

## CHAPTER XX - STRESSED

Celeste rested my head upon her lap, gently combing her fingers through my hair as she hummed along to some foreign tune. I'd be willing to bet that it's some sort of opera, or maybe from some television show that I've never heard of before. I'm not sure, to be honest. It sounds Japanese (or at least *Asian*, since I can discern that there is a pentatonic scale somewhere in the melody), but at the same time I can't help but feel like it has some western tones to it.

I feel a slight twinge of guilt from doing this, since I'm busy worry about Michiko and what actually happened that day on the rooftop, but at the same time, the feeling of Celeste's fingers in my hair calms me. She's massaging my scalp carefully.

I can smell her perfume all around me. Her hair's hanging down at either side of my face, the long and fine strands of blonde dangling before me. I find my hands floating towards the tips of her hair. Celeste smiled at me calmly and lowered her head slightly, allowing my fingertips to brush against her hair. The perfume is starting make my dizzy. The scent is strong.

It really is hard to *think* sometimes. I don't know if it's the situation I'm in, or if it's the smell of perfume, or if it's the mountain of troubles in my mind. This isn't the first time Celeste has told me to rest my head upon her lap like this. It isn't the first time I've agreed either. Sometimes I need someone to comfort me. Or maybe, deep down, I'm too weak to do anything without someone else looking out for me. Maybe I crave people's attention. Or their support.

Maybe other people are the reason why I even bother with *anything*.

Why is it that I could never stop thinking about Michiko? Perhaps it was because I desired her approval. As my first girlfriend—or rather, the first girl I'd ever fallen in love with—I suppose I just desired her approval more than anything else. I suppose I wanted to *impress* her. And I was always concerned with how she felt about me.

I still am, actually.

And yet, here I am with my head in Celeste's lap. Her smile was soothing and radiant. For what seemed like the first time her hair looked as if it was unkempt, hanging downwards messily as she watched me with what looked like compassion in her eyes (for what reason, I wonder?).

And at this moment, realization finally hit me.

The most beautiful woman I've ever met was watching me peacefully, brushing my hair with her slender fingers. The skin on the index finger of her right hand is slightly callused, as if it'd been rubbed against *something* a few times too many. Probably the trigger of a rifle.

"We have a job in four days," Celeste suddenly said, breaking the silence. "I almost forgot to tell you."

The only thing I could reply with was a brief “oh.” It’s kind of strange for Celeste of all people to be distracted enough to forget something about work. It’s not her style.

“Father texted me about two hours ago, when you were making lunch. He wanted to let me know. I was supposed to tell you, but it slipped my mind,” she admitted. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “What are we supposed to do?”

“It’s an escort mission, There’s an official coming from the international branch of our company, and it’s suspected that someone will be out for his life.” Celeste said.

Fuck. I hate being an escort. Killing people in front of someone else is...*unsightly*.

“Just relax. I’ll be with your the *whole* time, okay?” Celeste assumed me.

I nodded. “Roger,” I said flatly.

Celeste smiled again. I gulped. We were in the middle of the living room. She sat on the sofa, and I was lying on her lap with my head perpendicular to her legs. We were staring into each other’s eyes. The awkward tension in the room was really starting to get to me. I can feel my hands getting sweaty. I *feel* agitated. And yet, Celeste looked completely calm. She even seemed to *enjoy* this. She gently caressed my hair and slowly started to lean forth, inching her face closer to mine, her glossy lips gently pursed.

“I need water,” I said, sitting up. “I...really need some water.”

I swear I could hear Celeste sigh a little. I got up and walked over to the kitchen counter. My kitchen and living room are connected, as in many modern Japanese homes, so I don’t have to walk much. The journey to grab a glass of water too less than ten seconds, really, but in that time I could feel my head swimming in thoughts. Everything is swirling around in my mind. I can’t *focus*.

I’m worried about Michiko. I don’t wanna lose Michiko. I can’t let *anyone* hurt my Michiko. Not the way *he* did.

I don’t wanna be an escort. I don’t feel like *babysitting* someone. I hate the idea of *kissing people’s asses* when they can’t even protect themselves. I despise feeling *inferior* in that way.

I need to figure Celeste out. I don’t wanna be left in the dark about how Celeste *ticks*. I can’t discern what Celeste really *wants* from me. I *can’t read her*.

I stumble. I notice it myself (apparently I’m still perceptive enough to pick up on it). I think I’m getting sick again. I’m not feeling like *myself*. In fact, I feel totally out of it. I know my vision is getting blurred and my head is hurting like a bitch. I can’t even stand up straight and my legs feel like jelly.

It’s at times like this that I feel the most *weak*. The most *vulnerable*. And I hate it. But there’s nothing I can do now that it’s happened again.

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Touma collapsed. I don't know why, but he just fell to the ground without a word, and then almost instantly passed out. The sound of him falling nearly gave me a heart attack. I immediately went to pick him up, and I carried him to his bed. That wasn't easy, mind you. Despite my training, Touma *is* still around 70 kilograms, and he's pretty tall. Keeping my balance was quite challenging.

Regardless, however, I managed to bring him to his bed without incident. I still don't really know *why* he suddenly collapsed. His cheeks are flushed and his forehead is burning hot. He has a fever. I wouldn't be a stretch to think that his Patron Spirit's fire powers are only making things worse, but that's completely besides the point. If he's suddenly grown sick, then I should take care of him. But even so, I have no medical training besides first aid (which, in this case, doesn't seem like it'd help much), so I think calling a doctor may help. I could also go ask Shizue Sasaki, if she's at home. That may help.

But what else?

I place my hand on his forehead again. It's still burning hot.

Come on, I can solve this...I *know* I can. I want Touma to see that I'm more than just a pretty face. I want to show off my talents to him. Let's see...he didn't seem sick today, so I don't think he's just been masking an illness. He doesn't ever get sick normally, actually. So why would he have been sick just for today? No, that'd be too coincidental. Assuming my theory about his Patron Spirit is correct, then something must cause the spirit to act up, which is giving him this fever. That would make sense.

I need to stay calm. Freaking out won't solve anything. I should ask Shizue.

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I walked over to my front door. Someone has been (rather persistently) knocking on it. If it's one of those door-to-door salesmen I'm gonna have to shut the door. I get really nervous around strangers under normal circumstances. I'm relatively timid. Nobody would believe that if they saw how I acted around Michiko Inoue, but she's a special case. Whenever I see her, I just feel this *rage* boiling up inside of me. I can't control it. But enough about *her*.

I slowly unlock the door...and I'm greeted by the biggest breasts this side of the prefecture. No, not really. Caecilia Wolfe is standing at my doorstep, looking quite anxious. I, on the other hand, feel like the living daylights got scared out of me. I jump backwards with a little yelp. Caecilia seems taken aback. She raised a single eyebrow in confusion. "Shizue Sasaki, I believe we *have* met, have we not?" she inquired.

"O-oh, yeah," I muttered. "S-sorry about that."

"Listen, I don't have time for nonsense," Caecilia said. "I just dropped mister Koizumi off from our company event, but he's not feeling well. He just suddenly collapsed. From my experience, this is

*highly* uncharacteristic of him, so I came over to inquire if you know anything about this 'condition' of his."

I froze. "Is he ill?" I asked.

Caecilia nodded. "Mister Koizumi is unconscious. He also has a high fever. I'm beginning to become concerned for his health."

I blink. So that's what it is? Well, thank God. I was worried that it was something worse. Touma falls ill whenever he's under extreme stress. But then that begs the question of what would have caused it. "Touma often gets sick when he's highly stressed," I told Caecilia. "Do you have any idea what could have caused *that*?"

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Shizue's words confirmed my suspicions instantly. Touma isn't *ill* at all. The fever is completely caused by his Patron Spirit. The two are both under high levels of stress, so the spirit's powers start to act up to fight off whatever is causing the bearer of the power distress. The issue is, Touma can't simply light all his problems ablaze. That's not human life works. And thus, unable to unleash all of the power accumulated by this stressed reaction, the heat literally goes to his head, giving him a fever.

At least he's alright. But I can't tell Shizue Sasaki about this unless she already knows about Touma's powers. People tend not to like people with Patron Spirits, and there's no way I'm going to intentionally destroy their friendship with something like this.

I get they say "all's fair in love and war," but Shizue Sasaki isn't exactly my *rival*, and breaking their friendship like this is just a terrible thing to do. It's not my style. I'm not a *desperate animal*, unlike a certain ex-girlfriend I can think of.

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"I don't think we discussed anything too stress-inducing at our company event. It was a fun get-together. We didn't even discuss *work*, honestly. Perhaps something happened in his personal life. That's none of *my* business though. In the meantime, could you come with me to check up on mister Koizumi?" Caecilia asked.

I nodded. "I think I'd like to do that," I told her.

I followed Caecilia over to Touma's home. She lead me upstairs to his bedroom. What greeted me was a sight that even I myself wasn't too familiar with. In the six years I've known him, Touma very seldom showed any sign of weakness. But, whenever he falls ill like this, his vulnerable side shows itself. Deep down, Touma is still a highly emotional man, and the extremity of his reaction to high stress serves as a testament to that.

Touma *thinks* too much. And more often than not, he thinks about *others*. That's his biggest strength, and at the same time, it's his biggest weakness. At least, that's what I think.

Seeing him vulnerable like this is unsettling. It's just not *like* him. But once in a while, his feelings do get the better of him. They make him break down and cry sometimes. Other times, they swarm his mind with thoughts and give him a headache. And occasionally, it's both.

I stared at Touma for a moment.

He was indeed unconscious. His face was red and his forehead was covered in sweat. It looks bad, but it's pretty normal when he's overstressed. At least we know it's nothing *too* serious. He should wake up again by this evening, and he'll be totally healthy again in a day or two. "It shouldn't be too severe," I said. "I just want to find out what's troubling Touma."

"Well, aren't you a wonderful little housewife?" Caecilia asked. Her tone made it sound like a joke, but I personally find it to be quite a compliment. "I still have some work to do, so I'll have to ask that you excuse me while I take my leave. Is it alright if I leave mister Koizumi in your care?"

"That's fine," I said. "Thanks."

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The bad news is that I've lost my chance to be alone together with Touma. The good news, however, is that he's alright. I suppose it's a worthwhile tradeoff, but even so, I can help but feel a little disappointed. Oh well. Next time, then.

Leaving the house, I checked my phone. Father had texted me again. I have to go do some investigation for our next mission. I should hurry.

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There's one sad thing about my relationship with Touma: it hasn't really *blossomed*.

Touma seems to have beautiful women around him all the time.

Caecilia Wolfe is so beautiful that even a *straight girl* would have a hard time not ogling at her. And what's more, she's both successful and punctual. And she's *our age*? It's ridiculous. She seems serious, and smart and analytical too from what I can tell since she came right to me and grilled me for info when Touma got sick, but she also has an enjoyable polite and laid-back side to her. And she's next to impossible to read, despite the fact that I consider myself a rather skillful judge of character.

And then there's Michiko Inoue. She's pretty, and she's popular too. Her personality is a lot more outgoing than mine, and she's a lot more confident and talented than I am too. She's willing to keep trying to win his heart back despite her failures, which I have to admit is something I'd never have the guts to do.

I'm just not *lucky* like them. I have nothing going for me. Despite how I might come off as when I'm angry, I'm a pretty short kid with a mediocre body and no real abilities outside of housework and academics. Touma always tells me I'm much more talented than I claim to be, but he's just flattering me. I know he is. My oldest friend wouldn't tell me that I'm ugly and useless. He never would.

I sit down on Touma's bed, staring at his sleeping expression. I can't help but sigh. Caecilia Wolfe has her body and her wits to show off to Touma. Michiko Inoue, on the other hand, has determination and perseverance, as well as her academic skills going for her. But me? What do I have?

I'm just not enough, am I? Why can't I be good enough for Touma? God, this is so stressful!

I placed a hand on Touma's cheek. "Is this what you feel too?" I asked him quietly, as if I was talking to myself. "What is stressing you out, Touma? I'm not good enough to do anything else for you,

but you can at least tell me what's wrong. Because the one thing I can do for you that those other two can *never* do properly is *listen* to your problems. You can tell me anything," I whispered, "because I'll *always* be on your side. I *always* will." I sighed. "I'm sorry I'm so useless—"

"If you...call yourself 'useless' one more time, I'll...have to knock some sense into you," Touma muttered quietly. "I'm...awake now, idiot." He coughed. "Stop comparing yourself...to others. There'll always be people who are...better than you at everything. But there are...countless people out there who could never even...dream of being as wonderful as you."

I blinked. "T-Touma...oh, Touma!" I cried.

"You're not as...weak as you think you are," Touma said quietly. "Have some confidence..."

I nodded. "R-right," I answered.

"Say it with some...goddamn *conviction*," Touma demanded.

"Alright then," I said, quickly gathering my courage. "I'll try to be a little more confident from now on."

"Not *try*," Touma groaned. "You *will* be more confident. Because you're more wonderful than...you could ever imagine. Now tell me you're gonna be more...confident so I can quit...stressing out about you."

"I *will* be more confident," I said instantly.

"You better...mean it this time," Touma chuckled weakly.