

"Crap, I overslept!", the young girl cried in surprise as she practically leapt out of bed, flinging her blanket across the room in the process. With her hair ruffled and unruly, and her eyes wide in shock, she stared at her alarm clock, which hadn't made a single peep so far. In fact, it wasn't even set to do so.

Glaring at the clock and trying to resist the urge to smash the useless frog-resembling device, which she had bought only a few days earlier, she took a deep breath, not bothering to remind herself that it was herself who had forgotten to set the timer the previous night. She should have known better.

She had wanted to be prepared and take her time, but glancing at the hands of her clock once more to make sure, she saw that her day was about to go to hell right after it had begun.

She quickly changed into a simple pair of dark blue shorts and a beige long-sleeved shirt, cursing her bad luck that had granted her no time to look for something nicer to wear. She would have opted for paper clothes, but the thought of having to spend the entire day in those made her cringe. It was bad enough that they wore them on missions, but the cool looks and usual distraction from their itching nature made up for it.

Now fully clothed, Anita brushed past the curtain dividing the room she shared with her older sister Michelle. The bed was empty and the sheets in order, confirming Anita's suspicions. So she had been awake longer than her, and still hadn't bothered to wake her even though she knew Anita's plans for today. Anita wondered what she had done to deserve such a family.

"Mi-nee!", the short girl shouted as she stomped down the stairs with unrestrained emphasis. She immediately spotted the oldest sister in the kitchenette, with her back turned to her.

"Good morning!", Michelle chirped unabashedly, not bothering to turn around to meet her younger sister's eyes. Her hands were busy to manage the pots and pans on the

stove, which demanded her undivided attention.

"Why-", Anita was about to launch into a full force rant when she stopped dead at the sight of the kitchen utensils. She descended the stairs to their end and went over to Michelle curiously.

"Why didn't you wake me?", she asked in a much quieter tone now, assuming a completely non-threatening stance.

"You looked so peaceful sleeping, I couldn't bring myself to wake you.", Michelle answered with an overdramatic look on her face. Her right hand turned off one of the heater plates. The rice was perfectly cooked.

"And we all know how you can get in the morning.", another voice cut in, and Anita spun around to see Nenene on the stairs, still clad in her grey-striped pajamas. Not that Anita had needed to see her to know who this voice belonged to. Only one person ever talked to her like that.

Anita was about to counter, but Nenene's bemused smirk halted her. "My, is that what you're going to wear?", the older woman asked with a scandalized look on her face.

"What..." Anita immediately looked down at herself. She had only bought these clothes the other day, and they were freshly washed and ironed. It was true they probably looked a bit plain, and if she had had more time she would have picked something nicer to wear, but under these circumstances...

Suddenly a realization hit her and she immediately turned to Michelle angrily. "You told her!"

Michelle grinned, but lifted her arms in defense. "I wouldn't dare." Then without another word she redirected her attention to the stove.

"But how-", the girl mumbled as she scanned the living room until her eyes caught sight of yet another person.

It was Maggie, who had been sitting passively on the couch so far. She was in a crouching position, reading a book as usual. Anita didn't see her face, but Maggie's trembling hands were a dead give-away.

With one swift motion, the redhead flung a piece of paper at the book, effectively ripping it from Maggie's grasp. Now with her face revealed, Maggie looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Busted.", Nenene commented dryly.

"Anita, I...", Maggie said, at a loss of words. She hated to make her sister angry, and was ashamed of herself as she thought back to the incident that had made her tell Nenene about Anita's special day. She had been too weak.

A firm smack on the head quickly brought her out of her thoughts, and when she looked up at Anita, she saw that the anger had already subsided, making way for simple annoyance.

"Don't be so hard on her.", Nenene said, lazily flopping down on the couch beside Maggie. "I made her tell me." At the sight of Nenene's dirty and overtly suggestive smile accompanied by a fierce blush on Maggie's cheeks, Anita decided to give it up.

Walking back over to Michelle, she saw that now rice, omelet, fried fish and steamed mushrooms were all ready and set beside Anita's favourite large lunch box.

"Will you take it from here?", Michelle asked and smiled gently, already knowing the answer.

Anita simply nodded gratefully, and gave her older sister a hug.

"Thank you, Mi-nee. You're the only one I can trust in this household.", she mumbled, causing Michelle to smile even more.

"I'll go look for some nice clothes for you.", the blonde said and went upstairs as Anita turned her attention towards arranging the bento.

"The kid is so energetic in the morning.", Nenene mumbled while stifling a yawn. Maggie, who had recovered her protection in the form of a book, remained silent. Nenene sensed her body stiffening, however. It was challenging her.

Leaning over to Maggie, she made sure to snake one arm around Maggie neck while bringing her mouth dangerously close to touching the taller woman's ear.

"Make me some coffee?", she asked in the sultriest voice she could muster so early in the morning, and watched Maggie's face redden with obvious satisfaction.

For a moment the bestselling author played with the idea of clinging to the other woman to see if she would struggle free, but her brain needed coffee. Badly. So she watched Maggie hurry away, taking a note in her mind to tease the shy woman more often.

While Maggie took a large cup from the cupboard right above the spot where Anita was just giving her creation the finishing touches, she couldn't help but stop to regard her small sister's bento in all its glory.

Anita needed a few moments to realize that Maggie's shadow above her wasn't moving anymore, but when she did, she let out an embarrassed squeak and quickly covered the bento with her body.

"Don't look, Ma-nee!"

Maggie, caught red-handed, looked down and mumbled a quick apology and ruffled Anita's hair gently before she occupied herself with the coffee machine.

"What're you doing so secretively?", Nenene, who had watched them, asked as she came over to see for herself.

She knew, of course, exactly what Anita was doing and normally wouldn't have bothered to stand up for that, but being able to tease Anita when she was in such a mood was a rarity, and it would be a waste not to seize the opportunity.

With one hand, Anita tried to shield the bento, while the other tried feebly to keep unwanted people, namely Nenene, away.

"Wow, a heart shape on the rice...that's so unlike you!", Nenene suddenly said and Anita realized that her efforts had been in vain. It had already been bad enough for her older sister to see it, but Nenene too...

Judging from the grin plastered onto the author's face, Anita had the feeling that she wasn't going to live this down anytime soon.

"Maggie, why don't you ever do something like this for me?", Nenene asked as innocently as she could manage, while hugging the dark-haired woman from behind. Which, in turn, caused Maggie to blush even more, if that was at all possible. But she also smiled, because she knew that Nenene being in such a good mood could only mean one thing: Things were going well for the author, and Maggie could imagine that she had a lot of ideas. The very thought caused her heart to flutter in anticipation. She couldn't wait to get her hand on Nenene's next book.

"Cut it out, you two. I'm busy here.", Anita grumbled in half-hearted annoyance, elbowing her way past the strange couple. Taking out two sets of chopsticks from a drawer and putting it above the finished meal, she finally closed the lid of the box with a sigh of relief.

A quick glance at the clock told her that she didn't have much time left before leaving, so she hurriedly started for the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. Just before she went through the door however, she turned back around to face Maggie and Nenene with a threatening glint in her eyes.

"And don't you dare touching it!", was all she said before she closed the bathroom door behind her with emphasizing force.

"You'd think she kept her diary in there." Nenene was the first to comment on Anita's overly secretive behaviour.

"It's a special day for her.", Maggie offered, subtly freeing herself from the smaller woman's grasp under the pretense of preparing the coffee.

"Still, she's acting as though the world depended on it.", Nenene said with a wave of her hand. She didn't get this kid. What was there to be anxious about?

"To her, it does.", Michelle interjected, coming back down from upstairs with Anita's

clothes on her arm.

"I guess.", Nenene complied, yawning again while scratching her head, which was currently surrounded by a mop of tousled hair. She didn't care, right then.

"Anyway, I've got a lot of work to do.", she said as she made her way upstairs again. "Maggie, bring the coffee up once it's ready."

Maggie gave an affirmative grunt and already took sugar from the cupboard. She knew Nenene liked her coffee best not too hot and with two sugar cubes. It was something she had found out by herself, making coffee for the author every single morning. Of course, Nenene would have never told her that, but Maggie had used to watch her taking the first sip, judging from the author's initial expression whether the coffee was good or bad.

"Mi-nee! My clothes!", Anita called from the bathroom, her voice sounding hectic.

Michelle promptly replied by entering their relatively small (for a household consisting of four people, at least) bathroom, handing Anita a pair of neat black trousers and a white shirt with cuffed sleeves, which altogether didn't look overly formal, but not too recklessly casual either.

When Anita stepped out of the bathroom, washed and newly dressed, she was almost a little disappointed to see that Nenene had already gone back to her room instead of commenting on the new clothes. She could have needed a little honest input, even though it was unwelcome most of the time.

"You look good.", Maggie said and extended her hand to ruffle Anita's hair as she always used to do. However, as she saw the neatly styled mop of red, she refrained from doing so, doing her best to smile encouragingly instead. Anita didn't notice, but was thankful that at least everyone seemed to be cheering for her.

"Have a nice day.", Michelle behind Anita said with her sweetest of smiles as she gently pushed the hesitating smaller girl towards the door, where her bag with a still lukewarm lunch box, among other things inside, stood.

Anita picked it up and slung the shoulder strap over her head, deciding it was too late to turn back now. Today was the day.

"Well...I-I'll be going now.", Anita said with as much resolve as she could muster, and quickly stepped through the door without waiting for an answer.

Once in the dim hall, with its bleak and grey concrete walls and equally simplistic stairs, and the door behind her tightly shut, she realized she was cut off. She was on her own now. Why her pounding heart and racing mind insisted to make such a big deal of this was beyond her.

Reminding herself of the time, she hurried down the stairs, skipping one stair with every step, but with her bag in mind deciding not to be too reckless.

However, as she reached the end of the hall and opened the entrance door, the warm sunlight that greeted her immediately brightened her mood.

The weather was unusually mild considering it was already autumn and the wind came across in a welcome soft breeze, which caused the branches of the trees to Anita's side to sway, but not strongly enough to lose the first few leaves that still successfully clung to it. Anita was glad she didn't take a jacket, because her long-sleeved shirt proved to be more than enough under the sun that shone down from the spotless sky completely unhindered.

She could already hear the newscasters on TV groaning about global warming and the shifting of seasons, but when it offered her such nice weather on a day like this, Anita couldn't bring herself to think that it was such a terrible thing.

Still, instead of taking her time and enjoying the weather on this calm morning, the girl immediately broke into a jog, determined to at least come not too late for what could become a very important day.

The way to the place Hisami and her had agreed on meeting at wasn't exactly far from Nenene's apartment, though Anita knew that it was a considerable way from Hisami's. Imagining the other girl to simply take a bike then, she decided not to worry over that fact too much. Not when she had so many other things on her mind already.

To reach her destination, Anita decided to skip on the beautiful avenue she usually preferred of taking, in order to take a shortcut to the park which lead along the rails and over a bridge. The sooner she got there, the better. Maybe Hisami wouldn't even be there yet, which would give Anita a little more time to mentally brace herself. She still had no idea what she was going to say or do. Maybe she should just relax and deal with it when the time came...

Anita couldn't help but think that she would mess things up either way. She just wasn't good with those things. At all.

Finally reaching the park, she noticed that it was still practically deserted. She could see a jogger in the distance, but other than that she was alone. Which wasn't particularly surprising, as it was still early on a Saturday morning.

Her feet traced the less-travelled path Hisami and her had walked two days earlier, leading her to the single bench at the side of a pond, which was hidden behind a large and admittedly a little unruly bush, making it not the first spot to look for.

Curiously looking about, Anita walked over to the weather-worn bench and sat down, relieved that at least she wasn't late. Hisami wasn't there yet, though she expected the other girl to arrive at any minute, so she already took out the lunch box and placed it to her side. She couldn't wait to see Hisami's expression when she saw it. Would she be surprised? Happy? Confused?

Aside from this uncertainty, Anita had everything planned out. They would talk a little,

then eat, and eventually come to the topic of Hisami's novel draft, which she had given her to read two days prior. Of course, Anita had read it on one go on the very same day, and was exited to tell Hisami her opinion about it. And then...then...Anita wouldn't know how to continue.

With a long sigh Anita leaned back on the bench, inwardly kicking herself. Of course it wasn't that easy. Maybe she should simply stop to think so much, fretting over every little thing as though she was about to meet someone for the first time.

Still, she could feel the rapid thumping in her chest. Her heart had been beating wildly ever since she had opened her eyes this morning, and it was only getting worse by the minute. She didn't know why she was so nervous, she had met with Hisami countless times before, but today was different. Today was special.

Laying her eyes on the slightly mist-covered lake in front of her, she spotted a duck family crossing it slowly, sending small ripples across the surface as they did. They didn't seem to have a single worry in the world.

The whole day still seemed so very ordinary. A perfectly calm, mild and uneventful day. But Anita had a feeling that it wouldn't stay like this for long.

And, as if to prove that feeling, Anita soon came face to face with the person she had anxiously waited for, who was in unexpected company of another.

"Hisa-chan.", Anita greeted her friend, who stood at the trunk of the nearest tree, as she stood up from the bench. She hadn't heard her friend arrive, and idly wondered how long Hisami had been standing by the tree without saying a word.

Anita smiled a little self-consciously, but her joy at seeing the other girl was rapidly diminished as she set her eyes on the other person.

"And Tooru-kun too." Anita acknowledged his presence with a short nod, unsure of what to think of the surprising set-up.

Okahara Tooru. It wasn't that she disliked the boy, but for him to show up today of all days, Anita couldn't help but feel a little wary. Something was off.

And what surprised her even more was the fact that both of them wore grim expressions, Hisami even more so than Tooru.

The boy was standing a little to the side, holding his bike to keep it from falling, which had probably served in bringing the both of them here.

"Anita...", Hisami said with a quivering voice, causing the girl in question to lock her eyes onto the other's. "I'm sorry."

The red-head opened her mouth slightly, but before she could think of anything to say, Hisami continued.

"I'm sorry about...today." Hisami looked around uncomfortably, too weak to look directly at the other girl. As she turned away she saw Anita's lunch box, and her expression immediately worsened.

"I know you wanted this to be a special day, but..." Helplessly, Hisami turned to Tooru, who simply stood with a blank expression, unsure of what to do. But seeing how Hisami was close to tears and seemingly unable to say it, Tooru decided to take over.

"Anita...there's something we need to tell you. It's important."

Kapitel 2: One thing never changes

"What...in the world?", Anita breathed incredulously upon setting her eyes on the unconscious body of a young man, who was amateurishly tied to a pole with a dark blue jacket, which she instantly recognized as part of a school uniform.

He was in a sitting position, and from where she stood, Anita could see that he was sporting a rather ugly wound on the back of his head. His upper body was clad in a white shirt with a big, ugly skull on it, and the redhead guessed that it was his jacket slung around his hands and the pole behind him. The tie, which was an inherent part of most boys' school uniforms, was wound tightly around his right upper arm. He seemed to be in his late teens. Anita had never seen him before.

"H-He's not dead, alright?", Tooru said hastily, but when Anita turned to look at him, she saw that the boy was actually afraid that he was.

"I see that. He's unconscious, but the position he's in isn't really all that-", Anita mumbled, but was cut off.

"It wasn't our fault!", Tooru shouted louder than intended, then winced at his own voice. He was scared.

Anita rolled her eyes at the unconscious stranger. This was just perfect. She was in the middle of a deserted construction site, which was only one of the many scattered throughout the city. This one, too, was probably never finished due to the company going bankrupt or unsolved property issues. They were an eyesore, and no one came here except of the few who used them as shortcuts and gangs who used it as their headquarters, as silly as it sounded.

Without explaining anything other than it was urgent, Hisami and Tooru had asked her to follow them quickly. Not in her wildest dreams would Anita have imagined them to lead her to a place like this, with a situation like this.

Even without knowing what had happened here, Anita knew that her perfect day had just ended, and was probably going to take a steep downward turn upon being filled in on the events.

"So...who did this?", Anita asked with a nod towards the stranger, but found herself solely looking at Tooru. Hisami didn't seem to be in a speaking condition at the moment, looking scared and shocked above all else. And for the gentle girl to do something like this was out of the question anyway.

"I did.", Tooru confessed without much hesitation, and as much as she disliked the thought, Anita wasn't surprised. She was about to speak when Hisami suddenly approached her and took Anita's hands in hers.

"We can explain!", she said hastily, but seeing the confusion and anxiety in both of her

friends' eyes, Anita knew that they couldn't. They were too shaken up.

"My...bag was stolen..." Hisami finally said, but didn't continue. Tears started to form in her eyes, and Anita reassuringly stroked her friend's hands with her thumbs. Alternately looking at the stranger, Tooru, and Hisami, she started to get a general idea.

"I think I understand, Hisa-chan.", she said before turning to Tooru.

"You tried to stop him from getting away with the stolen bag.", she voiced her theory, nodding towards the still unconscious young man, "so you hit him with something and now he's like that." Upon concluding her quick hypothesis, she saw Tooru nod weakly. He was pale.

Anita could feel the oppressive atmosphere between the three of them, but found that she was strangely nonchalant about the matter. She wondered where the problem was.

Her friends looked just as though they had just robbed a bank and killed three innocent people in the process. All they had to do was tell the police what had happened and-

The police. All of a sudden, Anita realized what the problem was.

"Why haven't you called the police?"

Tooru gulped, and pointed at the fettered stranger. "Because that's not the one who stole her bag."

Anita's eyes widened in surprise before she inwardly smacked herself. She hadn't noticed it at all before, with all the things that were going on, but now that she took a closer look at her friend, she noticed that she really didn't carry anything. If they had caught the actual thief, then Hisami's shoulder bag wouldn't be missing.

The long-haired girl, who Anita had been so anxious about meeting today, only wore a long, light green and white dress. It revealed her pale shoulders and reached down to her ankles, and suddenly Anita was almost taken aback by how good it looked on her. She couldn't help but think that the bag would have even distracted from its figure-accentuating cut.

The redhead didn't notice that she was staring until she saw Hisami blushing slightly, which instantly caused her to look away and shake her head as if to clear it from these thoughts and get it back to the problem at hand.

"A-All right, I give up. Explain everything from the start.", she said with raised hands, but then smiled. "I don't get a freaking thing."

Seeing Anita like that calmed Tooru considerably. Maybe things weren't as bad as they looked. He was glad they had gone to her first thing. Looking over to Hisami, he saw

that the timid girl seemed to relax as well. Being completely honest with himself, he had expected Anita to freak out and yell at them, but he was glad he had been wrong.

"You see...Hisami and I were passing through here because it's a shortcut on the way to the park...", Tooru started to explain, but seeing Anita's questioning eyes, decided to start from an earlier point, "I-I was on my way to the park as well, to play soccer with the other guys, so I offered to take her with my bike." Realizing how much this sounded like a lame excuse, Tooru sighed, but continued. "Then there were these two guys who stopped us. We-I...shouldn't have stopped, but anyway...one of them suddenly took Hisami's bag and then they both fled...I wanted to follow them on my bike, but..."

Anita watched Tooru intently, raising her eyebrows as the boy suddenly stopped. She thought she saw a hint of embarrassment on his face, but thought it better to remain silent about it. "So you threw something after one of them instead?", she offered.

"Y-yeah...I threw one of those...bricks after him, they're lying all around here. I was so s-surprised when I really hit him and he just lay there.", Tooru said, his voice starting to quiver. "His friend stopped for a moment, but then ran away.", he concluded.

The whole thing sounded unreal, even to him. Why would some high-school guy simply steal an ordinary shoulder bag from a middle-schooler? And why did he go so far and threw a brick at a complete stranger? He didn't even know himself. It was just...in that moment, when he had seen Hisami's shocked expression, he had gotten so mad...

"A brick?", Anita repeated, surprised. Looking around she noticed they really were lying all over the place. Some were whole, some in pieces, but most of them were rather large and sported sharp edges. The ugly wound of the thief was no surprise, really. He had probably even been lucky.

"H-He didn't mean to!", Hisami said insistently. "It was just because of me, because in my bag...", she trailed off for a moment, but recovered before the others could say anything, "...there was something valuable." Her countenance sank visibly.

Judging from the expression Tooru gave the other girl after hearing this, Anita guessed that he was just as surprised as her. Hisami seemed quite serious, and while Anita instantly knew that it was better not to push and ask just what that "valuable" thing was, it did make her wonder. They had just wanted to meet in the park, so why would Hisami carry something with her that would make her so distressed over losing? Of course it was upsetting to lose one's bag to a thief, regardless of its contents, but if Tooru had been willing to go that far to get it back, Hisami must have been truly agonized.

"It's alright, he probably deserves it.", Anita reassured her friend. Two almost grown guys stealing a bag from a girl, how much more pathetic could they get?

"So...what do you say?", Tooru asked after a moment of silence, a spark of hopefulness in his voice.

"Huh? What do I say? Houston, we have a problem?", Anita asked jokingly, but seeing the shocked expressions of her friends, held back her laugh.

She felt so calm that it seemed unreal compared to her friends. Maybe this was the right time to tell them that she saw things like this all the time? That she practically beat the crap out of random thieves or other thugs on pretty much every single mission she attended with her sisters?

...hell no. How could she ever explain something as outrageous as that? It was better if they didn't know. If they were ever to be dragged into trouble because of her, she wouldn't forgive herself.

But that wasn't the problem right now. Someone stole something precious from Hisami, and she would make sure that this certain someone would regret it. Thoroughly.

"Don't worry. They have your bag, but we have a hostage of sorts. Maybe we'll get him to tell us where his buddies are, and then we'll just take back what's ours.", Anita said with a broad grin, trying to be optimistic enough for the three of them. And also, she was a detective after all. How hard could it be to find that one bag?

Both Hisami and Tooru were still rendered speechless. "But...it's dangerous.", Hisami said, worry clearly written all over her face. Tooru looked similar, but it was also evident that he really wanted to do everything he could to get the stolen item back.

"Well...", Anita said with a smile as she rummaged through her own simplistic black-and-white shoulder bag and eventually took out a cell phone, "I didn't say we're going to do it alone, did I?"

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"See you later!", Michelle called ever happily as she opened the door, with Maggie right behind her. There were about to leave for Jinbocho, and excited like children on Christmas' Eve. They had secretly chosen this day, because they had known that Anita would be out for the whole day. They loved her little sister dearly, but she still had so little experience when it came to the true worth of books.

"Yeah...", Nenene mumbled, not looking up from the newspaper she was reading. Her third cup of coffee this morning stood right in front of her on the couch table, with her bare feet placed at its sides. She was still in her pajamas, and didn't look as though she intended to change out of them anytime soon. She positively looked as much of a slob as a best-selling author could. Her earlier attempt to get some work done had failed after five minutes, so she had gone back to reading instead. It was easier, too.

The siblings by preference were about to close the door behind them when the phone rang.

"Wait!", Nenene called after them in an almost uncharacteristically loud voice to stop Michelle and Maggie, who immediately froze in place. When they turned to look at Nenene, the woman simply shrugged. "Phone.", she mumbled, and directly went back to reading the newspaper, as if unaware that the phone was actually closer to her than it was to the door.

Nevertheless, Maggie dutifully took off her shoes again and tread through the apartment to pick up the phone after its fourth ring. "Hello, at Sumiregawa's?", she said in her usual neutral tone, but quickly went silent as she recognized the voice on the other end.

"Yes, we're...", she started after a few moments, only to be interrupted. Her eyes going wide, she listened closely, unaware of the curious looks she was receiving from Michelle and also Nenene.

"Are you okay?", she asked after a few more moments of quiet listening. The answer she received was short, but even Nenene could hear Anita's excited voice through the phone and raised her head from the newspaper to look at Maggie, who slowly hung up without saying another word. She looked worried.

"What's the matter? That was Anita, right?", Michelle asked, sensing that something was wrong.

Maggie only nodded, looking helpless. "She said she needs our help. We have to come right away."

Even though Maggie spoke slowly and deliberately, Michelle's alarm sense tingled. "Do you know where she is?"

"I-I think so.", Maggie answered before being grabbed by Michelle, who had re-entered the apartment without even bothering to take her shoes off.

"You'll come with us, too!", Michelle said, using her free hand to grab Nenene as well, effectively dragging both of them with her.

"Whoa, hold it!", Nenene gasped, surprised at the strength of Michelle's grip. "Why do I-?", she started, but stopped dead when she noticed Michelle was glaring at her.

"Anita said she needs our help. Are you saying you don't want to help her?", Michelle asked with an almost contemptuous undertone.

Nenene gulped, but withstood the look she was receiving. There was really no reasoning with those sisters when it concerned one of them. They were worse than the Mafia. There was no way to get out of this.

"Fine!", Nenene said grudgingly, freeing her arm from Michelle's iron grip. "But at least let me change out of my pajamas!"

The oldest sister's eyes reduced to slits, she said dangerously: "You've got three minutes."

"Whatever.", Nenene mumbled annoyed and rolled her eyes before turning around and ascending the stairs.

However, in spite of her acting unwillingly, the author made it back downstairs in what amounted to a record time, fully dressed and not without a glimmer of worry in her eyes.

"Damn, what's up with that kid, causing such a fuss...", she cursed, but was seen through by Michelle immediately, her mood making a sharp 180° turn.

"I'm glad you're willing to help us.", the blonde said with a sweet smile, and turned for the door, directly followed by Nenene.

Maggie, who had watched the whole scene, simply marvelled at how much control Michelle had over Nenene if she got serious. She was indeed the eldest sister. Now if she could withstand the author a little more, too...

"Maggie, hurry!", Michelle called from the hall, breaking the brunette's train of thought. Passing the kitchenette, Maggie quickly grabbed the small lunch box she had previously prepared for Nenene to eat while they were out shopping, thinking it would be useful either way.

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"I see, so that's what happened.", Michelle said, favouring Anita with a sympathetic look. The day certainly didn't progress the way her little sister had planned.

The six of them stood in a circle next to the still unconscious hostage. The oldest three now cleared up on the situation thanks to a quick explanation by Anita, exchanged meaningful looks.

Anita was surprised that even Nenene had come to help, as it was highly uncharacteristic for her. Still, the more people they were, the bigger a chance they had at finding the bag soon.

"That's a fine mess you got into.", Nenene grumbled, her arms crossed. "And that guy's no help either.", she added, nodding to whom they'd agreed upon to simply call "the hostage".

"I suggest we split up and search for any traces, while someone stays here to watch our hostage. If he wakes up, he gets beat up until he tells us where the other one is.", Michelle said with a laugh, but only succeeded in earning sceptic looks from the others.

"Or something like that.", she added sheepishly, causing Anita to sigh. She was having far too much fun with this.

"Right, so where do we start?", Anita asked and pointed to the teenager. "All we've got is him."

"He's a student.", Maggie stated matter-of-factly, and, unaware of the frowns she received for pointing out the obvious, went over to him and untied his hands.

The three minors were about to protest until Maggie retrieved his student identity card from one of the jacket's pockets. After doing so, she used the jacket to tie the boy's hands once again, though much more tightly this time.

Standing up and facing the group, she read aloud. "Naoki Tanaka, seventeen. Hibiya High School, student number 38452."

"Well, that's something.", Michelle said with a nod. "It shouldn't be too hard to get some info on him with that ID card."

"We should definitely check the school, then. But if that doesn't bring up anything...", Anita said thoughtfully, looking around. From where they stood, there were various routes leading back to the streets. "Say, which direction did he take?", she asked as she turned to Hisami and Tooru.

Hisami lifted her arm to show her. "He went that way, in direction of the city centre.", Tooru added.

"Right, so we should check that too. Maybe he was stupid enough to drop something.", Anita suggested. However, both of her friends couldn't hide the doubts they were having. They honestly didn't think that it would be that easy.

Anita didn't pick up on her friends' pessimism, but Michelle moved forward to Hisami.

"Don't worry, we'll get that bag of yours back in no time.", she said softly and drew the unsuspecting girl into a tight hug, who couldn't help but blush slightly in return.

"Just what was in that bag, anyway?", Nenene asked nonchalantly as she absent-mindedly kicked one of the many small stones on the ground away from her. To her surprise she saw Hisami looking away, obviously hesitant of answering. The author was about to repeat the question when she received a dangerous look from Anita, and immediately regretted having asked in the first place. She just didn't stand a chance against those sisters today. "Sorry, forget it.", she murmured, a little embarrassed though she didn't know why.

It wasn't her business anyway. She began to question herself why she was even here, when she obviously wasn't of much help. There already were three arguably strange, but still pretty competent detectives at the scene, so there was little need for her. She should have stayed home.

"So I guess I'll be the one standing watch here.", she said, trying to change the topic. "I'm not much use otherwise, but that one guy shouldn't be a problem."

Anita nodded. "I think the rest of us should split into two groups. The three of us", she said, pointing to Hisami, Tooru and herself, "and you two." She looked at Michelle and Maggie. "I'll leave the school to you, see if you can get in." A sarcastic smile which she had no doubt picked up from Nenene crossed her face, "Mi-nee at least should pass well enough as a concerned mother."

The author chuckled at that, but the blonde didn't seem to notice.

Hisami and Tooru exchanged a small smile of relief, both equally glad that there were people willing to help them so unconditionally, even though they knew this was probably solely due to Anita's presence.

"Alright, let's not waste any time then. Let's go!", Michelle said enthusiastically and was about to leave, when she laid eyes on Maggie, who didn't seem happy in the least.

"But...we can't leave her all alone here like this! The other one might come back to help his friend, Nenene can't-", Maggie voiced her concerns, but was cut short.

"Hey, I'm not that weak. If that kid comes back, he'll be sorry.", Nenene interjected, crossing her arms in front of her. Her mood wasn't all that great today, and she wouldn't mind someone to take it out on.

"I think she's right." It was Tooru's turn to cut in, and Nenene already felt herself nodding before she noticed that the young boy wasn't looking at her, but Maggie.

"This was all my fault. I should stay here too.", Tooru spoke resolutely.

That was it. Trying to repress the urge to stomp her feet, Nenene walked towards Tooru, stopping only a few inches in front of him. "I think I said I'm alright alone.", she said threateningly as she glared down at him.

Tooru didn't budge an inch, however, and Nenene raised her eyebrows at the fearless boy.

Why was it that her death glare only ever worked on Maggie? Was she doing something wrong? She had no idea.

"You should go with your friends. You've seen what the thief looks like, that will be an advantage. It'd be no use if you stayed here." Nenene went for an approach she usually didn't like to fall back on: reasoning.

"She's right.", Anita agreed, nudging the boy friendly. "You'll be more help if you come with us."

"All right.", Tooru gave in. If he wasn't allowed to stand in for his mistakes, then he would make sure to make up for them with his own power. He walked back to Anita's

and Hisami's side, bringing the groups back to how they've been at the beginning.

"Good boy. Now go and leave me alone, all of you.", Nenene said with an almost playful air of arrogance and demonstratively sat down on one of the many concrete pipes right next to their hostage.

"I'll stay." Maggie repeated, attracting the looks of all those around her.

"But Ma-nee, we'll need your-", Anita said, but stopped herself short. 'Abilities', was what she had wanted to say, but she had no right to say that. Instead of finishing the sentence, she put on a broad smile. Maybe it was better this way.

"Okay, take care of our hostage then", she said, and, turning her honest smile into a playful one, "...and Nenene too."

"Don't you start, too!", Nenene yelled, but then looked away. Anita suspected a blush on the author's cheeks, but didn't stand quite close enough to confirm it. Still, managing to embarrass Nenene, even if just a little, was quite an achievement in itself.

"Now that that's settled...", Michelle sang, snatching the ID card from Maggie's hand as she walked past her, "we should get going. I'll manage the school on my own, so you three try to trace the guy." She nodded towards the three friends, who immediately returned the gesture and took off.

Michelle soon left as well, leaving Nenene and Maggie on their own.

"I wonder if it's really okay if we go alone like this...", Hisami wondered aloud once they were out of hearing range. She hadn't dared to bring it up in the presence of Anita's sisters, but now she began to feel a little uncomfortable. It wasn't that she didn't trust Anita and Tooru, quite the contrary, but she did wonder whether they could really do something were they to find the thief. And possibly the people he belonged to.

"Don't worry, it's not the Yakuza.", Anita said with a wave of her hand. "So far, we're six against two. That's not too bad." Even though Anita talked as though she was taking all of this lightly, her eyes were scanning the environment with every step. They weren't running, but not walking either. Each of them searched the ground and the buildings to their sides for any hint.

It wasn't long until they left the construction site and reached a large crossing.

"Well, what now?", Anita asked, though the question was as much aimed at herself as at her friends. The street split into four, which left them to pick one out of three possible directions.

"We should check all directions.", Tooru said, pointing left, right, and then forward. "See if we find anything. If not, we come back and decide on one."

Tooru seemed to have made up his mind, and Anita didn't miss the urgency in his voice. He didn't want to lose time. So far, the thief had a head start of a little less than thirty minutes, which meant he could be anywhere.

"Sounds good.", Anita agreed, but meeting Hisami's eyes, asked, "That okay with you, Hisa-chan?"

The girl seemed a little reluctant to answer, but then nodded and, to avoid further questioning, choose to go left, leaving Tooru to choose right and Anita to cross the street.

"Two minutes.", was all Anita said before she dashed off. The traffic light had just turned red, but the redhead paid it no mind and ran across the street even before the waiting cars could start moving.

On the other side of the two-lane street, Anita saw a small café and directly rushed over to an elderly woman, who sat with a cup of tea and a few biscuits in view of the street.

"Excuse me, have you seen a male high school student with a shoulder bag coming through here about half an hour ago?", Anita asked hurriedly.

"Let's see...", the woman said, and thought about the question for what seemed like twenty agonizing seconds, until Anita couldn't bear it anymore.

"He must have been in a hurry, and the shoulder bag didn't fit his uniform.", Anita urged, and after an even longer pause, finally got an answer.

"I have been here for the last hour or so, and I don't think I have seen anyone like that. But then, I could be wrong. Forgive me, but with my age, one doesn't pay those young men much mind.", the woman said and touched her cheek thoughtfully.

"Thanks.", Anita said hastily, then looked around. The only other customers of the café were a woman with a small child, and a businessman reading the newspaper, both of which probably hadn't paid any attention to the street.

Turning around to run back to the crossing, she came face to face with her friends, and almost jumped at the sudden sight.

Hisami had her hands clasped in front of her, while Tooru looked even more serious than before.

"What is it?", Anita asked, a little unsure. Tooru reached out his right hand to her, turning his palm upwards. That was when Anita realized that he was holding something.

It was dirty and looked as though a car, or at least several people, had run over it, but Anita recognized it immediately.

It was a small green frog, with red braids and clothes.

Anita clenched her fists at the sight and bit her lip. This was it.

Hisami and Tooru eyed their friend warily, sensing how angry she was. However, before they could say anything, it blurted out of her and she yelled at the top of her lungs, so that the whole street could hear it.

"That damn bastard! Does he have any idea how much work this was? I'm taking it personally, now!" With that, she stomped past her friends, in direction of the crossing where they had previously parted. Tooru immediately rushed after her, but Hisami didn't move, rooted to the spot.

When Anita realized that the girl wasn't following them, she turned around to see Hisami's open-mouthed surprise.

"Come on.", Anita said, her expression immediately softening. She extended her hand toward her friend, smiling gently. "We're going to get that guy, for sure." She didn't know where she took that confidence from, but as she saw Hisami relaxing visibly, she knew it wasn't misplaced. Her friend was relying on her.

As the other girl took her hand, Anita added with a smirk: "At the very least, we need to save Diana. She must be lonely."

For the first time that day, Hisami truly smiled.

—

"D'you really fink fey'll get'im?", Nenene asked in between gobbling down the contents of Maggie's lunch box, which in any other situation would have sufficed for two people, but was now engrossed solely by the author.

Maggie, who had been on high alert ever since the others had left, was preoccupied as she scanned the area to make sure that no one would be able to approach them without their notice.

Nenene thought Maggie was taking this way too seriously. It wasn't as though the whole gang would show up, armed with knives and bats, and attack them.

"Hey, anybody home?", she called to Maggie, who by now stood a few metres away from her and their hostage, a little disappointed that she wouldn't even get a response. True, Maggie's answers were cut to a minimum of words most of the time, but not replying at all was a little too harsh. Which just called for a revenge in Nenene's opinion.

"You know Maggie...", she started, making sure to raise her voice, "you really do make a good housewife."

Maggie, having only heard the latter part, quickly turned around, startled. "What?", she asked while regarding Nenene, who looked completely neutral as though she had talked about the weather. She found herself to be pretty skilled at that look.

"I said that you really do make a good housewife.", Nenene repeated with a smile, which widened as Maggie's cheeks began to colour. "The food was really good."

Nenene wasn't someone inclined towards making compliments, but she was bored and it served, at least with her reasoning, a higher purpose, so she decided to go all out.

"I'm not...", Maggie disagreed weakly, looking away. Housewife? Where did that come from? And in the first place, shouldn't it be "You would make a good housewife" ?

"No, really, you've got talent.", Nenene said and went up to Maggie, leaning close to her. "I don't think I'd let you go even if you wanted to." The last line was spoken in a whisper, and even though Maggie knew she was joking, she couldn't help but blush further.

When Nenene spotted the blush, she wanted to say more, but stopped herself. The taller woman really was kind of cute when embarrassed, so she let it go for the moment, allowing Maggie to hide behind her shield called 'standing watch' for a while longer.

But man, was she bored.

"Hey, do you think that kid's ever gonna wake up?", she asked, regarding their hostage. He was still unconscious, even though in his current position it seemed more like he was taking a nap. Nenene had protested, but arguing that it was dangerous to leave him as he was, the taller woman had wrapped a bandage around his head to cover the wound, which seemed to be merely superficial, and had brought the body into recovery position while keeping his hands tied around the pole.

The treatment was far too nice in Nenene's opinion, but she did see the point that he wouldn't be of much use to them if he choked on his tongue and died. Kind of.

"It's okay if I wake him, right?", she mumbled, not really waiting for an answer. Standing up, she walked over to the teenager.

"Don't, he's injured.", Maggie spoke absent-mindedly, regarding her cell phone as though waiting for a call.

She began to think that it would have been better to go to the police to clear up the whole thing. But she, and her sisters as well, undoubtedly, still had their pride as detectives, and on a Saturday, she had a pretty good idea that the police couldn't be bothered with a case just like this. It was probably just a stupid prank, anyway.

By the time Nenene's ear-splitting yell reached Maggie's ears, her mind was so far off

that she needed a few seconds to process the information before she turned around in shock, staring at Nenene.

Finding her both grinning and completely unharmed, Maggie's mouth dropped open, and she averted her gaze from the author to their hostage to confirm her suspicion. And indeed, the teenager lay on the ground with his eyes wide open, panting for air.

"Well, that sure worked.", Nenene said smugly, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Maggie paled at the sight, but another look at the hostage showed that he seemed to be alright, for the most part. He seemed dizzy, and looked around frantically. When he finally set his eyes on Nenene and got his bearings, his expression was one of distaste.

"Who're you?", he asked while trying to move his hands. Feeling that they were tied, he soon gave it up.

Nenene clicked her tongue at the question. "Shouldn't I be the one to ask that?", she replied, putting on an annoyed expression. "Wait, we already know that, mister Naoki Tanaka.", she added snidely.

The student looked at the woman for a minute, trying to fully remember what had happened, before it dawned on him.

"You're with those kids?", he asked, and was surprised when Nenene started to laugh.

"Right, kid.", she answered, but then turned serious. "And now hurry up and tell us why the hell guys like you think it'd be cool to steal a bag from a girl."

"Tch, serves them right for coming here. They were just asking to be robbed.", the boy spat.

"Oh, right.", Nenene said, threateningly positioning herself right in front of him. "They couldn't possibly have known that they'd encounter two terribly brave men like you.", she said contemptuously, her voice quivering with restraint.

"Nenene...", Maggie said worriedly, coming closer. She didn't like where this was going.

"You don't know anything, and I won't tell you anything either. So untie me now or you'll regret it.", Naoki said in a perfectly calm tone. He didn't seem to be nervous in the least.

Nenene was about to yell at him when Maggie cut it. She came closer to the boy, squatting beside him so she wouldn't have to raise her voice. "It's no use to protect your friend. He left you alone and ran away, even though you were injured and bleeding."

At the word "injured", the student seemed to think, but then simply shrugged. "He knew it wasn't serious, it doesn't even hurt anymore.", he said, but the white-hot pain that followed shortly after caused him to cry out. It felt as though it tore right

through his skull.

"Nenene!", Maggie said with insistence this time, but the author didn't react.

"Sorry, your head was a little in the way of my foot there.", she said dangerously. She was getting seriously annoyed now, and if she heard only one more stupid remark coming from that boy, she swore she would send him running to his mom, crying.

"Just tell us where your friend went, and when we get that bag back, we'll forget this whole thing.", Maggie spoke to the boy, now actually concerned for him. She didn't see any real threat coming from him, and yet Nenene seemed quite serious.

Naoki remained silent for a minute, his eyes darting between Maggie and Nenene. Women. Just two women. He'd be called a wimp for the rest of his life.

When he opened his mouth to speak, Nenene leaned down in anticipation.

"I don't-", was all the teenager needed to say to be stopped by a fierce backhanded slap in the face that sent his head reeling.

"You don't get it, do you?", Nenene now yelled, gripping the boy's collar to lift him up from the ground. "You idiots completely ruined the day for my friend, so god help you if you dare to lie to me now!"

She was furious, and seeing the boy underneath her, with his fear-stricken eyes, she knew he had understood at least that much yet. Maggie, who had watched the scene, couldn't help but smile despite her shock of seeing Nenene so unnaturally enraged.

As much as the author acted the opposite and hated to admit it, Nenene was a part of the family, and as such, knew no mercy when it came to any of its members.

Still, in spite of his undoubtedly unamiable nature, Maggie felt a spark of pity for the student. He and his friend hadn't known what they had gotten themselves into.

"Sorry, but we don't take kindly to silly pranks.", Maggie said, her face portraying none of the apology her words did, "Doesn't your name mean honesty? Maybe you should try to live up to it some time."

"Starting right now.", Nenene added with an almost malicious smile. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

He'd be called a wimp for the rest of his life.

But at least he would live to hear it.

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"Naoki Tanaka?", the secretary repeated, withdrawing her hands from the keyboard with a small chuckle. "I don't even have to search for that name to know who you mean." Her glasses reflected the light of the computer screen in front of her.

"Ah, is that so?", Michelle said, bringing her hand to her mouth as she laughed softly. "I was afraid he might be a little...infamous."

"Yes, sadly.", the secretary sighed. "I hope he didn't cause you too much trouble?"

"Oh no, nothing of the sort.", Michelle said with a wave of her hand. "My son had a little...dispute with him, that's all. You know these children..."

"Yes, they tend to be a little difficult at that age.", the secretary agreed. "If his lessons haven't ended already, you will find him in class 3-2. Do you need help in finding it?", she offered as she was supposed to, but was actually glad when Michelle immediately declined.

"I really wouldn't want to bother you. If I need any help, I'm sure there are enough students around to kindly show me way.", the blonde said with a forced smile. "Thank you for your time, I'll excuse myself now."

"I'm glad to be of service.", the secretary said before Michelle closed the door to the school office behind her.

Well, so much for that plan. She had hoped to get some more information out of the secretary other than the class he was in, but her routinely short answers, which didn't leave any place for further inquiry, completely shot that down. She probably had quite some experience in dealing with people like her.

Letting out a sigh, Michelle looked around for a building layout or direction sign and soon found what she wanted. It led her down a flight of stairs and along several corridors until she reached a door that was marked with a sign as class 3-2.

Michelle didn't really expect to meet any students in there, as she had noticed that most of the classrooms she had passed had been either empty, or filled with a mere handful of people for what looked like club activities. But it was still worth a try, and she didn't like the thought of leaving here empty-handed.

"Excuse me.", she said as she slid the door open, revealing a small group of boys who appeared to be playing cards. Or rather, idling their time away while half-heartily playing cards, Michelle guessed from the bored expressions of the attendees.

When they spotted the blonde, they immediately let up on their game and collectively turned to regard her questioningly.

"Excuse me.", Michelle repeated as she approached the group, smiling friendly, "do all of you belong to this class?"

At that question, she received a couple of nods and murmurs for the affirmative. All in

all, she couldn't say that these young men seemed especially friendly, but she still had to try.

"Then I assume you're all familiar with a boy named Naoki Tanaka?", she asked, trying her best to sound like a concerned parent.

There was a moment of hesitation and neither of the students spoke, until one of them leaned forward. "What's with him?"

"I'd like to speak to him.", Michelle answered shortly. She didn't like how he dodged the question, but decided to still go for the pattern of questions she'd had in mind originally.

"He's not here.", the same boy said, shrugging.

'I know that you no-good!', Michelle thought, slightly annoyed. But saying that would certainly not help her now. "Are you his friends?", she asked instead with a forced smile.

Unexpectedly, the boys began to laugh. "Tanaka's? He doesn't have any friends."

"I see.", Michelle said, and gave another thin-lipped smile. "Well, thank you anyway." She had half a mind to discuss this fully with them, but she had an idea that revealing too much would only cause problems later, and she didn't want to cause any trouble in this school either. She just had to admit defeat. For now.

As she turned to leave and head for the door, she could hear the students behind her snicker and couldn't help but sigh. She needed to get out of here.

Once out of the class, she allowed herself to clench her fists. 'Damn those kids!', she thought to herself, quickly making her way out of the building.

She had clearly underestimated them. As flattering as it was, those students had quickly seen through her 'concerned mother' farce, and thus closed up immediately. With her luck, she had even just talked to Naoki Tanaka's friends, who of course, wouldn't let her know anything. Damn them.

Things really hadn't gone too well. Or rather, her whole trip here had been a complete and utter waste of time. No use blandishing. She'd had her share of euphemisms for the day.

Just as Michelle was about to descend the stone stairs in front of the school building, which lead through a small park, she heard steps behind her. Without turning around, she could hear that there were at least five people following her.

At first she dismissed it, but as she walked deeper into the school's park, with barely anyone around at this time of day on a Saturday, she finally turned around and was greeted by the card players she had just encountered before.

Unlike before, they now looked unmistakably sinister, which amused Michelle more than scared her, however.

"And what might you want from me now?", she asked without a hint of fear. She could deal well enough with a group of students.

"Well, we just thought that you might be a little too curious, is all.", the boy Michelle had spoken to before, and who now appeared more as a leader, said.

Michelle held back her laugh. Were they threatening her? They really didn't now when to stop.

All this time, Michelle had believed that it was really just a prank, but now these boys seemed to do their damndest to appear as criminals.

And as they collectively drew knives from their pockets, she knew she had guessed right.

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"So this is where we lose his trail.", Anita said, panting for air, just like Hisami and Tooru did.

The three of them stood in front of one of four entrances to a large shopping centre. Nenene had called them about twenty minutes earlier, and, telling them what their supposed hostage had, they had come rushing here right away. Their feet and legs hurt, but at least they had the feeling that they had caught up on the thief a little.

However, the way things looked now, it had been in vain.

"This is it?", Hisami asked hesitantly, covering her mouth with her hand. The shopping centre was positively huge and almost flooding with people. Finding a single person in here was literally looking for a needle in a haystack.

"Yeah..." Anita sounded resigned. She had been hopeful all the time, but finding one person among hundreds of others...she didn't even know where to start.

"Hey, come on!", Tooru said insistently, "We can't give up now! We can't let him get away with this. We can't!" With his right arm he angrily pointed at the large glass doors that led inside the building. "He's somewhere in there, and he doesn't know we're after him. There's still a chance!"

Hearing this, Hisami looked up from where she had regarded the dirty little doll in her hand. Seeing her friend so agitated, she realized how serious he was about all of this, and instantly felt bad for having had secretly given up. Everyone was trying so hard, just for her. She hadn't even asked for any of this, but everyone had assumed it as natural to give their best to get her bag back, even though she hadn't even told them

what was inside. It was meant to be a secret, a surprise just for today. And this surprise had spoiled the whole day.

"Don't look like that, Hisa-chan.", Anita said and patted her friend's shoulder lightly, trying to make the sad look in her eyes disappear. "Tooru's right, it's not too late yet. We can do it. Nenene told us that the guy said that their meeting place would be here, at twelve sharp. So we still have a little time to find him, wherever he's hiding."

"Right.", Hisami said. She still had her doubts, but she wanted to at least mirror a fraction of the courage and resolve that her friends did.

"Then let's go." Anita went towards the glass door, but before she came close enough for it to open, the cell phone in her bag vibrated, halting her.

"Yeah?", Anita spoke into the phone as she picked up. "Nenene? What's up?" She listened to the woman on the other end, and her expression changed with every sentence she heard. "What do you mean, she doesn't answer?", she asked, clearly worried now.

Hisami and Tooru exchanged anxious glances, but they couldn't make much sense of what was going on.

"But...we can't, our time's running out. Yes, I know that!", Anita suddenly shouted into the phone, but she was clearly more afraid than she was angry. "...no, that won't do. There's not enough time, if we at least knew where he was hiding...wait, you did what? Nenene!", she shouted again, then listened for a few moments before she hung up.

"Damn it!", she cursed as she stuffed the cell phone back into her bag. "Michelle doesn't answer her phone and the others are worried. But if we go to check on her, we'll be too late to catch the thief. I don't think Michelle's in danger, but..."

But what if? She couldn't let anything happen to Mi-nee, but if she didn't get the thief, then...

"Anita-chan...", Hisami said softly, taking the other girl's hands into hers. "We have to help your sister. I wouldn't forgive myself if-"

"No!", Tooru intervened, shaking his head wildly. "You're going to get that guy! I'll go and look for your sister. She's probably still at that school if she hasn't reported anything since then." He pointed his finger straight at Anita. "So you definitely, definitely, have to catch that guy! Understood? I won't forgive you if you don't!", he almost shouted.

Both Anita and Hisami simply stared at their friend, and before they could even react, Tooru was already on his way.

"Hey, wait!", Anita suddenly shouted after him, hastily searching through her bag. She got out her cell phone again and tossed it to Tooru, who caught the small device

single-handedly.

"Call Maggie and Nenene if anything's up. And-", she called, pointing her finger at him in warning, all the while grinning, "don't do anything stupid, again."

Tooru simply smiled, giving a short wave with the cell phone still in his hand. "Gotcha." With that, he disappeared behind the next street corner.

"Let's go.", Anita said, taking Hisami's hand into her own. "So we won't get separated.", came the instant explanation as the redhead saw her friend's surprised face, but felt that it was more of an excuse for herself than Hisami.

"Damn, and we're no help at all.", Nenene groaned, walking from side to side.

"We are.", Maggie disagreed, and pointed at the two students on the ground beside her. They were tied and gagged with paper, left to wriggle in a vain attempt to get free. They had attacked them a short while ago, but Maggie had taken care of them before they were even able to touch either her or Nenene, thus stopping their attempts to retrieve their friend, who seemed to be knocked out for good this time.

"You mean we're the decoys?", Nenene asked with distaste, receiving a nod from the taller woman.

"If it weren't for us, they would go after the others. We're helping them.", Maggie explained. She was glad. Glad that she had been right in her choice to stay here with Nenene. If she hadn't, they would probably have to worry about her now, instead of Michelle. And while she was, of course, concerned about her sister's safety, she also knew that it took more than a few students to take her out.

"You mean you're helping them.", Nenene huffed. "Great, just great."

"Found anything?", Anita asked, even though she could see the answer on Hisami's face clearly enough. No.

They had searched the entire basement and first floor in search of the thief, but to no avail. They had even searched all restrooms, phone booths and every other place that was secluded from public view, but it had amounted to nothing.

They were now on the fifth floor, only sporadically checking selected places, because they knew they didn't nearly have enough time to go through all of them.

All the while, they ran hand in hand, never letting go of each other even for a second unless they absolutely had to. Thus it came unexpected for Anita when Hisami suddenly stopped and Anita's arm jerked backwards.

"What's up, Hisa-chan?" Anita looked at her friend, but Hisami was facing the floor,

making it impossible for Anita to read her face.

"I'm sorry.", Hisami whispered, letting go of Anita's hand and bringing it closer to her face to look at it. It was trembling.

"It's all my fault. I...ruined everything." Tears started to form in her eyes, but Anita quickly brushed them away before they could fall.

"That's not true. It's those stupid jerks' fault. So don't you cry now.", she said, drawing Hisami into a hug.

"But...", Hisami protested, but was silenced by Anita's finger on her lips.

"No buts. Nobody is blaming you. We all have our own reason for helping you.", Anita said softly, only loud enough for her friend to hear among the masses of people that continuously passed them. "We all love you. So everyone tries their best. We're all family, aren't we? And if there's one thing about family that never changes, it's that they're always there for you. No matter what."

With a smile, Anita gently touched Hisami's left hand, which still tightly clutched Anne. "So have a little more confidence that Anne will definitely, definitely, save Diana.", the smaller girl said, recalling Tooru's words with a small chuckle.

"Yes." Right. She couldn't lose hope just yet. She couldn't let the others down when everyone was trying so hard. She shouldn't cry, either, but this time, the lone tear that ran down her cheek wasn't one of sadness.

There was a small smile on Hisami's lips when she looked back up at Anita, but looking past her friend, her smile immediately froze.

—

He had been at this school once before, for his cousin's graduation. But that had been two years ago, and running straight towards it now, with the whole front in clear view, he found that he didn't remember a thing. How he was supposed to find Michelle here, he didn't know. The school was fairly large.

However, when he heard yells from the park, and several passers-by hastily walking out of it, he knew that Anita's sister had found him, instead.

Wasting no time, he ran in direction of the voices, but they were silenced just moments before Tooru spotted Michelle among the trees.

"E-everything alright?", he asked, but his voice died when he noticed several bodies scattered across the place. They all wore some kind of blindfold, and had a burning red mark on their right cheeks in common.

"Oh my, you weren't supposed to see that.", Michelle said and laughed softly, walking towards Tooru. "Did you come to help me?", she asked, patting the boy's head gently.

"Y-yes...but it seems you didn't need any help, after all.", he replied a little self-consciously. He wasn't sure how she had done it, but help seemed really like the last thing Michelle needed.

"Oh, but I was in quite a pinch earlier.", Michelle said dramatically. "And just look what they did to my cell phone!", she whined, presenting the boy with the broken device, which was clearly beyond repair. "Such brutes. But thank you for coming anyway. That was sweet of you." The blonde lifted her hand to stroke Tooru's cheek, who blushed in return.

"It's not a problem.", Tooru said hastily, looking away. "But...what do we do with them now?", he asked. They couldn't really leave them here, blindfolded and beaten as they were.

"Oh, regarding that, I think I have an idea.", Michelle said with a mysterious smile. "Will you help me with it?"

"S-sure."

—

"Wait!", Anita yelled, dashing after the boy in school uniform, who carried a mismatched shoulder bag with a small doll dangling at its side. He was only a few metres in front of her, but the string of people between them almost made it impossible to get any closer to him. 'Hold him! He's a thief!', was what she wanted to yell at the top of her lungs, but in a place like this, it would only result in chaos.

So they had no other choice than to try and keep up to him, dodging the people who came in their way to the best of their abilities. Anita's hand still firmly gripped Hisami's, but she knew that her friend wouldn't last much longer. She had to find a way to corner the thief, and soon.

"He's going up!", Hisami shouted from behind her, and as Anita refocused on their target, she saw that he had gotten on an escalator, taking two steps at a time as it moved upward.

"Damn him!", Anita cursed as she tried to make her way past the crowd that occupied the space in front of the escalator.

"It's the last floor!", Hisami called after a quick glimpse at the direction sign.

"Really?" Anita's mind raced. The last floor meant that he could definitely not go up any higher, and would thus try to go down again. There were escalators on each side of each floor, which made two possible escape routes for the thief. She just had to

make sure to block both of them.

"Hisa-chan, a book! I need a book!", she shouted, her eyes still locked on the teenager. Paper. More than anything, she needed paper. She cursed herself for the umpteenth time that day for not having thought of it in the morning.

"Eh?" Hisami looked around, scanning the people she passed running for any kind of book. Nobody held anything, but as she ran past a man with a newspaper, her left hand immediately shot out and ripped it from his grasp. "Excuse me!", she called, but before the man could react, they were gone and on their way up.

"Will that do?", Hisami asked as she handed the newspaper to Anita, who took it hastily.

"We just gotta try. Keep an eye on him, Hisa-chan!", Anita said as they reached the sixth floor. But instead of running straight after the thief, Anita took the other way. As she passed the first escalator down, she dissolved the newspaper and ran her hand from one side to the other, creating a barrier.

"No passing!", she shouted to the people who were about to go down, leaving them to stare dumbfounded.

The second escalator on the other side would be a race between them and the thief. Whoever got there first, won.

They couldn't afford to lose.

"Where is he?", Anita shouted loud enough so that Hisami behind her could hear her, even though Anita was looking straight forward, trying to direct the two of them quickly through the crowds.

"Parallel!", Hisami gasped, spotting the student on level with them on the other side.

"Damn! Out of my way!", Anita shouted, succeeding to get at least a few people to evade them. However, the sudden movement of the crowd caused a woman to trip and fall. Anita heard her cry out even before she saw that she was directly in front of him. She bit her lip at the sight. 'There's no time!'

"Hisa-chan, jump!" Just as she said that, she leapt into the air and above the woman on the floor. Her hand never left Hisami's, so the girl didn't have any time to think but jump after her. Back on the ground, Anita quickly turned around to support her friend and stop her fall by catching her in her arms. She was almost thrown off balance, but wrapped her arms tightly around the other girl and let go as soon as she stood steadily.

Without another word they hurried along the passage to the other side. Upon reaching the second escalator down, Anita looked down, and when she didn't find the thief, sealed it much like she had done on the other side.

"Done.", she panted, allowing a small smile to cross her lips. The thief was cornered now, wherever he was. A quick glance to the other side confirmed that her paper barrier was still in one piece there, too. She saw various impatient people trying to tear it, but with no success so far. Even though it was just paper when it came down to it, her construction held up easily so far.

"Where is he?", Hisami asked. She had lost him when they had to jump over the woman, and now he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Did he get away?", Anita almost shouted, quickly looking down again. He couldn't have been that fast, could he? If he had managed to get down, then everything was lost. "No..."

"No...", Hisami said as well, but as she quickly tapped Anita's shoulder, the redhead realized that she meant something else. "Over there!"

The girl pointed at a door nearby, which was almost hidden from sight from where they stood, and bore a sign reading 'no exit'.

"You think?", Anita breathed, but then started running towards it without waiting for an answer, taking Hisami with her.

Before opening the door, Anita looked behind her to make sure that nobody was paying any attention to them, then both of them slipped through the door and closed it behind them.

As expected, the door led to a narrow and dim stairway, going even higher on the left, and all the way down on the right.

"Up...or down?" It seemed like a stupid question regarding the situation, but...

—

"Hey, look who's there. If that isn't our little Takeo.", the boy was greeted when he opened the door to the roof, seeing three familiar faces already waiting for him.

"You're late, man. And just look at you.", one of the three said tauntingly, pointing at the wet tips of black hair that clung to the boy's face.

"S-sorry.", Takeo said, quickly taking off the shoulder bag. He wanted to get rid of it, he didn't even want to look at it anymore. It made him sick.

"Where'd you leave Naoki?", another asked him, sending a chill down his spine. "We already send the others looking for you two."

"He...", Takeo started, trying to brush the sweat from his forehead. This was bad. Really bad. 'How can I possibly tell them? They'll kill me!'

"I dunno.", he said and shrugged, looking straight his three upperclassmen and also comrades, if he actually dared to call them that. He couldn't show any fear now or he was done for. "Wouldn't surprise me if he was stupid enough to get himself caught. I told you I didn't need a nanny."

"Careful.", the tallest of the three said warningly. "Naoki's one of us. Insult him, insult us."

"So?", Takeo asked with a laugh that he knew was pushing it dangerously far. "I'm too, now." He cast the bag over at the three, and literally felt a weight being lifted from his shoulders. "I hope next time you'll give me something to do that's actually worth my time. Stealing a bag from a girl certainly wasn't.", he said, knowing he was full of it. He just hoped the others wouldn't notice.

"Easy, boy.", the apparent leader said, catching the bag. "Let's see what we've got here." With that, he opened the bag to see what was inside. "What the? Just a book? That's boring." He was about to toss it away when he spotted something else. "Hey, what's that?" Taking out a beautifully decorated light yellow envelope, he grinned evilly. "A love letter?"

At that, the other boys laughed. "Now that was really evil of you, stealing something like that from a girl. I bet she's heartbroken." Another laugh.

"Forget it. Let's just toss it down and leave. I completed the task, didn't I?", Takeo said, annoyed. He couldn't remember how he had gotten into all of this. But now that it seemed that there was no way out for him anymore, he could as well try and make the best of it. It was still better to be with them, than being against them. That much was certain.

"Not so fast. You're one of us now, if that's what you're worried about. But what do you guys think? Let's read this lovely letter before we throw it away!", the leader said, causing the other two to laugh like idiots.

Takeo didn't have a good feeling about this. He just wanted to disappear from here, and quickly. But he didn't dare to say any more than he already had.

"Dear Anita-chan'...what the hell, isn't that a girl's name?", the student asked as he started to read the letter, which he had unceremoniously ripped from its envelope. "That's definitely a girl's writing, though." He raised his eyebrows for a moment, but then shrugged.

"Anyway...", he continued. "Dear Anita-chan, if you're reading this, then I wasn't brave enough to tell you in person, even though I had promised myself that I would be." Takeo heard a collective 'ooh', and decided to stop listening to this nonsense.

"This may come sudden for you, but I need to tell you this directly, without misunderstandings, the way I truly mean to.' Ha-ha, now it's getting good!"

However, before he could read any further, he was interrupted by a dull exclamation, followed by a heavy thud. When he searched to find the source of it, he found Takeo lying on the ground, writhing and holding his nose to stop the blood that was streaming from it.

"Stop that right now, you bastards!", Anita yelled furiously, pointing her fist at the three. Hisami stood right behind her, her hands clasped over her mouth. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"Who're you?", the leader asked, too surprised to sound arrogant. "Don't tell me..." He stopped short, looking at the bag he still held.

"Damn right, that's ours!", Anita shouted. "Give it back now, or you'll regret it!"

The three needed some time to take it all in, but when they did, they all grinned. "Pretty self-confident, aren't you?", one of them said, but the hesitation in his voice when he saw what the red-haired girl had done to Takeo, couldn't be missed.

"I'm sorry to break it to you.", the leader spoke up, "but it was a big mistake to follow us here, as you'll soon see." With these words, he pushed himself off the handrail he had been sitting on, coming closer. "As for beating up Takeo...we'll make that up to you, as well." If any of them was actually impressed that a girl the size of Anita could beat up a taller boy just as Takeo, they hid it well.

"You have no idea.", Anita hissed and stepped forward as well.

"Anita-chan..." Hisami wanted to stop her friend, but Anita outstretched her arm in front of Hisami, motioning for her to stay back.

"Ah, you're Anita?", the leader asked, a dirty smile on his lips, "Figures."

"What do you know? You're just a bunch of idiots, who don't know a single thing about a person's feelings." She'd really had it, now.

"Oh, really? Then we'll show you our real sentiments, now.", the leader said, and in the next moment, his two comrades came running towards Anita, who just smiled.

Naturally, like any idiot would, they attacked from right and left, thinking this was a sure-fire way to get her. When the left one reached back for a punch, however, Anita leapt towards the right one. Landing with her knees on the guy's chest, she lifted her arms and, clasped together, brought them down right upon his head. Thus incapacitating the student, she pushed herself backwards. In mid-air, she extended her right leg and kicked the other boy square into his face.

Once she felt the ground under her feet again, she wasted no time and dashed towards the leader. Before he had even a chance to react, her elbow connected with his stomach and sent him crashing into the handrail behind him.

"Damn jerks...", Anita mumbled as she picked up Hisami's bag, brushing the dirt off it.

She was about to turn around when she saw that Hisami's letter was still crumpled in the hands of the leader, which she had just knocked out against the rail. "Goddamn jerks...", she corrected herself as she retrieved the letter.

"Anita-chan.", Hisami whispered as she came closer to her friend. She could hardly bear it. The letter hadn't been for Anita to see. Not like that. Not yet. Not...now.

However, instead of reading it, Anita folded the letter gently, and gave it back to Hisami. "I'm sorry, Hisa-chan. I wish I'd been here sooner. But look-", she said and showed her the bag with the small doll attached to it. "Diana doesn't really seem any worse for wear."

With that, the tears in Hisami's eyes finally fell, and she pulled Anita close to her. She didn't even care about the letter, or the bag, as long as Anita was alright.

"All's well that end's well, huh?", Anita said with a sheepish laugh as Hisami tightened her embrace. To think she'd had to beat up four guys over a bag today...

"Not quite.", came a sudden voice from behind them, and when the girls turned to see where it came from, they spotted the thief, Takeo. The bleeding of his nose had stopped, leaving only a drying trail across his mouth and along his throat. But neither that, nor the fact that he was still able to stand was what caused Anita to gasp in shock at the sight of him. He held a gun. It was rather small and slim, but undeniably a gun.

'He's kidding right? That's a toy pistol.', Anita thought. 'It must be!' But the very second this thought crossed her mind, Takeo aimed the pistol at her head.

"You don't want me to show you that this is real.", he said calmly, even though his voice was trembling ever so slightly.

Anita's mind was reeling. This had to be a joke. How would a student like him get a hold of a real gun? And also, what kind of person would, being in possession of a gun, steal a girl's bag? It made no sense.

"You've caused quite enough trouble.", Takeo said, forcing a smile. He looked intently at the two girls in front of him, the redhead protectively positioning herself in front of her friend.

He couldn't believe it. He was standing here, on the roof of a shopping centre, threatening two unarmed girls with a gun. 'I don't have to shoot it.', he thought. 'I'll scare them enough for them to run away. I won't have to shoot it.'

Without realizing it, his right hand, with which he was holding the gun, started shaking. 'Damn that Naoki.' He thought back to his comrade, who had given him this very gun just a few hours earlier. 'In case things get bad...you wimp.', he had said with a laugh. He hadn't wanted it, he had argued against it. But in the end, he had taken it with him, thinking that he would never need it, anyway.

And now he held it right there for everyone present to see. Things had really gone bad.

Stealing a girl's bag. It had been a foolproof plan, suitable even for the thickest of numbnuts. Stealing a goddamn useless bag from a little girl... it was the easiest thing of all. Just snatching it, showing it off, and then trashing it. The simplest thing ever. A stupid trial of courage, really. No big thing.

But now it was. The girls would probably run straight to the police if he were to let them go now. There was no way for him to get out of this thing in one piece.

Unbeknownst to him, Anita had no intention of simply running away. Which didn't mean that she had an acceptable plan for any other action, though.

She still had one page of the newspaper left, but that wasn't much. And also, newspaper paper wasn't really anything to work with in the first place. This paper, which had without a doubt been shredded and recycled countless times, would never withstand a bullet. She wasn't even sure if she could pull it off with special paper. She wasn't good with defense, at all. She really wasn't.

But attacking wasn't an option either. Even though she was fairly confident in her ability to dodge a few shots, in case he actually dared to shoot at them, it would mean leaving Hisami all alone, and that just wouldn't do.

"Now leave the bag here and get lost!", Takeo suddenly yelled, breaking Anita's train of thought.

"...no.", came the instant answer. They had come so far, they couldn't. And the very idea that there even existed a slight possibility that she was going to die over a stolen bag was too abstract for her to fully comprehend. She felt as though she was watching a movie, and had missed the part where it turned from a bad comedy to a thriller. The pieces didn't fit.

"Anita-chan...", she heard Hisami behind her sobbing. "Please, forget about the bag...", she pleaded.

Anita hated it, but there was really no other way, was there? Did she really have to give up to this guy?

She was about to raise her hands in defeat as Takeo raised his gun once again, this time aiming at Hisami. But when she looked past him, a sudden smile appeared on her face, which even caught Takeo off guard.

"What?", he asked, warily.

"There's...something behind you."

Kapitel 3: And that's me loving you

"There's...something behind you."

Takeo raised his brows at the red-haired girl. "And you think I'd fall for that? Listen, this is no joke. Just get the hell off this roof and leave the bag here, and nothing will happen to you!", he shouted, growing more nervous the less those kids took him seriously.

Something behind him? Just how stupid did they think he was?

Takeo didn't even believe for a second that there could be something behind him. He was facing a rail, and if someone had come through the door, he would have seen him, as the door was to his right. There was just no way that someone could be behind him, and as he realized that he was even thinking about something as ridiculous as this, he felt like smacking himself.

But...the girl had said there was 'something', and not 'someone'. The moment the student realized this, he could also hear rustling behind him. It sounded like...paper.

Estimating the distance between himself and the two girls to be at least ten metres, he dared to look behind him.

And as he stared right into the face of a giant white dragon, he wished that it had been a person instead.

He didn't even have time to scream, or think, before the dragon reached out his mighty paw and pushed him angrily to the ground. As the dragon approached him, his only thought was to run. Fast.

Which was what he did, after madly scrambling to his feet. He didn't care what it was that was behind him, he didn't care if it made sense or not. He just wanted to get the hell away from it.

Naturally, he headed straight for the door. Trying to make sure that the redhead didn't try anything funny, he aimed his gun in her approximate direction as he ran, even though his eyes were solely focused on the door.

Which he found blocked by a woman he didn't recognize. She was tall, had short black hair and wore strange clothes, the like which one wouldn't encounter anywhere else in real life. Yet she seemed real enough, as well as powerful, at least in the sense that Takeo didn't want to try his luck against her.

He stopped abruptly between the woman and the dragon, then aimed his gun at the strange beast. As the white dragon prepared to attack, heaving its paw with the intention of burying the boy underneath it, Takeo closed his eyes. And fired.

The sound that rang through his ears was louder than expected, and his arms trembled even though he held the small gun with both of his hands.

Opening his eyes again, he saw that the bullet had torn right through the dragon's paw, but instead of anything substantial, he just saw scraps of paper whirling through the air, and before he knew it, the limb was repaired again.

"Damn!", he shouted, firing again and again, each time ripping the targeted area to shreds, but never for long. "What is this thing?", he cursed under his breath, but stopped dead when he heard a distinctive "click", which he had never heard before, but still knew the meaning of.

His gun. It was empty. He hadn't thought about this while firing, but he realized it now. He had used up all of his bullets, the exact number of which he hadn't even known when Naoki had handed him the gun, and couldn't name now, either. It was a mess. It was a mess he couldn't get out of.

He felt like a cornered animal. The woman was behind him, the girls were to his right, and the beast was right in front of him.

It wasn't moving now, though, and Takeo found that the longer he stared at it, the less threatening it seemed. He had no idea what it was, but it was no living thing. At least that much was for certain. But the name 'paper dragon' didn't seem quite appropriate, either.

"Give up, you don't have a chance to escape.", the woman behind him said, but he didn't turn around.

Pearls of sweat accumulated on his forehead. They were right. He barely had a chance against one of them if he was lucky, but never two of them and this beast. He didn't have a chance. Alone.

His eyes darted back and forth between the dragon and his comrades, which were still on the ground. He saw one of them moving, but the other two seemed down for good, at least for the moment.

Maybe if he could avoid his attackers long enough for the others to help him...

It was an absolute gamble, but did he really have any other chance? If he was caught, they would deliver him to the police, where he would be charged with theft, illegal possession of a firearm, armed threat, and probably a few more things he couldn't think of. He wouldn't even need to explain anything. Nobody would believe him if he said that he hadn't wanted any of this, that he hadn't done everything the others had told him because he had wanted to, but because there hadn't been anything else he could have done.

He was practically in jail already. He wondered what his parents would say once the police informed them. For all they knew, their son was an average student who had never done anything to raise attention. The perfect image of an ordinary teenager.

'It's always the quiet, inconspicuous ones', the newspapers would cite if they caught wind of this.

Suddenly, he wished he had just one bullet left.

"Just get him Ma-nee, I don't think he's listening.", Anita shouted to her sister, who nodded in return. "Don't worry Hisa-chan, we've got him now. Just stay here, okay?" Turning around to Hisami, Anita handed her the bag she had been holding for the past few minutes. "And take care of this one, you don't want to lose it again.", she said with a smirk, before leaving her friend where she was and approaching the thief.

Hisami only stared after her, clutching the bag tightly. She didn't want her to go, but she knew Anita was strong. She had been able to deal with all four of them, and now only one was left, and he couldn't use his gun anymore, either. Still, she had a bad feeling, and just wished that the boy would surrender already.

"Stay away!", Takeo yelled, but knew that he had no means to force them to comply.

Anita, Maggie and the dragon surrounded the thief and drew the triangle tighter with every step.

"Enough.", Maggie said, and the dragon attacked once again.

Maybe luck was always with the dumb. Or the desperate. Whichever it was, in spite of his clear inferiority, Takeo found a way to push himself past the dragon, avoiding his grip only by a hair's width.

With nowhere else to go, he just ran forward, until he eventually met the rail. Turning his back to the rail, he realized that he really hadn't had a chance all along. His useless upperclassmen were still nowhere near recuperation and even if they were, being the idiots that they were, they would just surrender without putting up a fight.

Which was exactly what Anita was suggesting. "Don't make this harder for yourself by resisting. You've lost. Game over."

Takeo was at the end of his rope. His feet still tried to push him farther backwards, away from them, but the rail stopped him.

He didn't realize how heavily he was leaning into the rail until it broke out of its holder and sent him toppling off the edge of the seven-story building.

He opened his mouth to cry out, but not a single sound escaped his throat. He couldn't even breathe, but as he saw the roof's edge pass in front of his eyes, he knew he wouldn't need to breathe, anymore.

He supposed that he didn't have enough time to think about his whole life as he fell, and instead wondered briefly just how much faster he was reaching the ground now compared to running down the stairs the way he had originally planned.

Planned. It would have been irony if anything on this roof would have gone as planned, seeing how the rest of the day had ended up in a complete and utter mess, as well. At least he had been spared the irony, then. It was something.

As he looked upwards to where he had fallen off the roof, he saw the annoying redhead look down at him, reaching out her hand with a shocked expression on her face. She seemed really worried.

Her arm was much too short, though. Much too short. And she looked so worried. He could even hear her cry a name. But it wasn't his name.

"MA-NEE!"

The stories were passing faster than Takeo could count, but when he suddenly felt something soft underneath him, he guessed he had just passed the second. It felt like being in an elevator on the way down, and the elevator came to a sudden stop because there was always that one lazy bum on the second floor, who didn't bother to just use the stairs.

That was what Takeo felt as the dragon spread its wings underneath him to stop his fall, and then took him up to the roof again.

Up on the roof, the dragon let Takeo gently slide off its back, which stood in stark contrast to its previous behaviour. However, as Takeo looked at the woman who seemed somehow connected to the dragon, he saw that her features had considerably softened, as well. She didn't bear that stern and angry expression anymore, and now for all the world looked almost concerned for him.

"Are you okay?", she asked as she helped him to his feet.

"Y-yeah.", he answered, and now saw the red-haired girl rushing over to him, as well. She looked truly relieved.

"You idiot, that was dangerous.", she said angrily, but her eyes spoke volumes. As much as she might dislike the boy, she certainly didn't want him to die. And most certainly not when she was around. She hated people dying. She hated it.

Now with the thief taken care of for all she cared, she turned to her older sister to finally greet her with a smile for the first time that day. "What took you so long, dummy. I was almost worried there, you know.", she said quietly and wiped away a lone tear that threatened to leave her eye.

Maggie wasn't sure whether Anita referred to herself or the boy, but gently patted her head all the same. It was a good thing she came here.

Both paper-users were about to turn back to their captive, when they realized that he wasn't there anymore. Instead, he was dashing straight towards Hisami, who still stood in the same spot where Anita had left her, her hands raised up to her face in fear.

'Left her. I left her.' That was the only thought that filled Anita's mind as she saw the student running towards her friend. Her best friend. Her soulmate.

"No!", she shouted as she ran after him, even though she knew it was impossible to reach him before he reached Hisami. Her mind pictured a million twisted scenarios as to what Takeo was about to do to Hisami, and she couldn't bear even a single one of them. She swore that if he only dared to do so much as touch her, she would have him pay for it.

Hisami, who saw the boy madly rushing towards her, could do nothing but cover her eyes. She was afraid, but her legs just wouldn't move. She couldn't run.

As she closed her eyes, she waited for him to hit her, or push her to the ground. But as ten endless seconds passed with nothing of the sort happening, she dared to remove her hands and open her eyes again, only to see that he was kneeling right in front of her, with his head as close to the floor as was possible without actually touching it.

Looking past him revealed a set of faces that probably mirrored her own perfectly.

"I'm sorry.", Takeo said, and Hisami couldn't say that it sounded like a lie, "I caused you a lot of trouble today. I'm sorry."

He didn't receive an instant answer, as Hisami was too taken aback to respond, but when he raised his head and looked up at her, his eyes seemed honest enough.

Before Hisami could even begin to answer, Anita came to her side and positioned herself between the two. Her arms were crossed in front of her, and she looked down at him with a mixture of amazement and scepticism.

"Are you for real? First you steal from her, then you threaten us with a gun, and now you expected us to forgive you just because you said you're sorry?"

Takeo shook his head in response. "No. I just wanted to apologize. Nothing more." He looked away in embarrassment. He didn't know whether apologizing would actually ease his situation or make him look like a complete idiot, but he didn't care. No matter how they had done it, they had just saved his life, and it probably wasn't such a bad idea to start being grateful for it right now.

"It's...okay.", Hisami finally spoke, causing Anita to look at her in disbelief. "You weren't really planning on shooting at us, were you?", she asked with a gentleness that Anita found to be naïve at best and utterly misplaced at worst, and received a weak nod for an answer.

"I have everything that was stolen from me back. That's all I need.", Hisami said, and averted her eyes from the boy, signalling that for her, the matter was settled.

"You're really something else, Hisa-chan.", Anita said with a dramatic sigh, but then smiled widely. Hisa-chan wouldn't be Hisa-chan if she reacted any other way.

Feeling that the focus on him had subsided as the girls continued to smile at each other, Takeo dared to stand up again. A little unsure of what was expected of him now that he had surrendered, he looked around until he spotted Maggie. She was looking directly at him, then nodded her head to indicate that he should come over to her, which he promptly did.

Hisami's eyes followed Takeo as he compliantly went over to Maggie. "Your sister, she's...", she said, but trailed off. She couldn't find the right word.

"Amazing, huh?", Anita grinned. "She's really cool when she does things like that. I can only do the small stuff.", she added with a weak smile, demonstratively forming a blade with the few scraps of paper she had left.

"That's not it.", Hisami disagreed with a shake of her head, looking straight at Anita with a proud smile. "You're all...amazing."

She had seen glimpses of Anita's power before, but had never really understood just what it was that she could do. It was impossible to describe.

"Nah." Anita scratched the back of her head sheepishly, blushing slightly at Hisami's words. "It's really more trouble than it's worth."

"I would think.", Hisami said, chuckling. "Still, it's wonderful."

When they heard someone approach, both girls instinctively turned their heads to see Maggie.

"Someone will find them sooner or later.", she said and pointed behind her, towards the four students, each of whom she had tied and placed in a row. Awake again, the three older students seemed to be struggling, whereas Takeo looked quite content.

"Yeah, they'll write it off as a prank or something.", Anita said with a nod, but then pointed at the gun, which lay in the middle of the roof right where it had been discarded. "We should probably take that with us, though. Are you really alright with this, Hisa-chan? Not going to the police and all?"

"Yes. I don't think they will bother anyone again for quite some time.", Hisami answered with a giggle.

"We should meet up with Nenene. The others will probably do that, too.", Maggie eventually said, receiving two nods in return.

"Can you handle us three?", Anita asked, and upon seeing Maggie's questioning face, pointed to her paper beast.

"It's really a mess down in the shopping center...", she sighed, remembering that people were probably still not able to use those two escalators. "And besides...you've never gone by paper dragon, have you, Hisa-chan?"

When Hisami realized she was the one being talked to, her eyes darted between Anita's beaming face and the dragon. "R-Really?", she asked incredulously.

"It shouldn't be a problem.", Maggie said after estimating their collective weight and the dragon's capabilities.

"Right!", Anita cheered and took Hisami's hand, helping her to climb upon Maggie's paper beast.

"By the way, Ma-nee.", she said when her older sister sat down in front of them. "What's with your cheek?", she asked, pointing at Maggie's left cheek. She had only noticed it now, and wondered why only one of Maggie's cheeks was red, and even more so than was usual when her sister blushed. It seemed a little off.

"Ah...that.", Maggie said, covering the red mark on said cheek with her left hand just as though her teeth hurt.

"I...argued."

—

"Don't you think that's a little too flashy?", was the first thing Maggie, Anita and Hisami heard upon arriving on the construction site where Nenene, Michelle and Tooru were already assembled. Nenene looked at them with her trademark expression of irritation and boredom.

"But...it was the fastest way...", Maggie said quietly, dissolving the dragon and collecting the paper in her hands.

"Just admit you're happy to see us.", Anita said in what seemed like mock annoyance, but as she shot Nenene a stern look which only she noticed, the author bit back her responding comment.

"I'm so glad you're all okay.", Michelle said happily and laid her arm around Tooru, who stood right beside her. "Right, Tooru-kun?"

"R-Right. Did you get everything back?", Tooru asked, trying to distract from his reddening face.

"Sure did.", Anita grinned and gave the victory sign, while Hisami smiled serenely, telling him more than any words could.

"Which means we're done here, right? Can I go home now?", Nenene asked impatiently.

"We should take care of the boy, first. He doesn't seem so well.", Michelle said

thoughtfully, nodding her head at Naoki, who was still out like a light. Tooru felt guilty looking at him like that. He really hadn't wanted to hit him that hard. The broken piece of a brick he had thrown after him hadn't even been that big. It would probably still hurt like hell once he woke up, though. He winced at the thought.

"I should bring him to a hospital.", he said, though he didn't really know how to do that. It was probably better to call for the ambulance, but being where they were, it wasn't exactly a good place for them to find.

"Oh, don't you worry about that.", Michelle reassured him. "Maggie, Nenene and I will take care of that, so you three just go and enjoy what's left of the day." She put on her best motherly smile.

"But-", Tooru and Nenene said in unison, though for different reasons.

"Oh, I'm sure Nenene here feels terribly guilty for having been a little too rough with the poor boy. So don't worry, Tooru-kun. It wasn't your fault." Michelle winked at the boy, and Nenene's protests volatilized.

"But...you're really bringing him to a hospital?", Anita asked, a few doubts left in the back of her mind.

"Why, of course! Let us act our part as the big sisters for once, okay?", Michelle replied, her smile unwavering.

"Right. Thanks, Mi-nee, Ma-nee, and Nenene too.", Anita said gratefully, but Nenene didn't appear to be listening.

"Have a nice day!", Michelle called after them as they were leaving, waving her hand. "Aren't the three of them so cute?", she asked dreamily once they were out of earshot.

"I'm glad everyone's safe.", Maggie voiced what had concerned her the most all this time.

"Except him.", Nenene commented and looked at Naoki, still feeling rather unconcerned about his health, though she agreed that he should probably see a doctor. Just in case. She wondered if it was her responsibility now to come up with an excuse as to how the boy had received just a wound.

Maggie leaned down to untie his hands in order to free him of the pole, but upon doing that, immediately fixed his hands again. She didn't trust him, even though he was just barely conscious at the moment.

"By the way, you didn't tell us whether or not you found out anything about our Naoki here.", Nenene pointed out and looked at Michelle, whose eyes widened shortly before she gave an obviously fake laugh. Maggie and Nenene exchanged wary looks before eyeing Michelle questioningly.

"Oh, I didn't really find out anything other than that this boy has some pretty feisty friends.", Michelle explained in the most offhand voice she could muster.

"Oh? And what happened to those, I wonder?" Nenene saw through the blonde immediately, and was just waiting for her to spill the beans.

"Well...", Michelle said, touching her cheek as if worried. "The question would be what will happen to them once they are found in girl's school uniforms."

Both Maggie and Nenene needed a few seconds to process what Michelle had said, but when they did, they gaped at her. "You didn't.", Nenene eventually said. It sounded like a statement, but was more of a question on her part. To think that she had considered herself as rather evil...

However, 'evil' wasn't what Michelle pictured herself as, putting on the most innocent expression as she shrugged. "I had to use the paper for something."

Finding his bike in the same place where he had left it in the park, Tooru leaned down to unlock the chain which had tied the vehicle to the lamppost. Anita and Hisami were watching him, and if he was completely honest with himself, he was glad that he could leave the two alone now. He had really overstayed his welcome today, intruding on their day like this. He hadn't wanted to.

"I guess you're a little late for your soccer match. Sorry about that.", Anita said apologetically, causing Tooru to turn to her in surprise.

It wasn't even her fault, so for her to apologize was a little strange. But as he looked at her, he wondered whether she really meant something else when she said she was sorry.

"If you want to make up for it, join us for our next match. I bet you're great at soccer.", he suggested playfully and gave a short laugh.

He was surprised when Anita suddenly took his hand and shook it, but smiled when he looked at her.

"Deal.", Anita said, and Tooru saw that she was serious. "Will you come cheer for us, Hisa-chan?", she asked with a glance to the other girl.

"Sure." Hisami favoured both of friends with a sweet smile. "So make sure you'll be in the same team."

"Right. Wouldn't want him as an opponent, anyway.", Anita said jokingly and nudged Tooru, who chuckled in return. "Me neither."

Tooru was surprised, to say the least. Judging from the way Anita had looked at him in the morning, he had been sure she would dislike him even more after all of this. But instead, she seemed really friendly, more so than they ever were at school. She was cool. He could begin to understand why almost all of the girls at school had a secret crush on her.

Which was not so secret to most guys, since they received the backlash first-hand.

"Well, see ya in school, then.", Tooru eventually said, dodging the awkward silence that had been about to come between them.

"See you on Monday. Take care.", Hisami said and Tooru gave a kind smile in return. "You too. Enjoy your day." With a last nod at Anita, he got on his bike and left, leaving the girls to look after him.

"He really likes you.", Anita said once Tooru disappeared in the distance. She didn't sound particularly angry, or sad.

Hisami was about to shake her head, but then stopped herself. "I'm glad we're friends. And I'm glad you are, too." Looking at her friend, she saw the other girl smiling weakly.

"He's pretty okay for a guy." Anita nodded and crossed her arms behind her head as she looked up to the sky. "I'll have to be careful not to get on his bad side, though. Wouldn't want bricks thrown after me." Both girls giggled at that and turned around to walk the small distance to the small and secluded spot near the lake, where their peaceful day had been supposed to start, but hadn't.

It wasn't too late to start it over though, and even though Hisami still seemed a little shaken up, Anita could see that she was trying her best to simply push it all into the farthest corner of her mind, focusing solely on what lay ahead. It was barely two o'clock, the real day had yet to start.

"By the way...", Anita started after a while of walking silently next to her friend, "did I tell you that this dress...really suits you?" The moment this question left her mouth, the redhead berated herself why she came up with such a stupid remark now of all times. Wasn't it a little late to tell her how beautiful she looked in that dress after several hours? It surely was.

But to her surprise, Hisami didn't even so much as flinch at the stupid comment, instead laughing softly. "No, but thanks. I was hoping that you liked it."

"It's...you look really good, Hisa-chan. That is to say...it's different from the ordinary school uniform. I-I guess I just don't see you without one all that often." Anita continued, almost stumbling over her unnecessary explanations.

"We can change that." A mysterious smile formed on Hisami's lips, and widened as Anita continued to look at her with questioning eyes.

"I know we see each other at school every day, but...I wouldn't mind if we met more often. I know you're probably busy-"

"That's not it!", Anita interrupted her friend quickly. "I'd...I'd like that. Right here." She pointed at the bench close to the lake, which was now only a few metres away from

them. It felt a little like their own personal bench, because they had never seen anyone else sitting on it.

Even now, while the sun was shining with all the power that it had this late into the year, it was vacant. Just as though no one bothered to watch the ducks on the lake and the glittering ripples they caused with each motion, which made the whole lake seem to glow.

They both sat down on the bench, with just a hand's width of space separating them. Neither of them talked, and while Hisami seemed to be perfectly content with it, Anita wasn't.

She hadn't had any problem talking to Hisami before, but now it felt really...strange, though she didn't know why. They had met here a few times before, as well, so it couldn't be the setting...

"What are you thinking about?", Hisami suddenly asked, bringing Anita's thoughts to a sudden halt.

"N-Nothing." Anita shook her head. Why was she feeling so strange now? It was the same feeling she had had this morning, as well. It had been gone the entire time, but now... "Are you hungry?"

Hisami looked surprised for a moment, but then remembered that Anita wasn't carrying her shoulder bag for nothing, just as she wasn't. "A little.", she admitted.

"I still have my lunch box." Anita opened her bag, but then grimaced as she found it upside down. "Though it might be a little jumbled after all the running.", she added apologetically.

Taking it out carefully, she turned it back around and opened the lid with a sense of dread.

However, opening the lunch box revealed the food inside in almost the same condition as before, and Anita was secretly grateful that she had filled the box to the brim. She took out one pair of chopsticks and handed them to Hisami while trying to tear her eyes away from the glaringly obvious heart shape of the rice, which, ironically, seemed to have taken the least damage.

Hisami was a little taken aback for a moment, but then gave a warm smile. "You put a lot of work into this, didn't you? It looks wonderful."

Anita negated the praise with a shake of her head as she took out another set of chopsticks. "Wait to see if it only tastes half as good as it looks." With that, she picked up a small clump of rice and put it into her mouth.

It tasted good. But then, she hadn't had a hand in its making, so it was probably no surprise. Michelle was clearly the better cook, though only since recently. If she hadn't bought all these cookbooks, things would probably be different.

"Here.", seeing that Hisami was reluctant to start in spite of her praise, Anita moved closer to her, so that the lunch box lay with one half on Anita's thigh, and with the other half on Hisami's.

Taking out a slice of broiled salmon and trying it, Hisami smiled. "It's good."

"Really? I'm glad.", Anita said and leaned back with a sigh, not trying to hide the fact that she was immensely relieved.

Hisami liked the boxed lunch, and hadn't made a face or comment to indicate that she found it strange in any way. Things were finally starting to look good, though Anita knew that her lunch box alone wasn't quite enough to get her point across.

Damn, she was still freaking out about all of this. She smiled inwardly at her own nervousness.

They continued to eat the boxed lunch in relative silence, only commenting on how it tasted ever so often. Though it tasted good. It really did.

"By the way...", Anita said after a while, causing Hisami to look at her as she was picking up a piece of sausage. It was the kind that was shaped into the likeness of an octopus, and Anita hadn't known just how much work this was until today.

"Why did you want to meet me today?" she continued, but then realized how rude it sounded and corrected herself. "I mean, you said something about telling me about something important today."

Surprised by the question she had hoped wouldn't come up so soon, Hisami unconsciously gripped her chopsticks tighter and caused the piece of sausage to drop back into the box.

Without missing a beat, Anita picked it up again, holding it up for her friend. "Here."

If Hisami's face wasn't reddening by now, it was after seeing her friend smile easily with a tilt of her head. Seeing her like that, Hisami could hardly remember the angry expression on her face anymore, even though it hadn't been long since she had seen it. But she didn't want to remember it, either. All she wanted to see was Anita's smile.

Trying her best not to look away, Hisami moved her head forward and closed her mouth around the piece of food her friend was holding.

Friends usually didn't do that sort of thing. All kinds of strange thoughts filled Hisami's mind, but she dismissed all of them. "Thanks.", she said a little hesitantly after swallowing the food. Though saying this didn't mean that Anita wasn't still waiting for an answer. Still, she felt so foolish.

"You too, didn't you?", was all she managed to respond to that. She knew that asking a question of her own was just a way to buy time.

"Well..." Anita didn't know what to say. Hisami was right, of course. Thinking back to the previous evening, she remembered how Hisami had called her unexpectedly in the evening, asking her out. She had immediately agreed, of course. But even though, Hisami had suggested to meet another time if it was inconvenient.

Hisami always did that, and it drove Anita up the wall sometimes. Which was why, at least in her opinion, she hadn't really had a choice but saying "No, there's something I need to tell you, too!"

She had just blurted it out like that, and even though it was certainly no lie, it was the cause of the nervousness Anita felt right now. She wished she'd had more time to prepare.

Seeing Anita struggle with herself for reasons unknown to her, Hisami decided that it wasn't completely fair to divert from herself like this.

"You will probably laugh about this.", she said quietly, turning the focus onto herself.

Anita was about to ask what she meant, when Hisami turned to her bag and took something out. Anita quickly put the almost empty lunch box aside, allowing Hisami to show her what she was holding.

It was a book. That in itself didn't come as a complete surprise for Anita. She knew that Hisami loved books more than anything else. What really surprised her was the fact that it seemed old. Really old.

It was a hardcover edition and seemed to have more than four hundred pages, which resulted in a fairly thick book with the paper that was used in the past.

"I'm really sorry you had to go through so much trouble just for this.", Hisami apologized and handed Anita the book to look at it more closely.

"Anne of Green Gables.", Anita read aloud, wondering about the English title. She regarded the book intently and it took her a few seconds until the realization hit her. "Anne of Green Gables!"

Hisami nodded weakly, not sure how to interpret Anita's perplexed face. "It's...the first edition."

Anita continued to stare at her friend for a few moments. 'First edition? Does that mean...' She didn't finish the thought, and instead opened the book to look at its first page. And surely enough, she spotted the date immediately: 1908.

That book was a hundred years old! Anita had searched for books with her sisters long enough to know that it wasn't exactly easy to get a hold of a book that was this old. Sure, large libraries might still have it, but to own a copy personally was another thing entirely.

"That's...incredible. Where did you get that?", Anita breathed. The book was in exemplary shape, and from the look of it, it wasn't a fake either. This was the real thing.

"Family.", Hisami answered shortly, giving a weak smile. "I have relatives in Canada, and it seems they remembered my favourite book." Even though she said it like that, she knew that her grandparents hadn't sent her the book out of pure goodwill. It probably served as a compensation for all the years where they hadn't had any time for her, leaving her on her own with the money she received. She didn't know how they had gotten the book, but she hadn't asked, either. Maybe she didn't want to know.

However, this didn't change the fact that this was one of the best presents she had ever received, and she was happy. She had wanted to show it to Anita as soon as possible, which was why she had called her friend on such short notice the previous day.

"That's...really great, Hisa-chan!" Having gotten over her initial surprise, Anita now beamed with joy for her friend. "The true, unabridged version! I bet there are all kinds of things in there that were left out in our textbook version."

"Yes.", Hisami smiled. "Though it's a little hard to read in some parts." A sheepish smile crossed her face.

"I'll help you if you don't understand something.", the redhead offered immediately. She had no trouble with the language whatsoever, so she was glad to help.

Skimming through a few pages, she saw that the text and wording differed quite a bit from what she remembered of the book they had read at school.

"You know what I really hate about this book, though?", she asked after a while, her expression suddenly growing serious.

"Eh?" Hisami looked up at Anita. Hate? Hadn't Anita said before that she liked the book? But when she thought back to all the trouble Anita and the others too, had gone through, it was just natural that she was upset.

It was just a book, no matter how rare it was or how much she loved it. Just a book, and Anita had almost risked her life to get it back. Thinking about it like that, an immense guilt overcame her, and she shuddered unconsciously.

However, when she finally dared to look at Anita, she saw that the other girl hadn't meant this at all.

"It doesn't have a happy end.", Anita said and closed the book with a thud. Realizing Hisami was looking at her strangely, she laughed softly and scratched her cheek.

"But...Anne decides to stay home and forgives the one she had hated for so long. That's...not a bad ending.", Hisami contradicted weakly. She didn't know what Anita

meant. Or maybe she did, but didn't dare to hope that she was right.

"That's just it, though. I mean, she hated him all the time, and in the end they're all over each other and make up. That guy...what was his name again? He was just such a..." When she realized she was ranting, Anita stopped herself short and took a deep breath. It wasn't like her to get so worked up over a book, but this had been bugging her for a while now. "Diana and Anne...they should...should've... just done without those guys. They never really liked them anyway.", she concluded, feeling stupid all of a sudden.

Why was she even telling Hisami that, now? The girl was the biggest fan of this book, and here she went and complained about it.

It was all Hisami could do not to stare at her friend in open-mouthed surprise. She didn't say anything, afraid of revealing too much. Afraid of hoping for too much.

"So...you're not angry that you went through all the trouble just for this book?", she asked instead, upon which Anita smiled widely.

"Are you kidding? I would've kicked myself if we'd lost that book to these suckers." Both laughed at that, but Hisami was the first to get serious again.

"Thank you, Anita-chan. For everything." Hisami's eyes were sincere as she said this, and Anita could see that she was truly glad that the book wasn't lost.

Anita thought that she wouldn't mind doing this every day if it meant that Hisami would stay happy like this.

"Hi-Hisa-chan.", Anita began, knowing that it was now or never. "What...I wanted to tell you..." She tried to look straight at Hisami, but eventually her eyes strayed, looking at the book she still held in her hands, instead. This was so hard.

"You know...back when I said I was going back to Hong Kong...what you said then..." She trailed off again. This was stupid.

But she was right, wasn't she? When she heard those guys on the roof read that letter...she certainly couldn't be that wrong, right?

"I...I didn't really answer that time, and I think I hadn't even understood it then. But I do, now. I really..." Anita stopped herself for a second. She wanted to say 'like', but no. She had told herself that she wouldn't take the easy way. This wasn't about liking anymore. She finally put the book out of her hands, forcing herself to look at the other girl. "I really love you, Hisa-chan."

It felt as though time came to a sudden halt when these words left her mouth, and from the way Hisami looked at her, the other girl felt the same. "You...mean it...right?", she whispered, and her voice trembled slightly.

The redhead nodded self-consciously. "I mean...", she started, but stopped her

useless explanation. "I...mean it."

Hisami didn't know what to say. She hadn't even thought that Anita had remembered. That she had remembered her words from that day, when they had embraced each other so tightly because they had thought it would be the last time. She didn't know what would have become of her if it really had been the last time. Her strong words from then rang hollow in her ears, now.

"Is that why you disliked the ending?", she eventually asked. She didn't know why she always got back to that book, why she chose it as a parallel even though things were so obviously different now. But hadn't it all started with this book? Wasn't it their fictional alter egos, who had helped her understand what she felt? Hisami didn't think she would have been able to name that feeling, hadn't it been for them. They were soulmates, weren't they? More than friends.

"...maybe." Anita wasn't able to hide her blush anymore. "Pretty stupid of me, huh?"

"Just a little.", Hisami smiled gently. She slowly leaned forward, closer to Anita. When the other girl didn't move backwards or showed any signs of being uncomfortable, Hisami closed the distance between them.

It felt strange at first, not at all like she had imagined. It felt good. With her eyes closed, she couldn't see what Anita felt, and she was afraid to know.

She drew away before she lost herself in it. Their kiss had only lasted for a second, but for the both of them had felt so much longer than that.

After breaking the kiss, Hisami wasn't able to meet her friend's eyes. Was 'friend' even the right word anymore?

"Hisa-chan...", Anita said tentatively, but the other girl still didn't look at her. So instead of saying her name again, she reached out her hand and cupped Hisami's cheek, gently turning it back to her.

"...everything alright?", she asked and gently stroked her thumb across Hisami's cheek.

Hisami nodded ever so slightly. "What about you?"

Instead of answering, Anita drew Hisami's face closer to her and planted a soft kiss onto the same spot she had just touched.

It wasn't that she had disliked being kissed on the lips, she just wasn't brave enough. Hisami might think that she was strong because she hadn't been afraid of the guys who had threatened them. But in reality, Hisami was the truly strong one. She had kept herself from crying even though something so precious to her had been stolen, she had faced the thief together with her, not knowing that Anita herself was only able to be so brave because she wasn't alone. She had kissed her, something Anita couldn't bring herself to do even though she wanted to.

But they had a lot of time, didn't they? Just like it had taken her a little longer than Hisami to understand her feelings, she would surely learn to do this, too.

With newfound confidence, Anita looked straight into Hisami's eyes, her smile almost reaching her ears.

"Would you like to stay over today?"

—

"We're home!", Michelle announced happily as she entered the apartment, but found it empty. "Isn't Anita home yet?"

"It's probably better that way.", Maggie commented as she maneuvered herself and Nenene, who she was carrying piggyback, past the cart with piles of books, which Michelle had left standing in the entrance.

"That's right, if Anita saw these books, we'd be scolded again.", Michelle agreed, regarding the heap of books which they had just bought. "We should hide them somewhere."

"Exactly where would you want to do that? My whole apartment's full of these books.", Nenene complained with an annoyed look as Maggie carried her over to the couch.

"You're right.", Michelle said, causing the author to look at her sceptically. "Which means Anita won't even notice that we bought more books if she just put them to the others." The blonde smiled as though the problem of limited space and an addiction to buying books didn't concern her at all. How typical.

Nenene sighed and sprawled on the couch. "Do whatever you want, as long as I'm not a part of it." She didn't even have to say it for everyone to know that she was dead tired. Therefore she didn't even make an attempt to help as the sisters quickly shuffled the books about to hide them.

First these two crazy sisters had wanted to shift the responsibility of getting Naoki to a hospital all on her alone, and when that plan had failed, had dragged her along on their insane shopping trip afterwards, which hadn't even been shopping so much as clearing out every shop. Nenene liked to think that if it hadn't been for her, the sisters would have come home with a truck.

Anita would be proud of her.

"Maggie, coffee.", she whined. Only coffee could help her now. She hoped Maggie would make it a little stronger and less sweet, the way she often tended to do. Nenene didn't like it sweet, but for some reason never complained, which was why

she knew she had brought it all unto herself. Still, having Maggie make her coffee was better than doing it herself.

Thinking of Maggie, Nenene perked up her ears and listened closely. The apartment was completely silent. Which meant that no one was preparing her coffee. She was inclined to simply call again, but instead sat up and looked around.

She should have known, of course, but she still groaned when she spotted both Michelle and Maggie near the window, each of them reading one of their new books. How could they be so utterly engrossed in books?

She continued to stare at them for a few moments in both amazement and annoyance, but ultimately stood up and went over to the kitchenette.

'Damn, just what kind of day is this? I haven't made myself coffee ever since they came to stay here!'

Upon hearing the sounds of filling the coffee machine with water and coffee powder, Maggie's head immediately jerked up. With a look of utter shock on her face, put the book to the side and scrambled to her feet.

"Let me help.", she said as she crossed the room with a few quick steps. However, the icy glare that Nenene shot her made her stop in her tracks.

"Who do you think I am? I'm fine.", Nenene said coldly, intentionally leaving out the "thanks", which would normally accompany such a sentence.

Not bothering to watch Maggie return to the window with a bearing that screamed 'heartbroken', she poured the coffee into a cup and sipped at it.

It was all she could muster not to let the cup fall. The coffee tasted so bitter and vile that she would have mistaken it for something else entirely had she not seen with her own eyes that it had actually been made with ordinary coffee powder.

Idly wondering whether five teaspoons had been a little much for one cup, she took the cup with her back to the couch, trying to look as neutral as possible under the circumstances. She set the cup down onto the table in spite of her intention to never touch the thing again, and flopped back on the couch with her eyes closed.

Maggie, who had been watching her, turned to look at Michelle helplessly. However, Michelle simply smiled and patted her shoulder, silently mouthing: "It's okay."

Nenene was just about to get bored and already toyed with the thought of drinking the entire cup of coffee out of sheer curiosity about what would happen, when she heard the door open.

When they heard giggling, all eyes turned to the door, revealing Anita and Hisami who entered the apartment hand in hand.

The sight brought an unexpected smile to Nenene's face, which she quickly masked with a sneer.

However, even without noticing this change of expressions on Nenene, Anita's giggle faded as she looked around the apartment and found that it was even messier than it had been in the morning. Her sisters really had no idea of how to keep their living space tidy.

"Seriously, I can't bring any friends home with all the books in the way!", she complained half-heartily as she lead Hisami safely past several piles of books which looked as though they might collapse by just looking at them.

"Now that's something we agree on, for a change.", Nenene said, joining Anita's glance at Michelle and Maggie.

"You don't have any friends though, do you?", Anita teased the author playfully with a large grin. Again, Nenene smiled to herself. The kid seemed to be in awfully high spirits.

"I'd think 'friends' isn't what you're bringing home right now, either.", Nenene said nonchalantly, but the corners of her mouth twitched treacherously and broke into a devilish smile upon seeing a fierce blush on both girls' faces.

As expected, Anita found no response to that, but stomped past them to the kitchenette to fetch something to drink when she saw that even Michelle was stifling a laugh.

Hisami, who still stood in the middle of the room, unsure whether to follow Anita or simply stay where she was, suddenly remembered that she hadn't even greeted her hosts yet. "I'm sorry to intrude.", she said with a small bow.

Both Maggie and Michelle simply smiled reassuringly at her, while Nenene waved her hand dismissively. "Don't say that, you're already family, aren't you? The more the merrier...or something." She added the last bit to avoid giving the sisters strange ideas.

"She's going to stay over tonight.", Anita announced as she came back with two glasses of milk in her hands.

"Oh, is that so?", Nenene asked, now actually turning around on her couch to look at the redhead with a raised eyebrow. "Seems like Michelle will have to sleep on the couch today." This time it was Maggie's turn to chuckle, but when everyone turned to look at her, she blushed and quickly went silent.

Anita huffed and crossed her arms in front of her. Nenene was having a little too much fun with her today.

"Anyway, we'll be upstairs, call us when dinner's ready.", Anita said, looking at Maggie mainly, as she was in charge of cooking most of the time.

"Have fun, you two.", Michelle said and, now that she had gotten over the fact that she would indeed have to sleep on the couch today, smiled again. The blonde being completely unaware about how this sounded, Nenene was the only one who snorted at that, receiving a sharp glance from Anita.

She had been about to go up the stairs with Hisami, but now she went down again, leaning over the backrest of the couch close to Nenene's ear.

"If I tell Michelle about what you did to Maggie today, it won't be pretty for you.", she said in a low voice, only for the author to hear.

Hearing that, Nenene gave a self-confident smile. "Is that a threat?", she asked in an equally low voice without turning her head to look at Anita. She didn't feel guilty. After all, it had been the only way to get Maggie to listen. Though she could have been a little nicer about it. Probably.

"No.", Anita replied, then paused. "But if you make her sad, you'll be sorry." She smiled. "That is a threat."

"I'll have to be careful, then.", Nenene said with a glance at Maggie, who looked as though she had an idea that it was her they were talking about.

"Good." Anita winked at Maggie and then turned back to where Hisami still stood and led her upstairs to her room.

"Did I miss something, I wonder?", Michelle asked the moment the door upstairs closed.

"Nah, nothing.", Nenene answered with a sigh. That kid sure knew how to fire back. And she probably had a point, too.

Standing up from the couch, she scratched her head and looked around. All in all, her day had been horrible, she was dead tired, and she had unloaded the wrath of the young paper sister onto herself. Even more so than usual.

Now...she could try to fix that. But it would involve work, and would mean that she was being nice. Friendly. Not really herself.

To hell with it. "So...what do you guys want for dinner?"

Nenene had anticipated her question to be met with considerable surprise, but the way Maggie and Michelle were looking at her now was just ridiculous.

"Say something now or I'll cook whatever I feel like. I'm not sure you'd want that.", Nenene threatened, hoping to get a reaction other than open-mouthed stares out of the two.

Instead of answering the question, Maggie immediately got up and walked over to

her. "I'll help."

"No. Just say what you want and I'll do it.", Nenene said, halting Maggie before she could go to the kitchenette.

"But...I always-", Maggie protested weakly but was harshly interrupted.

"No! Don't you get it? Just...let me do one damn thing for you.", She started out yelling, but her voice got quieter near the end as she tried to fight off the embarrassment. This was bad.

Maggie had no time to respond before the door upstairs opened again, Anita's head sticking out. She was a little red. "What's with all the noise? You're worse than kids!", she said in what was trying hard to sound like annoyance. Her face was smiling, though.

"Nenene wants to cook.", Michelle informed her younger sister, not tearing her eyes away from the book she was reading.

"So what?", Anita asked, puzzled. But as her eyes spotted Maggie, standing in the middle of the room with a really strange expression on her face, she realized what the author was aiming for. "I want curry!", she called down to Nenene with a wink. "You love that, don't you, Ma-nee?"

"Right, then.", Nenene said, having gotten the hint. She immediately went to prepare the food, smiling to herself. The redhead could be a brat, but she was easily the most perceptive of the three.

That, and she was beginning to enjoy this. Kind of.

"By the way Michelle, you should probably get your bedclothes before it's too late.", she said suggestively after Anita had closed the door upstairs.

"Yes...I don't really want to sleep on the couch, though.", Michelle complained weakly while tugging at her cheek. Her bed was so soft and warm, and certainly better than the couch in every way.

"If it really bothers you that much, I could offer you Maggie's room.", Nenene said jokingly, leaving the stove for a moment to surprise-attack Maggie with an embrace from behind.

"If you'd prefer that, I'll let Maggie sleep in my bed." She didn't even say 'in my room'. She was shameless.

But as she saw Maggie's face change from pale to beet red in a matter of seconds, she knew it had been worth it and planted a quick kiss on the taller woman's cheek before laughing it off.

Though she was serious. Kind of.

Maybe this was a little like herself, as well.