

A Shared Cup of Tea - Chapter 1

Lily Mirai

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Author Notes:

Thank you SO MUCH for putting some time for reading this, writing A Shared Cup of Tea has been my dream for the longest time and after many transformative tries, I'm so glad to finally be releasing *something!*

If you know me from before I published ASCoT, you may know I'm an illustrator, and I fully plan on illustrating scenes from this story. In the future I'll compile sets of chapters with it's illustrations and release them as a single set!

If you'd like seeing any of them before then, look up the #ASCoT hashtag on Twitter! (Which you can also use to give me any feedback or anything related to the novel!) (And also, do follow me at @LilyMirai_ if you'd like updates on the novel or if you'd like seeing my art!)

A Shared Cup of Tea updates will have early releases for all Patrons who support me on <https://Patreon.com/LilyMirai> for \$1 or more! (And all Patrons that support with \$5 or more during the development of a chapter will get mentioned on the special thanks screen!)

Again, thank you everybody for your time, and I hope you enjoy A Shared Cup of Tea.

Patreon Special Thanks

Thank you SO much to the following Patreons, who have helped me dedicate my life into what I love.

EEmmilley

GooeySloth

Chapter 1

Etsuko Hoshi was standing outside a popular stationery store, the 23-year-old black haired woman had arrived around three o'clock and four o'clock was rapidly approaching without her being able muster the courage to go in.

Every time she tried to go in her muscles felt weak and her heart racing, she knew these feelings all too well, if she ignored those signs, worse ones would appear.

Once her watch beeped signaling her that it was already four, she gave up and started making her way home.

<<How long am I going to go without being able to do such simple things?>> She felt defeated, she really wanted to go in, but the idea of being approached by a clerk and the process of checking out terrified her.

Etsuko had difficulty interacting with people she already knew, but it was even worse if she had to speak or interact with strangers, so she tried to evade it as much as she could, and as she found a feeling of comfort in her loneliness, she stayed that way until she realized what was happening to her.

<<Am I a shut-in?>> she asked herself one day as she noticed that she had gone months without going out for something that wasn't taking out the trash or going for groceries, which she did online for the most part anyways.

She opened the door to her apartment complex and took the stairs. She lived on the 9th floor, but she refused to use the elevator if it was possible, a small space closed off with the possibility of someone else getting in? No thank you.

Etsuko arrived at the 9th floor and caught her breath as she searched for her keys in her bag, she opened her door and let herself inside.

Etsuko threw her bag into her futon and took her jacket off, she headed to her kitchen and turned on her coffee machine, which soon started dripping the golden brown liquid, Etsuko tied the little hair she had so it wouldn't distract her and served herself a cup of coffee once it finished.

She made her way to her desk, sat down, put on some headphones and gave her coffee a sip, she was ready to work.

Etsuko worked as a remote programmer, she had always been fascinated by computers, logic and technology, so the career choice came naturally to her, she also loved being able to work remotely, no office filled with noise, no small talk, nobody judging her, just herself, her computer and whatever she might be drinking that day.

The biggest issue was when a videoconference was due, and it showed. She was anxious, repeated herself, stuttered, between other things that made her experience with these meetings really bad, but her boss noticed.

Helena Brown contacted Etsuko one day through chat, and asked her if she was comfortable during these meetings, Etsuko admitted that she had difficulty interacting with people, and since she was effective on her work, it wasn't difficult for Helena to move some strings around and to get her to not need to make an appearance, she gave her updates to Helena, and she got a list of requests or suggestions afterwards, plus a recording of the meeting.

Thanks to Helena's efforts in helping Etsuko, she quickly started lowering her guard around her, and she didn't even notice once she wasn't getting anxious when talking to her.

Helena quickly had the privilege of being one of the only people Etsuko would talk to, even if she usually didn't send the first message.

Hello! (¯▽¯), wrote Helena in chat

Hey there, answered Etsuko. How are you doing?

Doing good, doing good, finishing up today's work! How about you, Etsu? Everything alright? (o'▽`o)

Etsuko still was upset about not being able to go into the store today, but she didn't know if she should tell her.

It's alright...

Oh no, the triple dots (◦´^`◦), Helena saw right through her. Did anything happen? (◦´^`◦)

I tried going to that new stationary store.

Oh! The cute one that opened like last month? It was over the news here when it opened! It seems adorable!

Yeah, that one. Etsuko took in a deep breath. When I arrived there I just stood in front of it, unable to go in.

Nooooo (π~~~~π)

They'll start delivering online purchases soon enough.

But experiencing the store is a whole different thing!

Yeah, I guess, but don't worry, I'm used to this.

That's even sadder ◦ · ° · (ノД` · ° · ◦

Etsuko didn't know how to respond to that, it was true that she was used to just buying online, but she did want to experience the store as well. Why would she have gone to the trouble of trying otherwise?

Would you go in if I went with you? Asked Helena.

Huh... I don't know... I'm sorry, but, we still haven't seen each other in person yet... Etsuko tried to be as honest as she could. I'm honestly kinda nervous.

It's okay! Don't worry, I understand!

Thank you so much Helena.

Don't mention it. (*'▽`*)

Etsuko took a minute, she did want to be able to get over these fears after all, and meeting Helena could be the perfect opportunity, she did trust her.

But... I really wanna give it a try anyways. Said Etsuko.

Really?! (((o(* ∇ *)o)))

Yeah, but, let's not go anywhere crazy though.

Don't worry, I think I know the perfect place! °. ✧ ∖(°∇°) ∖ ✧ .°. This might be too soon, but wanna meet tomorrow? Etsuko felt her heart start beating faster, but she just wrote.

Sure.

I'll send you the details tomorrow! Does 5PM sound okay?

Sounds perfect.

Aaahh, okay, I'll let you work now, I'm so excited to finally meet you! (ノ´ワ´)ノ*:°.° ✧ .°. See you soon!

Bye, see you soon. Said Etsuko as she closed the chat window.

<<See you soon, huh...>> that was not something she was used to saying at all.

It was more than a day away, but Etsuko already had started preparing herself mentally for the occasion, she knew that she was really scared but also that she wouldn't go anywhere if she didn't do anything about it.

She felt really grateful for Helena, who had gone from her boss she thought she didn't want to deal with to someone she could think as her friend and rely on, and even someone who she could trust enough to feel just a little bit less afraid of meeting.

Etsuko took another sip of her coffee, took in a deep breath and got to work.

Hibiscus Ojeda, a 25 year old woman with pink fluffy hair and brown eyes, heard a kettle go off in the kitchen and made her way to turn it off, she grabbed a cup from a drawer and served the recently boiled water on it, then she grabbed a thermometer and put it in the kettle to wait for the water to go down to 85°C/170°F, as she was about to prepare a white tea. She put a timer she had on her counter for five minutes. She brought her hands together, closer her eyes, and started concentrating on her breathing.

The timer went off and Hibiscus broke her focus, she quickly deactivated the timer and gave a glance to the thermometer in her kettle <<Eighty seven degrees, nice.>>.

She emptied the cup she had poured the water on, which was now a lot colder and put a metal tea infuser in the cup, then she opened the cupboard where she stored all of her teas. <<Where's the strawberry one with rose petals...?>>

After moving them around and checking the labels, she found the one, "Eternal Spring", she opened it and immediately felt it's smell, she grabbed a teaspoon to measure one and a half spoons of tea, then she poured the water in the cup and rotated a small set of hourglasses that had two, three and five minute sandglasses.

As she made the mental note to take out the infuser from the cup around the 5 minutes mark, Hibiscus took out her phone from her pocket and put on some music, which started playing from a speaker in another room where she had come before, her apartment was small enough for her to hear it without needing to crank the volume, the sound was slow

and relaxing, guitars and xylophones complementing each other in what seemed like a dance, creating a sound that helped Hibiscus relax and smile, she felt grateful.

After the song ended, Hibiscus glanced at the timer which was closing on the five minutes, so she took the infuser out of the cup and into a rubber cap that when rotated served as a stand, she stirred the contents of her cup and raised it her nose and took a deep breath in.

- Aaaahh~ This gives life purpose.

Hibiscus then took a sip of her white tea and just let herself focus on the flow of the warm and soft sensation of one of her favorite teas, hitting her tongue and filling her mouth, she tasted the warm liquid slowly and then swallowed.

- This is the best... - she said out loud.

Hibiscus took her cup back to her room and let herself relax on the chair that was next to her desktop, she opened her laptop and opened a spreadsheet filled with numbers and operations, all related to sales, repositions, inputs and outputs of money, and started organizing it.

Hibiscus had recently turned into a shop owner, during the previous months, she had bought and redecorated a place to open a tea house.

She had dreamed about opening a tea house for a long time, after an issue with her parents when Hibiscus was 15, she had to start crashing on friends' couches to be able to have a place to stay the night.

The next year she started working at a café to raise money for both to stop crashing on friend's places constantly and to also pay them back for the help they had given her in the most difficult time of her teenage years.

One of these friends that gave her a room to be for a while was into teas, and they planted the seed that would soon turn into Hibiscus' own love for it. Specially after a certain white tea, which had helped to give her one of the most peaceful moments she had felt in a long time, letting go of the tension in her muscles, and realizing how tired they were from being like that for so long.

After this experience, she started giving herself time to just sit down and be with herself, drinking tea, and focusing on how she felt. It changed her life. For the first time in years she wasn't anxious about where she would go next, she just was present and grateful to be fine in that moment.

- Minette come here! - she said as she pet her lap and a cat with light brown and white features rapidly came to her and jumped into the space she was petting, gracefully sitting down. She began caressing her and Minette started purring.

A little time after she had turned 18, she finally had raised enough money so that she could afford to rent an apartment with the help of a friends' family to help her out as co-signers, help she didn't wanted to get, but that she needed if she wanted her own place without having a job contract.

She got a small studio apartment, one that allowed her the space to go on with her daily life without suffocating her or her pet cat, Minette.

As Minette purred, Hibiscus felt a sense of calm that overwhelmed any other feeling in her body.

- Everything I do is worth it, for stuff like this. - she said with a big smile.

Hibiscus had a rough early life, after deciding that she wouldn't focus her life on reaching her parent's expectations, she was kicked out, the reason for why she had to crash in friends' places for a while.

Now that she had her own place and could live a peaceful life, she felt extremely grateful constantly, but something was missing.

She wasn't opening up to people in the last few months, and it felt obvious, she was really busy running the shop by herself to be social, during a lot of her childhood, she had been too depressed to be around friends, and after being kicked out she went to the other extreme, living with friends, socializing everyday, even when she didn't want to and working really hard.

Ever since she signed the papers to rent out the place for the tea house, she barely had active friends, she had moved out of town for her new place and shop and it made seeing old friends incredibly difficult, some of her friends did end up visiting the shop once it had opened up, but that didn't last.

Since she didn't have any advertising or any social media skills to start doing so, the store had a slow start after it's first boom on opening week.

Hibiscus had, for the previous last months, rented, prepared, launched and operated a tea house on her own.

She felt really tired.

She sighed, took another sip of her cup and concentrated on her spreadsheet again.

After the boom in the first week, she had won enough money to sustain the shop okay, but after that the month went by really slowly, and the trend wasn't going up as she would have liked.

She had savings prepared for a few bad months, but she wouldn't be able to hire anyone if she can't even turn the money generated from sales into rent, services and ingredients that are required to run it. She needed to make a change, or she could start losing money *fast*.

<<I hope everything goes well>> Hibiscus thought, really worried, as she stared out the window next to her.

Etsuko logged off from her remote desktop, she had been writing and editing code for a good while and she was already starting to feel the need for sleep, but she didn't feel like going to bed yet, so she took her headphones off and headed for her kitchen bringing along her coffee mug, which she left on the dishwasher.

She turned her electric kettle on and took a tea bag out of a box she had laying around her counters, which she put in a new cup. She loved coffee, but she already had issues with caffeine in her past, so she would go for the healthier option and drink tea so she could still have a warm cup of something to hold and drink for a while.

While the kettle started working, Etsuko went back to her room and layed in bed, hoping for the minutes to pass quickly before she fell asleep.

Etsuko opened her eyes to a bright morning and birds chirping outside her window. <<Shit>> she thought. <<My tea...>>

She went to her kitchen and turned on the kettle again, she looked at her counter and saw the tea bag in her cup, still there, *taunting her*.

Etsuko took the time the kettle boiled the water in it to wash her dishes, which were plates and pots from yesterday's lunch, a glass and her coffee mug.

While she washed her dishes she started thinking about where Helena would like to meet her, and how she would arrive there. She hoped that she wouldn't forget to send her the details of their meeting point soon, as she wanted to look out for the route where she would feel more comfortable.

The electric kettle went off as Etsuko dried her hands, she grabbed the coffee mug she had just cleaned and poured herself two spoonfuls of instant coffee and boiled water before going back to her desk to work.

The light was coming in between Hibiscus' shades, which woke her up naturally and slowly, Minette was sleeping besides her, Hibiscus slowly rose up and slowly stroked Minnette's back, which woke up purring softly

- Good morning Minette, let's get up, shall we?

Hibiscus stood up, stretched and went to the bathroom, followed by her cat. Hibiscus washed her face and brushed her teeth as Minette jumped over the bathroom's water tank and groomed herself as she waited for her human to finish her own clean up

- Ah, that feels good - said Hibiscus as she wiped her face dry with a soft pink hand towel -. Okay, now breakfast! - Minette meowed and followed.

Hibiscus took Minette's bowl and put it in the dishwasher, replacing it with a new one and filled it with cat food, while minette walked purring between her legs, excitedly.

- Yeah, yeah! - Hibiscus said while laughing - It's coming!

She let the bowl down and Minette began quickly eating her food, while she started working on her own.

She put her kettle and a small pot with water to boil to prepare tea and eggs benedict, Hibiscus worked in what seemed like a dance, going from the front to the back of her kitchen preparing everything, putting some Berry flavored green tea to infuse, chopping spices, toasting bread, preparing the eggs, cutting some tomato slices and warming up some leftover hollandaise she had stored from yesterday's breakfast, stirring it slowly on a double boiler over the water she used to prepare the eggs.

Hibiscus put a lot of care and effort into her breakfast, and as she finished it, she felt great about it. <<It ended up really cute!>> she thought as she finished up her work.

She felt so proud of her creation that instead of going to take a bite right away, she took her phone out and took a photo of it, then she took her cup and plate and went to the table in her living room to eat. Minette followed her, as she had already had her fill.

Hibiscus sat down, took her cup of tea and put it near her nose to catch it's essence. <<So good...>>

She took a sip of it, and after letting herself enjoy the berry flavor from the strawberry and herbaceous taste from the green tea she had chosen for the day made her feel happy,

warm and energized.

She then left her cup and took her benedict egg toast and gave it a good bite.

The runny eggs, the spices, the freshness of the tomato and the remains of the grassy feeling from her tea made for an spectacular combination. She ate through it in slow, mindful bites, taking sips of tea in between, trying to examine and enjoy every single sensation that performed a ballet between themselves and created combinations full of flavor and textures that made Hibiscus feel really happy.

- Thanks for the food - said Hibiscus with a big smile, she thought of all the possible people who had worked hard for her to be able to enjoy the flavors that she had just had experienced, including herself for taking the time and effort to prepare it.

Hibiscus washed the dishes and tools she used to prepare her breakfast and left Minette a bit more food for later, she then went to take a shower and prepared for the day, she decided to wear a white t-shirt and a long light blue skirt with a pink cardigan, she then put on white shoes and grabbed her bag, putting some headphones and petting Minette for the last time as she opened the door.

- I'm going to work, goodbye Minette! - she said to her, who meowed back to her.

<<Gosh, I love her so much.>> She thought. Hibiscus went outside and found her white city bicycle between the plants she had on the hall. She took her bicycle and took the elevator down. When she was finally outside, she gave a look back to her apartment, where Minette was on top of a Window looking at her. Hibiscus waved to her goodbye with a smile and got on her bike and made her way to her tea house to work for the day.

It was midday now, and Etsuko was already done with her job for the day and Helena had already given her the details of their meeting, so she started to pace around in her room, anxious, she had taken a shower already and was deciding for clothes for the meetup, she didn't have much clothes for occasions like these, but she doubted if she would just wear a t-shirt with some shorts and a hoodie or to go for something cuter, like a skirt. <<Too embarrassing...>> thought Etsuko, who decided to go with her usual.

Etsuko grabbed a white t-shirt and a pair of black denim shorts and put it all on, then she put on a black zip up hoodie without closing it. She then filled her pockets and bag with her wallet, keys, phone, was the phone charged? She turned it on and saw it at 92%, but she also noticed it was still around twelve and fourteen minutes, still too early.

<<Shit, what do I do with all this extra time?>> She started going around her apartment and did some light cleaning on her kitchen, organized her desk, wiped the floors, and took out the trash. As she finished, she took out her phone again, it was 14:47, still too early.

<<Why does time even exist...? Does it even exist? Wasn't it just human comprehension of how stuff *happens*? Is it linked to thoughts and memories?>> She went to her desk, sat down and opened her laptop to google her doubts away, Etsuko wasn't sure if she wanted to approach this issue from a psychological or philosophical way, so she issued search terms for both and separated it in different windows, then she opened various links and started reading.

After a good while Etsuko decided the whole thing was way too complicated to understand in one sitting, so she saved some links to continue reading later and regained consciousness of

what she was doing before.

<<Oh no, please tell me I'm not late>> she said as she turned to her computer's clock who had just turned to four o'clock. <<Alright, I'm just going.>>

From where she lived to the meeting point Helena had decided it wasn't more than 15 minutes walking, so she would arrive early, but it didn't matter anymore, she didn't feel capable of starting another task without getting distracted by it and leaving late, and it also would give her the time to check on the area and feel a little bit more confident for when Helena arrived.

Helena was the one that had a fair bit of travel, she was probably on a train already, since she lived on the next city, she felt kinda guilty about Helena having chose somewhere so closer to Etsuko with Helena having to put in a lot more effort, but she also felt thankful, as the opposite wouldn't have been comfortable for her.

Etsuko exited her apartment and put on some headphones and played her usual playlist from her phone to make her way to the place where they would meet.

While following the directions that online maps gave her, she noticed it was close to a supermarket she frequented because of it's usually empty self-checkout and decided to follow her usual path instead of the maps, to evade any main street or somewhere filled with people.

After some minutes and checking twice, she found she had arrived, it was a light pink tea house that was on the first floor of a residential building, it had a good amount of plants both outside and inside. <<So cute!>> she thought as she decided to get some plants for her own apartment later, she needed some life in there.

Etsuko took out her phone and noticed that it was still too early, Helena wouldn't arrive for at least half an hour, she analyzed her options, it was either wait here outside or go inside on her own, for a second she tried to go with the latter, but her anxiety spiked quickly, just the

thought of continuing to go inside gave her a slight stomach ache, so she rapidly went back to the first choice, just stand there, listening to music, until Helena arrived.

Hibiscus had spent the day working at her tea house, most of which was spent cleaning, she didn't have many clients today, and all were around their 40s and clearly working office jobs, most had been there with their laptops and either had ordered an espresso or a latte.

Hibiscus felt happy about getting customers, but she felt sad about having only served coffee based drinks. She decided to incorporate coffee into her tea house since she had years of experience as a barista, and it also gave her tea house a bit more security, the location of the tea house was near some small office buildings and it was an exploitable target audience if she offered coffee.

At around four and a half, when Hibiscus was just resting behind the counter, drinking a cup of white raspberry tea and eating a chocolate croissant she noticed a girl who looked in her early 20's had been standing in front of her store for a while. <<Must be waiting for someone.>> Hibiscus thought as she gave the final bite to her croissant and stood up to serve a client that had just come in by the door.

It was already five and ten and Helena still didn't arrive, it struck Etsuko as odd since she imagined Helena to be someone really responsible. She took her phone out and sent her a message.

Hey Helena, is everything okay?

Yeah, I'm so sorry, the train I was on stopped because of an emergency, I'm two stations away but I cannot get off yet! So sorry for not telling you sooner! Did you arrive too long ago?

Etsuko didn't want to make her feel bad.

Just a little while ago.

I'm so so sorry for making you wait! (ノ`д´) The moment I get off this train I'll run there!
—≡Σ(((つω´)つ

Don't worry about it, take your time and be safe.

You're so sweet. Okay, I'll see you in a while! (*'▽`*)

Etsuko stored her phone back in her pocket, she had to wait until Helena could make it there, Etsuko felt dumb for going out so early, her feet were already starting to hurt from standing there frozen for so long, she wished she was strong enough to go in the tea house alone and have a seat while she waited, but she knew she wouldn't be able to do so.

<<This is what I get for going out so early...>> Etsuko thought.

At around five fifteen, the client had already paid their order and left, Hibiscus had finished cleaning their dishes and table and gave a look outside, she found the girl still standing there.

<<Was she stood up?>> Hibiscus hoped that she was wrong, she had been standing there for at least half an hour. Hibiscus took a mental note of the time and decided that she would go check on there if she found the girl didn't move in too long, she hoped that she was okay and that whoever she was waiting for would arrive soon.

At five twenty five Etsuko's phone went off. <<Signs of live!>> thought Etsuko feeling relieved, she had started to feel anxious just from standing there, hoping that no one would think she was weird or suspicious for standing there for so long, she took her phone out and found a message from Helena.

I might not make it for a while... It seems a major issue went down with the trains and I'm trapped in the middle of the line. I'm so sorry for making you wait m(_ _;m)

Etsuko could feel her soul leaving her body.

Don't worry about it, it's not your fault. She responded. I'll be here waiting!

Thank you so much, Etsuko, see you there ; o ;

Good luck! Etsuko stored her phone in her pocket again.

She wasn't mad at Helena, she was mad at herself who had gone out a whole hour earlier and had feet hurting already by the time they would have met. She didn't know how long she would have to wait, so she left out a sigh and then took a deep breath and just continued listening to music.

Hibiscus took a glance outside and found the black haired girl was still there, she took a look at the clock. Five thirty. <<That's far too long.>> thought Hibiscus, who already was worrying too much, she went to check on her.

Hibiscus walked towards the girl and calmly tapped her shoulder, the girl jumped in place reacting to the touch, and slowly turned around.

- I'm so sorry for startling you! - said Hibiscus, feeling guilty. After seeing the girls' face Hibiscus determined that she was definitively around her own age.

- A-ah, I-i-it's - Etsuko couldn't manage to say a full word before tripping on her own words, she was still processing the scare she had just experienced. - it's ok-k-kay...

- I'm Hibiscus, the owner of the tea house behind us. I'm so sorry for intruding, but I've noticed you've been here for a while... Is everything okay? Are you waiting for someone? - Etsuko nodded slightly, Hibiscus could notice how exalted she was. - I'm terribly sorry for scaring you just now. Can I offer you some tea? I'll help you calm down.

Etsuko didn't know what to do, her heart was still racing, she felt really scared and anxious about the situation, but she felt awkward about saying no and then staying there again, so, still shivering and unable to say a word, she nodded again.

- Thank you, please, follow me. - said the pink haired girl before going in the store, Etsuko followed her slowly. The girl invited Etsuko to sit down in a table and then

went behind the bar.

<<Okay.>> Etsuko began thinking rapidly. <<I'm in the tea house, I'm in the tea house, I'm in the tea house>> She couldn't stop the thoughts, and she felt her anxiety spiking. <<Helena isn't here yet. Helena isn't here yet. I'm alone at this teahouse I've never been before.>> Etsuko could feel tears starting to form in front of her.

- It's a rosehip and blueberry herbal infusion, it should help you relax, please, go ahead.

Etsuko looked at her, tears already formed and falling, and nodded slightly, Hibiscus was getting more and more worried as she saw the girl starting to tear up, but she gave her the best smile she could. Etsuko looked at the cup, brought it to her lips, closed her eyes and gave it a sip as tears fell down her cheeks.

Etsuko felt like she was... nowhere? In a place where only white surrounded her, she could feel her heart slowly accelerating and how she suddenly felt peaceful.

Hibiscus saw the black haired girl take a sip and then relaxing her shoulders, and the only thing she managed to think was <<Thank god...>> as she brought her hand to her heart.

Etsuko finished swallowing the drink and opened her eyes again and sighed.

- Do you like it? It's one of the few ones that can relax me instantly! - said Hibiscus proudly.

- I-I... I do... - said Etsuko, feeling a bit more calm.

- I'm terribly sorry for scaring you just now.

- O-oh, d-don't worry. - said Etsuko, trying to look at her, but avoiding visual contact. -

T-thank you f-for the drink... - Etsuko could feel her voice breaking.

- I don't know if you caught my name earlier, let me introduce myself again, I'm Hibiscus.

- M-my name's E-Etsuko.

- Etsuko? - Hibiscus asked back since she wasn't sure she had listened correctly, and Etsuko confirmed it nodding slightly. - It's a pleasure meeting you, Etsuko.

Hibiscus smiled and stretched her hand to her. Etsuko felt anxious both about feeling another person and about being felt, but she felt grateful about how Hibiscus had handled the situation and for the drink, so she gave it her best try and shook her hand.

Hibiscus skin felt smooth, gentle and warm, probably from preparing the drink she had given her. She felt like she was touching milk foam from the top of a latte.

For as long as they shook hands, Etsuko forgot how anxious she felt before touching her, drowning in the softness and warmth of her hands.

The moment both of them let go, Etsuko started feeling embarrassed, she had just processed both what she did and how she felt, while Hibiscus just looked at her with a smile.

Suddenly Etsuko felt like crying, and it showed, which made Hibiscus' expression finally change.

- Oh no! I'm so sorry! Did I do something wrong?

- E-everything's fine! - said Etsuko, nothing was alright.

Hibiscus had done nothing wrong to her, Etsuko knew that, but her anxiety had gotten the best of her and she couldn't stop feeling like she had done something wrong to her.

Hibiscus took a handkerchief she had on her apron's pocket and offered it to Etsuko, who took a second to look at her, face full of tears, nod affirmatively and receiving it to clean her face from her tears.

Etsuko tried calming down and looking at Hibiscus, who still was smiling at her. Hibiscus was full of worry, but she wanted to make Etsuko felt comfortable, so she did the best to not make her worry even more.

Etsuko, after seeing that, went on another train of thoughts she wasn't able to stop.

<<Didn't she touch me? Why is she not disgusted? How is she still smiling? Did I look that pathetic outside she's holding back her disgust to help me? I'm grateful, but please, just show your disgust... Please...>>

The rhythm and intensity of the thoughts had started manifesting in her body, her hands had started shaking and the crying got stronger, she went into a fetal position in her seat and felt completely out of control of her own situation.

Hibiscus, once she connected the dots of Etsuko's actions, knew what was going on... <<A panic attack...>> She took a moment to collect her thoughts and spoke.

- Have you had this happen before? - said Hibiscus, Etsuko without looking up, nodded slightly. - Do you take any medicines for this? - Etsuko nodded from side to side. - Is there any way I can help? - Etsuko didn't do anything. - Would you like me to guide your breathing? - Etsuko took a second, looked at her with her face full of tears again and nodded. - Okay! Let's take it slow, breathe in. - Etsuko took a shaky, but long inhaled through her mouth. - And breathe out. - She exhaled.

After what it seemed like an eternity, which were actually just three minutes, Etsuko could finally regain her breathing and stop the thoughts.

- T-Thank you... - whispered Etsuko, Hibiscus barely could make out what she had said.

- It's no problem, I'm glad to be of help. Do you feel better? - said Hibiscus.

- I'm... better...

- I'm glad to hear so. - Hibiscus let the tension in her shoulders disappear, she would need an infusion herself, then she reminded why she was speaking to her. - Uh, right, were you waiting for someone?

- I was...! - said Etsuko after she suddenly remembered why she was there, and took out her phone, she already had some messages from Helena from a while ago.

The trains are moving!

And another one three minutes later.

Out of the trains! I'm on my way!

The last message had been sent 6 minutes ago. <<Helena should be arriving soon.>> she thought, and she turned around after hearing someone coming in through the door.

A tall woman, in jeans, a cute pink blouse and long, brown hair and light brown eyes. She had a phone in her hand, Etsuko wondered if she was Helena, as a new message appeared on her phone.

I'm here! Where are you? Etsuko responded quickly.

Sitting at a table with a pink haired girl.

The woman looked at her phone and started making her way towards her table smiling, confirming she was Helena, Hibiscus saw the interaction and stood up, leaving the space for her.

- Hey there! I'm so glad to finally meet you Etsuko. - she said with a big smile. - And who do I also have the pleasure of meeting?

- Hi, I'm Hibiscus, the store's owner.

- Helena - she said with a big smile, both shook their hands and Etsuko wondered how both were able to do such a thing without breaking down.

- I'll leave you so you can think about your order for now. - said while leaving small menus from her apron for them.

- Thank you! - said Helena as she sat down.

Hibiscus started making her way behind the bar when she suddenly felt something pulling her slightly, she turned around and saw Etsuko softly pulling her from her shirt, looking down.

Etsuko made the conscious effort of looking at her eyes and said.

- Thank you...

Hibiscus, who finally could feel the girl who she had just met was finally at peace, could finally smile honestly and fully.

- You're welcome.

Hibiscus made her way back and prepared her work area for whatever the girls could order.

Etsuko sat back down in front of Helena, who could only say.

- Tell me everything - smiling ear to ear.