

CHAPTER XVIII - SPAT

Celeste looks like she has soft lips. If I'm being fully honest, I've always wondered how they felt, and I really didn't know up until now. The scent of her perfume filled my nostrils as she leaned in closer and closer. The smell of the flower in her perfume is really strong. I'd call it oppressive, but it actually smells really good. It suits her too. I found myself inexplicably drawn closer to her. I'm not sure if it's because I'm recovering from the end of my relationship with Michiko, but I feel compelled to hold Celeste more. I almost just want *her*. Perhaps it's lust? Or frustration with myself? I'm not sure.

And then, as if it was the end of an odd dream, I heard Michiko's voice once more, crying out with absolute conviction. At the sound of her voice, I opened my eyes, having just broken out of some kind of trance. Placing my hands against Celeste, I gently push her away. She opens her eyes, staring up at me in confusion. There's a hint of disappointment in her eyes, as if she intended on going even further than that.

I heard footsteps approaching. A moment later, someone put a hand on my left shoulder and spun me around. It was Michiko, of course.

And without a word, she threw herself onto me and kissed me as if it was that most natural thing in the world. She kissed me exactly the same way we used to do it. Everything felt familiar.

I'm a fan of familiarity, if I'm being honest.

And yet I couldn't bring myself to hold Michiko in my arms. I knew I wanted to, I wanted the feeling of her embrace even more. I wanted to hold her—to touch her body the way I used to—and to become enveloped once more in her love. But that was no longer possible. I'll admit that I'm being selfish, but there's a part of me that will never fully accept her again. A part of me distrusts her. And that part of me is too damn powerful.

I found myself trying to push Michiko away without hurting her physically, but it was to no avail. She clutched onto my shoulders desperately, never breaking the kiss we shared. Tears (of joy?) formed in the corners of her eyes as she continued to embrace me.

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I don't mind hating another person. That statement may sound strange, but it's true. There are a lot of people out there whom I'm not fond of, but a new name gets added to that list every little while. It just happens here and there. For better or for worse, Michiko Inoue has been on that list pretty much from the very beginning. But I think I just moved her up a spot or two.

Lucky her.

She has no right to be here with my Touma anymore. And he's no longer "her man," so why the hell should she have the right to interrupt

our date? This is bullshit! I walk over, forcibly prying the two of them apart. Then, grabbing Michiko's shoulder, I hold her still and slap her clean across the right cheek.

"Celeste—" Touma began. I held up a hand to silence him. "Don't stop me," I said.

"Wh-what's with people and slapping my right side?" Michiko asked with a laugh. "Do you all have a problem with my right half?"

"Oh, real funny," I replied. "I don't have time for this." Taking Touma by the hand, I try my best to put on a smile. "Alright, let's go," I said. Michiko and I had been busy having our little spat completely ignoring Touma, who'd been trying to stop us this whole time. Ignoring Michiko's complaints as she tried to follow us through the crowd of people in the store, I bring Touma to the counter and pay for the dress I'd picked out (I was going to pay for it myself anyways), and without another word I brought him out of the store. He's normally a little more defiant, but it was clear to me that he didn't want to make a scene, and I didn't want the scene I'd made to get any worse so I decided to...make a *tactical* retreat.

I can hear Michiko Inoue chasing after us. Her shoes are loud. I don't particularly feel like dealing with her though. It's at times like this when you need to be a little more strategic about how you do interpersonal relationships. I'm...not very good with that kind of thing. Touma looked mildly frustrated. I suppose he's considering whether or not we should just talk to Michiko. Personally, I'd much rather not to that.

"We've gotten what we're here for, so let's go home," I suggested, taking Touma by the hand. "We can have a nice, hearty lunch and we can chat for a little while. That would be nice."

"Yeah...sure," Touma muttered with a nod. We briskly walked off hand in hand, leaving the shopping district behind us.