

Soulmates

Von Tukuyomi

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 throw 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?"

"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.

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"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.

"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.

—

"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...

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"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?", an other 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."