

CHAPTER VI - LIKE AN ANALOG CLOCK

Shizue Sasaki glared daggers straight at me. I could feel her frigid stare stabbing into my very body. We've never talked before, not once in my life, and yet somehow she held me in such contempt that she wouldn't so much as crack a smile at me. It bothered me terribly, how much she seemed to hate me. She seems like she wants to just hang me or something, actually.

We were seated inside of her residence. Yuki and I were side by side, sitting on a single, plain, red sofa with nervous sweat starting to form on our foreheads. We came here *avoiding* Shizue Sasaki because we expected her to lose her shit at us when she found out we'd come to Touma's house. She obviously didn't like us (or maybe she just didn't like *me*), so she probably wouldn't be very happy about us just dropping in uninvited, so to speak.

No, wait, not *probably*. More like *definitely*.

Shizue Sasaki had caught us in front of Touma's house. She'd dragged us to her own house afterwards. And now here we were, sitting on a red sofa with her across from us with little more than a coffee table between us. She was staring at us as if she was looking for some kind of explanation for our stupidity.

She wouldn't find one.

It's been about ten minutes since "Celeste" (or whatever the hell she wants me to call her; I don't know at this point) had entered Touma's home. I could feel the anxiety building up inside of me as I thought about the various things she could have been doing to *my* man.

"I assume you *don't* know who that blonde was?" Shizue suddenly asked.

Taken aback by the sudden sound of her voice, I jumped a little. "N-no, we don't," I replied, "but I think she's one of Touma's colleagues."

"I see," Shizue mumbled. "I sure wonder why they sent someone like *her* to deliver him a package," she added, "but that's none of my business."

Package? What package?

"So exactly what are *you* doing here?" Shizue asked Yuki and I.

"We're here to deliver Touma Koizumi's phone," Yuki replied honestly.

"Somehow, I don't find myself even remotely inclined to believe that," Shizue said. Turning to me, she sighed. "Alright, y'know what? I'll just say it, alright? Why'd you do it?"

"W-what?" I stammered, dumbfounded.

"Explain yourself. If not to anyone else, then explain it to *me*. Explain it to *him*. Why did you do it?" Shizue demanded, slamming her fist on the

coffee table before her. "When the hell has Touma ever wronged you, you little skank? And if you can't love him anymore, then fine! It doesn't matter! But know that there are people who DO love him! If you've stopped loving him then just give him up to someone else instead of keeping him like a gullibly little puppet on a string!"

I froze. She...she knew. She *knew* what happened. Yuki, too, looked dumbfounded, as if the impossible had happened right before our eyes. She had also believed with absolute certainty that nobody would ever know about the affair. And yet here it was, clear as day. I gulp. The cat's out of the bag, so I might as well. "How did you know?" I asked. "Or was that just a leading question?"

"Oh, I assure you it was no leading question," Shizue replied coldly. "However, you didn't deny my accusation, so the rumours seem to have some root in the truth, don't they?"

"Rumours?" I asked.

"Yeah. They say you've been sleeping with Junichi Kimura. Somebody claims to have heard him talking about it. He said something about how incredible your body was. I suppose a whore like you can take that as a compliment," Shizue snapped impatiently.

"Woah there," Yuki interrupted, "don't go calling people names like that. It's rude, damnit! And besides, that's my friend you're talking about. I won't stand for it!"

"Oh, yeah, says the one who suggested the whole affair in the first place," Shizue said flatly. "If you cared so much for your 'friend,' then why make such a ridiculous suggestion?" She sighed. "Listen, I'm not here to ask you for an apology, nor do I particularly *care* what you plan to do with your life in the future. Just tell me this: *why*?"

"I...I don't know, okay?" I snapped at her. Why does it matter? At the end of the day, I fucked up, okay? I get it," I sighed, "but even then, I still don't know *why* I did it. I never knew. I still don't know. I don't know what would have happened if Yuki didn't suggest it to me. I don't know why I went with it. What I do know is that I did something wrong, and I *need* to make it right. Does that make sense?"

Shizue stared at me for a moment. She was probably surprised by my outburst. Quickly regaining her composure, she sighed. "Alright then. I can't really argue with that, as much as I hate to say it. Tell me this then: what now? Will you or will you not give Touma up?"

"Wait, hold on WHAT?" Yuki cried. "Who told you that you could—"

"I'm not asking *you*," Shizue cut her off, "so back off." Turning back to me, she stared me down. "So? Are you still trying to keep him for yourself?"

I contemplated her question for a moment. Part of me told me that I should be giving Touma up. I may not know Shizue Sasaki that well, but

she's known him for much longer than I have. And more importantly, she probably won't hurt him...not the way I have. And above all else, I could tell what she was after. She wanted me to break up with Touma *officially*, so that she could have him for herself. Why else would she be so eager to get my answer? I know she's good for Touma. I know he'd be happier with her. And yet, I hate that sentiment. I HATE it. I absolutely LOATHE the idea of handing him to any other girl, because I KNOW I can make him happy. I KNOW that this was just a one-time mistake, and one that I'd but my LIFE that I'd never make again.

I love Touma. Whenever I think about what I've done, I hate myself a little bit more. But I hate the idea of losing him more than anything. I'm selfish. I'm greedy. I'm a horrible person. But I *need* Touma. I NEED him. And I'm okay with being a little greedy. Only when it comes to him.

A give Shizue as calm a smile as I can muster. "Touma is *mine*," I replied. "I *do* intend on keeping him for myself. I don't expect you to trust me when I say I'll never make the same mistake again, but if you would believe such a declaration, I wouldn't hesitate to make it."

"You're *still* not going to give him up? Even after all this?" Shizue demanded. "You know how much you've hurt him, don't you? How self-centered can you be?"

"Say whatever you like if it'll make you feel better," I replied, my heart now both spurred and resolved to keep Touma. "I don't care if you trust me or not. I don't *need* your opinion. I need *Touma*. I don't give a shit about who you are or what you want. I *will* fix my mistake in time, and I *will* make Touma happy by my own two hands. Even if it kills me."

Shizue Sasaki glared at me again, but this time her stare didn't faze me. I no longer cared what she had to say. If she intended on trying to steal Touma from me, then fine. Let her bring it. I'm not giving in without a fight, because regardless of what I did, I still harbour feelings for Touma and *only* Touma. And if I can't have him...well, I'll keep trying to win him back until I take my last breath.

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Humans can be incredibly selfish sometimes. I don't deny that I'm guilty of it too. Extremely guilty, in fact. My oldest and dearest friend just had his heart broken, and here I am the very next day essentially declaring war on his girlfriend (though I'd prefer to make her an *ex*-girlfriend). I know Touma still probably has feelings for her. I know he blames himself for what happened with Michiko Inoue, but I can't forgive her. I can *never* forgive her for hurting my Touma like that, and if she doesn't intend on giving him up to a woman who loves him, then I'll have to take him by force. I'll *prove* to him that I love him, and I'll help him forget all about her. And then when the time comes, he will naturally relinquish Michiko Inoue. I just *know* it.

Michiko Inoue and her "friend" were here for about half an hour. After they left, I wrote up a quick shopping list and ran off to the convenience store. Picking up ingredients as I went, I checked them off one by one. We're going to have Yakisoba tonight.

Time seemed to fly by. As I walked home, I glanced at my watch, making note that it read "4:59." Touma's guest should have left by now, and if not she should be leaving any time now. As I approached his house, I saw the metal gate opening and the blonde woman I'd seen earlier walked out. Her voluptuous body seemed unreal to me. I loved how it looked. I found myself tempted to call out to her, but I resisted.

She called out to me instead.

"Miss Shizue Sasaki, may I have a moment of your time, please?" she asked. Her blonde hair looked authentic, unlike that of Michiko Inoue's friend. Her blue eyes were deep like the ocean, and just as shrouded in mystery as the waters were too. She walked over to me. "You're not surprised that I know your name?" she asked. "Please don't be. Mister Koizumi speaks of you a lot. He tells me you've known each other for practically forever. Of course, I simply guessed your identity based off what I know of your appearance. I do apologize if I have the wrong person."

I shook my head. "N-no, I am Shizue Sasaki," I replied.

The woman nodded. "I see." Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a business card. It was simplistic, to say the least. It had a company logo on it (one that said "Armistice Advertising Solutions" on it) and a name: Caecilia Wolfe. It sounds German.

"I'm not going to bore you with any details," Caecilia said, "but in short, mister Koizumi works at a bar owned by our company. We have this large building, you see, and he works part-time as a bartender. He's always wondering how he should tell you, so I asked him if he'd be alright with me breaking the news to you instead, and he said yes. So here I am."

"I see," I reply. We've both said that phrase once now.

"I'd like to ask you about a little something before I go," Caecilia said suddenly. "About one hour ago, there was a brown-haired girl right outside mister Koizumi's door. She claimed to be his girlfriend. Would you happen to know of the authenticity of that claim?"

I paused. Technically, Michiko Inoue *is* still Touma's girlfriend. But...

"I'd say it's either false or soon to *be* false," I answered.

Caecilia nodded. "Interesting. I just found her to be a little suspicious, that's all. I know Koizumi's not *technically* a high-ranking official within the company, but I owe him quite a great deal and it just wouldn't feel right if I didn't confirm his safety." She bowed respectfully. "I do apologize for taking up so much of your time. I'll be taking my leave." Saying so, she raised her head and walked off.

I stood for a moment in silence. Caecilia, huh?

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I couldn't read her at all. That thought came to me as I began to make yakisoba. Behind me, I can hear Touma whistling casually. Knife and vegetables before me seemed familiar, and yet...I couldn't help but feel uneasy. I couldn't read Caecilia Wolfe at all.

"Hey Touma," I call out, "exactly *who* is that Caecilia woman?"

"Oh, you met her?" he asked.

"Yeah, she gave me her card and told me you're a bartender."

"You gonna make fun of me now?"

"No, I wanna know if it's true."

"Yeah, it's true."

"I see." I stopped talking for a minute before realizing Touma had essentially dodged my initial question about Caecilia. "Hey, wait a minute!" I cry out. "Answer me: who *is* Caecilia Wolfe?"

"She's essentially my direct superior," Touma replied. "Think of her as my manager. Err...not the *bar* manager, but the manager of the entire floor. That's the easy way to explain it. There's a bit more but I don't actually know all the details."

"Alright then," I replied. "Hey Touma, do you like older women?"

"Are you drunk?" Touma answered my question with another (possibly rhetorical) question.

"No, I'm serious," I replied.

"Well, first of all, even if I wanted an older woman she'd better be *crazy* hot or something and she'd likely not look her age. And second of all, if you're wondering about Celeste, she's sixteen."

"Who?" I asked. Who the fuck is Celeste?

"Caecilia's middle name is Celestine," Touma replied. "The people at the company all call her Celeste. She gets annoyed by it once in a while but I think she's given up on trying to stop us."

I nod. "Oh," I mutter. So Caecilia is Touma's age? But her body is *incredible*! I feel my muscles stiffening. Could she be a potential rival for me? Or is their relationship merely that of coworkers, and I'm just overthinking this? Damn it, I can't read her at all.

Michiko Inoue is like my digital watch. With a glance, I can immediately tell what time it is. That's how digital clocks work. Caecilia (Celestine) Wolfe, on the other hand, is akin to an analog clock. She's much more difficult to read, and to someone who doesn't read analog clocks often (like me), we could get the arms mixed up altogether. I can't read her all that well, if at all! Caecilia Wolfe's motivations are almost completely obscure. She seems like a master deceptionist of some sort. After all, I can't tell whether or not she lied even once in our conversation!

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I ate with Touma at my side. He likes yakisoba. I can tell from how he smiles when eating. And I can't help but smile too.

"Thanks, Shizue," he suddenly said.

"H-huh?" I looked up in surprise.

"Thanks for doing this," he said. "I appreciate you more than you'd ever know. Really, I do." He smiled. "Although I don't *necessarily* agree with it being your life's goal, I do believe you'll make a wonderful housewife someday. You'll make a man *very* happy. I just know it."

I felt myself blush.

"Hey Touma," I said, "can I ask you something?"

"Go right on ahead," Touma replied. "Ask anything. No promises that I'll answer though."

"Do you...do you still intend on seeing Michiko Inoue?" I asked bluntly.

I shouldn't have done that.

Touma paused for a second. His mouth was almost comically stuffed with yakisoba, but I could tell that he was thinking, and seriously too. A moment later, he resumed his chewing and (after a little while) swallowed his food. He sighed. "I don't know," he answered. "I'll have to see her at school tomorrow. It's a Friday, so I'll be fine. I'll decide what I'll do before then." He paused. "I think I'm gonna break up with her though," he said. "I don't deserve her, and she doesn't need me. It works out perfectly."

I freeze. I want to tell him that he's wrong—that Michiko Inoue doesn't deserve *him* and that he *deserves better*, but I hold myself back. I remind myself not to get too far ahead of myself.

"Do you think I should break up with her, Shizue?" Touma asked me, his eyes weary. "Be honest."

I can't move. I know my answer already, but I can't bring myself to say it. I can't bring myself to tell him the heartbreaking truth. I want to say it, but I also don't want to risk ruining his happiness just so I could have chance at sating my greed.

"Yes," I finally answer. "I'm sorry. I know you love her, but I think it'd be for the best if you two broke it off."

Touma nodded. "My thought exactly," he replied. Falling silent, he returns to eating his yakisoba. A minute later, he speaks again. "Great food by the way."

I nod. "I'm glad you like it," I said. "I'd be happy to cook for you anytime."