

CHAPTER X - WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

When we arrived back at Chisei High, I checked my watch. I'd been gone for about 18 minutes. If I got to the classroom within the next two minutes (which was unlikely, but whatever), I'd make Celeste's promise about the duration of the job true in every sense. After all, though the job itself only took 18 minutes, I still have to get to class.

Bidding my companion goodbye, I got out of the car and strolled casually towards the school building. I guess that's kind of odd. I don't know any other high schooler who does and kills a guy first thing in the morning. I admit that it's not how I'd have preferred to spend my day, but nonetheless, it's what I'm paid for.

The halls are surprisingly silent when classes are going on. My teachers were probably notified that I'd return sometime in the middle of the period, so I suppose it's best if I make haste. Picking up my pace, I head straight for the door to my classroom. Silently opening the door, I glance inside. Everyone's still in their seats. It's as if I hadn't been missing at all. I walked into the room and slowly closed the door behind me before dropping directly into my seat. There's a reason I chose the seat next to the door.

My classmates all seemed to shoot me little glances, but the teacher completely ignored my little entrance (or so he tried, at least). Ignoring their stares, I took my books out and found the page on the textbook that the teacher was using.

Fuck's sake, this is boring.

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Touma had changed while I was driving.

Not his personality, I mean. He'd changed out of his work uniform and back into his school uniform. I couldn't help but shoot a glance at him while he was doing that. Though I've probably seen it a hundred times by now, his chiseled body never ceases to make my heart race. Perhaps it's because I have the hots for him?

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I can remember the day Touma and I first met. I was on the job, chasing after a specific target. This target was rather troublesome, and he wouldn't stop running. I don't *particularly* blame him, since I was trying to kill him and all, but even so I found him annoying. We were by the pier. That wasn't a good idea.

My father is German, but I've never been to Germany. Instead, I've been raised in Japan. It's a fact that we have swimming lessons in school, but despite that, I never got the hang of it. Indeed, I couldn't swim to save my life, if I'm being honest.

Either way, I found myself chasing after the crook. He took every twist and turn he could find but I maintained my pursuit, but then all

of a sudden he turned and bolted to the dock, and without a second thought he leapt into the water.

I was dumbfounded. I had to get him, but at the same time, I knew I'd drown if I tried.

But we're talking about a high-priority target here. Letting him escape was not an option.

Taking a deep breath, I ran towards the edge of the dock and took as good a dive as I could. It landed in a painful belly flop. I'd landed in the water, stomach first, from over three meters in the air. It may not sound like much, but I'll admit that it hurt.

I couldn't tread water. I was drowning and I'd lost track of my target. But he didn't lose track of me. He quickly appeared before me, seemingly out of nowhere, but I didn't have the means to react to that any longer. In an instant, I felt a throbbing pain in my stomach as the water around me slowly turned red.

He stabbed me.

As I was hopelessly trying to stay afloat, he'd pulled a knife out and driven it through my stomach. I was bleeding. It hurt.

I was terrified.

He broke out into a snarky laugh as he continued to tread the water effortlessly, even taking the opportunity to kick the knife's handle as I flailed about, driving the blade deeper into my flesh.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to cry.

At that moment, I was ready to *beg*. I didn't want to die like that. I'm sixteen years old! I don't want to die like a dog, drowning in the ocean and tortured by some crook driving a knife into me. I didn't want to die *at all*.

I blacked out for a second.

I know it was a second because when my eyes opened again, nothing had changed. I was still afloat, and the water was barely dyed a deeper red than when I'd closed my precious eyes. But something *felt different*. I looked at my target. He was still laughing at me mockingly. My stomach still stung with pain (the salt in the water was probably starting to make it worse). But then what was it that was different?

A loud splash interrupted my thoughts. A moment later, I felt myself floating much easier. It was surreal, as if an angel had come to my side and lifted me from my watery grave. My target had stopped laughing too. He instead looked confused.

I felt a warm touch on my own hand. Turning my head, I saw someone tightly gripping my hand, pulling me along as so I could stay afloat. He was dragging me towards the ladder by the dock. My target had grown

impatient. He swam towards us. He was faster than the boy pulling me, possibly because the boy was, well, *pulling me*.

The boy stopped moving. Raising his free hand out of the water, he made a finger gun and gave his tongue an annoyed little click. It sounded as if all he was doing was venting his frustrations. And yet, in that instant, a burst of brilliant fire erupted from his fingertips, engulfing my target.

Have you ever seen a man burning to death underwater?

I bet you haven't.

But I have.

The fires seemed to defy the laws of physics, burning bright while completely submerged in the water. My target quickly sank, his screams of agony drowned out by the water as he disappeared beneath the surface.

The boy pulled me out of the water and lay me down on the pier. He hadn't spoken a word to me, and yet he regarded me with a sort of curiosity. He wore a school uniform (which was soaked). Taking his uniform's blazer off, he forcefully tore it apart into numerous strips of cloth. Then, trying them together into a sort of pseudo-bandage, he wrapped it tightly around the wound on my stomach and tied it carefully. The bleeding instantly slowed.

The boy then got up and walked a short distance (a few steps, maybe) and grabbed something off the floor. It was his phone. Coming back to me, he smiled calmly. "I'm Touma Koizumi," he said. "What's your name?"

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Touma called my father. I told him the phone number, which he punched into his cell phone (mine was totally fried, since I'd leapt into the water with it in my pocket; he'd guessed that already). I gave him my father's personal phone number, not his work number. Father picked up the call quite quickly, and I told him who I was. I whispered our secret password (don't ask me why, but we'd decided on "apricots for breakfast" as a password) to help him confirm my identity. I told him I was wounded and explained the situation briefly to him.

Father arrived within ten minutes. Touma had done his best to keep the part of his makeshift bandage over my wound dry. It wasn't the best and it still stung, but I could tell he made the effort.

My heart was racing.

Father appeared with a few of our associates. We needed a lie to make him think that I was just chasing after someone, and not because that someone was a *target*.

"What happened?" father asked me. Of course, he had a rough idea. He sent me on this mission, after all.

"Somebody stole my wallet," I lied (I forgot my wallet that day). "I was chasing after him, and then he tried to swim away, so I leapt in."

Father nodded slowly. He seemed to know it was a lie. "You know you can't swim that well," he said. "I could buy a new wallet for you and give you just as much money as there was inside of it, but I could never have a replacement for a daughter. You shouldn't have chased him like that. You know you can't swim well." Saying so, father knelt down beside me and inspected the bandage. "Did you do this, boy?" he asked Touma.

"I apologize if my work was inadequate," Touma replied flatly. "I needed to stop the bleeding, so I used the resources I had available to me."

Father shook his head. "You go to Chusei North High School?" he asked.

Touma nodded in response.

"I see," father replied. I shot him a glance. It was a pretty recognizable one. He got my message.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked.

"It's Touma Koizumi, sir," Touma answered.

"I see. Might you have a Patron Spirit?" father inquired.

Touma paused for a moment. He seemed to be considering how he'd answer the question. He nodded a second later.

Father smiled. "Then come with us, boy," he said. "We need to get my daughter to a hospital to get checked up, but I could use someone like you. We can discuss it later."

Touma nodded. Helping father pick me up, the two of them carried me away from the dock where my target had burned to death.

I don't know the details of their conversation while I was getting checked at the hospital, but all I knew is that the day after I was out of the hospital, my father told me Touma was working for us now. And that I was officially his Operator.

And that arrangement, I can say for sure, made me *very* happy indeed.

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I always wonder what kinds of days Celeste has. She may be my age, but she hasn't been to school in earnest, and she certainly doesn't seem to *want* to go to school.

Celeste works as my Operator every day. She's essentially my manager, and she's responsible for notifying me of jobs as well as driving me from place to place. It's a pretty simple task (for her, at least; I think Celeste is a little *overqualified*). She makes a solid salary too. It's nice.

Perhaps it's because of the whole event that's gone on recently between Michiko and I, but I've found myself thinking about Celeste a lot more. And I mean

a *lot* more. I've never thought of Celeste as even remotely *unattractive* (no, quite the opposite; she's *stunningly* beautiful in my opinion), but I don't think I've ever regarded her as a potential romantic partner either.

Until now.

But no. If I tried to get with her now, I'd just be rushing into a new thing.

I need to play my cards carefully this time around,

I don't know if I can take another hit like this.

I'm weak.

I need Michiko, but I can't run back to her anymore. I've already lost her, no matter how you look at it.

Hearing the bell ring, signaling the end of the day, I get up and grab my belongings before walking out of the classroom. I don't need to be bothered right now. I'd be okay with talking to Shizue for a bit, but not anyone else. I'd get too annoyed.

Heading to the first years' classrooms, I wait by the door until Shizue's familiar blue hair pops up before my eyes. Shizue's not particularly *short*, so she's pretty noticeable. "Were you waiting for me?" she asked.

"I wonder," I replied. "Was I?"

Shizue laughed. "Sure you were," she said. "C'mon, let's go home together. What do you want for dinner?"

I hesitated for a second.

"Yakisoba."