

Soulmates

Von Tukuyomi

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.